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## Investigating the relationships between education and culture for female students in tertiary settings in the UAE

Beverley McClusky  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# Investigating the Relationships between Education and Culture for Female Students in Tertiary Settings in the UAE

Beverley McClusky

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education  
Edith Cowan University  
2017

## Abstract

This research is about the higher education of Indigenous Emirati women and how they balance the intricate demands of higher education with the social customs of a traditional society and the expectations placed on women. The study sought to identify and comprehend the issues which have affected the educational changes that are taking place, including culture, gender, religion, the influence of Western education processes, and the desire of an Indigenous population to raise their educational practices to an internationally recognised benchmark.

The research was aimed at providing insights into the distinctiveness of this group of women from their social and educational perspectives, and provides an alternative view of Emirati women, altogether different from the media stereotypes which have largely become accepted as representations of Arab women. It offers educators and researchers a deeper understanding of the relevant issues, and challenges preconceptions of educated women's contribution to the workforce in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Gulf Arab nation. The experiences articulated about their educational encounters in a variety of pre-university environments, their reflections on contemporary university life, and the impact of Westernised influences on higher education in the UAE are put under the spotlight.

This qualitative study was undertaken within a constructivist, interpretive paradigm. A total of 43 media students were surveyed and interviewed to understand more about their attitudes and opinions on education and culture. Areas under consideration related to educational environments, learning styles and students' relationships with teachers, as well as matters relating to cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital. The analysis extends the sparse knowledge and prevailing attitudes about Arab women held by many Western nations, and unearthed important factors, such as alignment of choosing a university with the established ethos of a conservative religious society. High school experiences, critical thinking, and English language skills all affected success at university. Emirati dress code was seen as an issue of personal choice and encapsulated Emirati identity, while being covered was not regarded as subjugation but as an expression of distinctiveness and leadership. Approval, deference and respect for the family underpinned most decisions about educational preferences and career choices. Attitudes towards financial recompense, job selection, finding a satisfactory work/life balance to sustain a traditional lifestyle and

participate in the economic development of the UAE, were all pertinent considerations for this group of undergraduate women.

This research argues that higher education and Emirati culture are intrinsically linked, and the relationship between these two tenets influences the perspectives, and opinions of Indigenous undergraduate Arab women enrolled in a media course.

In highlighting the experiences of women's transition from higher education to achieving personal goals and becoming effective members of the workforce, the thesis challenges preconceived opinions of educators and external agencies. In the UAE, the result has been significant societal change due to economic development, higher education and the national desire to create a workforce of highly educated females. Nevertheless, these changes are inherently directed by the powerful yet subtle influences of this traditional society, and how far female graduates will go to alter their familiar way of life.

## Glossary

Abaya	A simple, loose full-length garment (usually black in colour) worn by Women in the Muslim world.
Aib	The translation of the Arabic word for shame.
ADWC	Abu Dhabi Women's College, part of the Higher Colleges of Technology organisation.
Bedouin	The Indigenous Emirati population, desert dwelling. A semi-nomadic group who historically inhabited the Arabian deserts.
DIFF	The Dubai International Film Festival was inaugurated in 2004 and has provided a platform for Arab filmmakers and talent in the film industry.
Dishdasha	A long white cotton robe worn by men. It has a narrow central front opening and long sleeves.
DWE	The Dubai Women's Establishment is an organisation which provides an infrastructure to foster future Emirati women leaders. It provides programs, training, and interactive seminars to encourage them into the workforce, and also helps to balance careers with family duties.
Emiratis	The national population of the UAE.
Faculty	The North American term for academic staff in a university. Generally it refers to all ranks of professors, lecturers and/or researchers.
Fatwa	A ruling on a point of Islamic law made by a recognised authority.
GDP	Gross Domestic Product is a monetary measure to express the market value of goods and services produced in a whole country or region.
GCC	The original Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, known as the Gulf Cooperation Council is a regional intergovernmental union consisting of the Arab states in the Persian Gulf. Member states are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates which all share political and economic ties.
Galabeya	The name for a dress-like item of clothing, a traditional Arab, Muslim ankle-length garment with long sleeves.

HCT	The Higher Colleges of Technology is a large institution of higher learning in the United Arab Emirates. It was established in 1988 and provides post-secondary education in 17 gender-segregated campuses throughout the country.
KHDA	The Knowledge and Human Development Authority is the educational quality assurance authority of the government of Dubai. It was established in 2006 by HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to oversee education and human resources in private early childhood centres, schools, higher education institutions and training institutes in Dubai. Its aim is to adhere to levels of international standards and best practice.
Mahr	A number of gifts made up of different components given at prescribed times during and after wedding celebrations which carries symbolic significance for the bride.
MENA	This is the English language acronym for the Middle East and North Africa region. The region extends from Morocco to Iran including all Middle Eastern countries.
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, founded in 1961 and comprised of 35 countries which aims to stimulate economic progress and world trade.
Sharia	Islamic sharia is the religious legal system which governs members of the Islamic faith. Derived from Islamic religious precepts rather than human legislation.
Shayla	A scarf worn by women in the Gulf to cover their hair.
SOUGHA	A social enterprise initiated by the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development which is aimed at creating entrepreneurial opportunities for unemployable and difficult to employ nationals. It also provides a platform to preserve and foster Emirati heritage by supporting local craftsmen and women in the economic market.
Tanmia	The national HR Development and Employment Authority established in 1999 to provide services that support UAE nationals' employment in private and public organisations.

UAE

The United Arab Emirates, sometimes called the Emirates, is a country situated at the southeast end of the Arabia Peninsula. The country is a federation of seven Emirates established in 1971. Each Emirate is governed by an absolute ruler called a sheikh, and jointly they form the Federal Supreme Council. Abu Dhabi serves as the capital with Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al Quwain the other Emirates.

UNDP

The United Nations Development Programme is the United Nations global development network. It is an organisation which advocates for change and works to connect countries to knowledge, experience and resources.

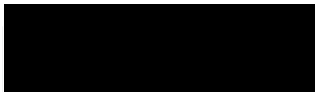


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## Dedication

“The energy and the idealism of young women are important forces for transforming our world”.

Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Al Ketbi. *The Mother of the Nation*.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

In 2010 Madsen and Cook wrote: “research on education for women in the Middle East is just beginning to unfold and scholarly research (in most disciplines) on the UAE (United Arab Emirates) and its women nationals is difficult to find” (p. 128). This thesis seeks to add to the paucity of this research, in particular to shed light on how Indigenous Emirati women perceive and cope with the multiple demands of higher education in the context of their social customs and the expectations placed on them.

Several noteworthy factors have triggered evolution in the United Arab Emirates and affected the lives of its citizens. The outcomes, whether beneficial or not, have been influenced by a complex mix of prevailing issues and subtleties in perspectives, opinions and beliefs.

For young Indigenous women in the United Arab Emirates and some more mature, female members of society the impact of change over the last forty years in this Gulf country has been considerable. Encouraged by its political leaders, significant economic growth and social change have given rise to questions about the constraints of traditional family life, social customs and religious expectations that have impacted women and the choices they make about their future.

The focus of this study was on young women in higher education and the changes they personally experienced, as well as the education systems they were exposed to. For some this comprised a public education from primary through to secondary school. For others it comprised a mix of private primary and public secondary school, while for growing numbers private schooling throughout primary and secondary levels was followed by public tertiary education. These different environments inevitably affect individuals because of the teachers they come into contact with, the ways in which they are taught, the predominant language medium, and significantly, the Western influences brought by external authorities to a globalised world of teaching and learning.

All these elements became more obvious to the researcher as change unfolded over a period of time, leading to the purpose of this study and subsequently, the research questions.

## 1.2 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between education and culture in a tertiary educational setting. It evaluated the perspectives of, and influences impacting on, young female Indigenous Arab students in a Gulf nation, and explored other factors which had a bearing on their experiences and led to change in their personal and professional opinions.

### 1.2.1 Research Questions

The three central guiding questions of this study were:

1. What factors influence the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?
2. What is the role of culture in the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?
3. What are the perspectives of personal change that take place for female Emirati undergraduates in a traditional society?

This introductory chapter begins by setting the scene for the empirical research outlined in the rest of the thesis. It then states, in more detail, the nature of the problem which inspired the research, followed by an explanation of the new knowledge which this study contributes as well as its significance.

## 1.3 Context of the Research

Higher education is in its infancy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The impact of Emirati culture on the higher education of young Emirati women has started to highlight significant difficulties that have also been acknowledged by educators. Given that the UAE has undergone significant social change in recent years there is growing pressure on women to be educated as a means of advancing social change for future generations. As part of this development, government schools, which provide the future cohorts of students for higher education institutions, are also recognising the need for change in state education. Moreover, the methods and quality of teaching practices in secondary schools have come under scrutiny because of inherent weaknesses. Current student perspectives have highlighted problems with

regard to learning styles (Purdie & Hattie, 1996) as well as variances in the educational environment in which they are studying (McCabe et al., 2001).

Cazden (1988) stated that students want particular types of relationships with their teachers. She argued that they were not only dealing with the inclusion of technology as a daily means of instruction, but also with the element of censorship because of “cultural sensitivity”. Her work focused on teachers working closely with their students through language and discussion, using technology as a medium of instruction. Many Emirati students come from a cultural background of passive learning (Haidet, Morgan, O’Malley, Moran & Richards, 2004) and have to transition into active, critical thinkers. Students from government high schools who were taught by female teachers throughout their schooling face additional challenges. Haidet et al. (2004) noted that for some, coping with a male teacher was a new experience; while for others who came from a more liberal family background and private education, the encounter provided an opportunity to engage with a male individual who was not blood-related.

All students at the participating university wore an *abaya*, a traditionally black over-garment that covers the body from the shoulders to the floor. The majority covered their hair with a *shayla*, a scarf worn over the head, and some covered their face both inside and outside the classroom. Other students chose to remove their face covering in the presence of a female teacher but not a male teacher, and a small group remained totally covered, irrespective of the gender of the teacher. This diverse expression of dress appears to reflect the students’ religious beliefs, as all forms of dress and coverings were culturally accepted across all sectors of education, business, government and society. At the same time, students were continually exposed to Western fashion, entertainment and media within the larger social context. The result of these factors was a unique juxtaposition of their culture and contemporary demands of education. Students at the university wore jeans, t-shirts, stiletto shoes, sandals or traditional Arab dress (*galabeya*) and other Western clothing all covered by the *abaya* or outer garment.

To understand the complexities of female university students’ cultural attitudes it is important to acknowledge the history and culture of women in Islamic society, whose role has largely been determined by religious values constructed from a core belief of how women should behave. This also extends to their education. Restricting women to domesticity arose

from having to wear a veil and being excluded from public life, which in turn limited their opportunities for education (Walther, 1999).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the need to develop Indigenous human capital in the UAE changed the thinking of this Islamic country with regard to education (Al-Khateeb, Darrat, & Elkhail, 2007). The concept of investing in human capital, plus the associated benefits of educated individuals and an educated workforce combined perfectly with the strategies of nation building and the country's economic development (Akaari, 1999). According to Mincees (1980), educated women who practice a profession also fill an economic and social need. In the early days of the UAE's history, females from more liberal and higher socio-economic backgrounds had opportunities to access higher education in foreign universities, with Kuwait University a longstanding choice of many UAE parents (Soffan, 1980). Despite being limited to one segregated campus in Al Ain, 185 female students enrolled in the newly opened United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) when the facility opened in November 1977 (Soffan, 1980). The advent of a local university within the country made higher education more accessible to not only single women, but also married women, and a directive of the late President, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, allowed for their education to be paid from government funds. In line with this free national public higher education, the inclusion of all females who pass an entrance examination is now a reality, and has led to a new generation becoming part of the labour force. As stated by Her Highness Shaikha Fatima bint Mubarak Al Ketbi, (2014, p. 1) "Emirati women should become a real active partner and not just a participant in the completion of the programmes and plans for sustainable development and the achievements of progress and prosperity of the nation".

The UAE is in a state of change and education is just one avenue that the youth of the country is using to alter perspectives of national culture and identity. One national female who holds a high-profile position in the UAE media, previously worked as a presenter on a mainstream English-medium TV channel and exemplified the rise of youth power (Umashankar, 2008). She typified the articulate, self-assured female graduate that many UAE tertiary institutions seek to cultivate, yet it is interesting to note that she completed her undergraduate studies in America, which for a single woman at the time was outside the cultural norm and at odds with the vast majority of female Emirati experiences. Nevertheless, her standing in the community was highly regarded and she was looked upon as a role model.



Arab culture has traditionally defined the role of women as caretakers. Harfoush-Strickland (1996) reported that access to higher education for women has to some extent been bound by the cultural and religious beliefs of the society in which they live. However, this is now in transition, since relatively few men can continue to provide for all their women in the changing Emirati environment. Creating a young, educated labour force has therefore been a catalyst for economic emancipation (Bahgat, 1999).

The UAE is predominantly a patriarchal society (Gallant, 2006), and many issues surround the subject of gender. Young women are inhibited by pervasive traditional attitudes in education and are cautious about what professions are deemed suitable once they complete their tertiary studies. Gallant (2006) explained that this is overlaid onto other roles expected of women, namely marriage and family life (Aryee et al., 1999; Hijab, 1988; Rugh, 1985; Sha'aban, 1996). Cultural values are inevitably linked to society's division of labour, and the role of women could be considered an extension of its religious beliefs. However, contrary to popular opinion, there are no explicit prescriptions in the Quran for dividing labour in Islamic society – in fact it allows for and supports a myriad of variations (Wadud, 1999).

The Middle East and Gulf Region have been influenced by colonial activity over many centuries, and in the Arab Peninsula, some colonial authorities initiated compulsory modern education (Akkari, 2004). This served to educate a minority of Indigenous people and provided the skills required to strengthen colonial administration but weaken nationalistic tendencies. The existence of local, formal Koranic schools created an alternative system with a clear distinction between schools as religious educators and those that promoted modern development. As female gender education in primary education increased, a flow-on effect ensued into secondary and higher education within the developing countries in the Gulf region.

Whilst historical and cultural connections in the Gulf region are still evident today in GCC-member countries, gender segregation in higher education has been interpreted and implemented through different practical and organisational arrangements. Modern public education structures are a recent, twentieth century development. Bahrain has the oldest public education system in the Arabian Peninsula. The beginning of a modern public school system was established in 1919, initially to provide primary education for boys, and was later developed to provide further primary educational facilities for boys (1926) and girls (1928).

A secondary system with separate facilities for boys and girls followed, and by the 1960s higher education had been established. In 1968 the Gulf Technical College was opened, later renamed the Gulf Polytechnic, which subsequently merged with the University College of Art, Science and Education (UCB) founded in 1978, to become a national university offering undergraduate degrees known as the University of Bahrain (1986). The Arabian Gulf University (AGU), funded by the six member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), was established in 1984 to provide programs that were previously under the auspices of the College of Applied Sciences and the College of Education. This university offered some unique programs not previously available in other institutions in the Gulf. Today the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences trains undergraduates in a six-year medical program (Saif, 1987), while the newest tertiary institution, Bahrain Polytechnic, opened in November 2008 with the task of working with the private sector to design educational and training programs to meet labour market requirements.

The provision of undergraduate courses was a response to the Kingdom of Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030 for promoting better training and education opportunities for its youth. In line with Western tertiary institutions, the campus is mixed, not segregated.

In Oman the only public university was specifically designed to accommodate separate genders by means of architecture and separate access to buildings through lower and upper walkways for men and women respectively, in addition to separate seating in classrooms. Construction started on Sultan Qaboos University in 1982 and its first students enrolled four years later. The university commenced programs in five colleges, subsequently adding to its offerings in 1987, and more recently in 2006 and 2008. From an initial number of 557 undergraduate students the university now has a total population of over 15,000 students, split almost equally between males and females undertaking courses ranging from diplomas to doctorates across a number of disciplines, with females graduating in larger numbers than males at bachelor level. The Higher Education Council is responsible for academic research policies within the university and consults with other bodies to regulate admissions, student numbers, general state policies, and review draft laws on higher education. The Sultan Qaboos University Council on the other hand, is responsible for maintaining and improving university standards and aligning graduate numbers with the needs of the National Development Plan.

Al-Lamki (2002) suggested higher education in the Sultanate was inadequate to meet demand and recommended a new framework of consolidated management systems and market-orientated reforms. Several other private colleges and higher educational institutions offer vocational, industry training, diploma and degree courses, some of them independent locally-accredited facilities, while others partner with overseas Western universities.

The UAE is bound by a national vision in a cultural context that is both individual and common to the region. Its connection to other Gulf countries serves to strengthen a regional identity and shared understanding (Fasano & Iqbal, 2002), yet at the same time there are distinct differences in the way each GCC member state operates and the manner in which they implement higher education through a diverse range of organisational structures. In the UAE this is evidenced by a federally-funded university with two campuses; one in the capital, Abu Dhabi, and the other in Dubai, initially serving a female population at inception in 1988 (Heard-Bey, 1999). Furthermore, an examination of the influences on the development of higher education in this part of the world shows how historical factors, economic and political progress have combined to drive future higher education outcomes (Davies & Hayashi, 2007).

The Gulf region is frequently referred to as the Middle East, however in real terms the group of nations known collectively as the GCC differs culturally from other countries in the region. The Gulf Cooperation Council is a political and economic alliance of countries comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar, and was established in May 1981 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. These nations, situated on the Western side of the Arabian Gulf, are sometimes called the Persian Gulf. They occupy an area of 251,000 square kilometres and form an extension of the Indian Ocean accessed via the Straits of Hormuz (Torstrick & Faier, 2009). The Hofstede (2001) report described this region as one that subscribes to the Muslim faith with serious conviction, upheld by millions, and with intricate power across societies whose citizens adhere to the religious principles laid down in an Islamic tradition.



*Figure 1: Map of GCC Countries*

An examination of the history of these countries reveals a legacy inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Contemporary nations only began to emerge after World War 1, but until then political decisions were made by foreign entities. The new territories materialised with a range of administrations and different government structures, and European control prevailed in some of the Arab countries (Abudabbeh, 2005). Discovery and development of the oil industry in the 1930s brought about enormous wealth for some countries and a diversity of sovereign assets. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE had the highest oil reserves in the world (Goodwin, 2006, p. 18), so revenues were able to fund initiatives to advance and progress all aspects of their communities, particularly improving education. Although this wealth provided individuals with material possessions and access to Western culture through travel, technology and experiences abroad, the Islamic faith remained dominant and is therefore an important factor in understanding the nuances in this region (Cordesman, 2003).

As stated by Goodwin (2006), the Gulf States invested heavily in business ventures and links with American corporate entities as their economies became more globalised. The UAE and other Gulf nations embraced the importation of goods and services, primarily found in the Western world. Links to Western universities proliferated through partnerships with Australia, Canada, the USA and Britain, and federal institutions developed from the introduction of Western methodologies. The religious imperative has remained a central theme in these bi-lateral relationships, which seemingly brought advancement to the Indigenous populations. However in recent times, according to Abudabbeh (2005), the reappearance of fundamental Islamic attitudes has caused worldwide concern, particularly in view of two Gulf wars, the September 11 disaster, international terrorist attacks, the latest violence in France in 2015, and other catastrophes in 2016. Ostensibly the Arab Spring of 2011 further propelled the volatility of religious groups onto the world stage, and even though not all Arab people are Muslim, Islam is very relevant to a large majority. In the UAE which is an Islamic country, traditions are strengthened through family connections and there is religious tolerance towards non-local groups who are able to practice their faith.

According to Abudabbeh (2005) the Muslim family is the centre of an individual's life, with a strong culture and prescribed protocols for males and females to follow. Family honour and reluctance to cause any kind of shame are deeply fixed in the psyche of the Indigenous population. Abudabbeh (2008, p. 427) explained that the family has a universally altruistic viewpoint about achieving happiness through the fulfilment of other family members, and that the closeness across generations entails an element of self-sacrifice in order to facilitate the hopes and dreams of the extended family.

Despite the Emirates being considered a liberal country, inherent Arabic cultural conventions are maintained through familial, societal and educational practice. Women are expected to behave in certain ways, and the mechanisms for sustaining these traditional and religious customs hinge on the respect bestowed on them as a female. Abudabbeh (2005) went on to explain that all aspects of Emirati women are encapsulated in their dress, conduct, place, decorum and family, and contemporary women are fierce adherents to this image.

In a research study conducted in the UAE (Saafin, 2008), Arab undergraduate participants identified certain features they considered important in the teacher/student relationship. Specifically, students sought flexibility in their relationships with their teachers.

They wanted more than just instructional skill and were drawn to a certain “cultural” quality and rapport which mirrored a warm family atmosphere (Saafin, 2008). The research concluded that Arab students value and appreciate the “human” element in their teaching, and while effective teaching is the objective of every Western-educated instructor, the nuances of the culture in this region can be easily overlooked. A survey conducted by Saafin (2008) identified that a show of respect is highly desired by students. Making fun of them or placing them in situations where they lose face in the front of their peers will lead to immense dislike and complaints about the teacher.

Research which explored the value students place on the teaching process with regard to passive or active participation appears to emphasise their high school experiences (Haidet, Morgan, O’Malley, Moran & Richards, 2004). Despite no significant differences between the outcomes achieved in active or passive learning environments, the students themselves reported more favourably on teachers who practiced more passive learning methods. Consequently, the ramifications for teachers who endeavour to create active learning environments aligned with critical thinking may well prove problematic, unless students understand the importance of changing their perspectives of learning.

#### 1.4 Statement of the Problem

There appears to be a frequent mismatch between the expectations of students and university academics about what constitutes learning. This research was conducted from the viewpoint of a white Western educator and sought to investigate the factors that influence academic engagement and progress for Islamic women in the UAE. It was important to examine underlying assumptions of what Westerners bring to the education context, as these can potentially influence student achievement.

University faculties are predicated on predominantly Western-educated concepts and practices (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2004). Nakayama (1989) argued that senior academics bring values with them that become inculcated into a specific cultural environment, yet they themselves have limited knowledge and understanding of the culture in which they operate. In the past the country’s public institutions were under the direction of an American provost (Mills 2008), although this situation is now in a state of change. In 2014, Her Excellency Lubna Khalid Al Qasimi became the second female to be appointed President of Zayed University following a major restructuring which took place in 2013 under the then President

Maitha Al Shamsi. That same year also saw the first appointment of an Emirati Provost to the university, Dr Abdalla Al Amiri, which was a departure from the previous American appointments.

Although more Emiratis are taking up academic positions in universities a significant number of foreign, Western-educated academics still hold key positions, with the result that many of them have become involved in the public higher education system. For the universities the appeal is to produce graduates who have been through a Westernised model of education and can enter the workforce with the advantage of understanding Western customs. In this way, the process that students go through at university not only has an effect on their learning, but also on their cultural identity (Minnis 2000).

Pressure from families (Gallant, 2008) to maintain both religious and cultural traditions have resulted in a delicate balance between the desire for educational excellence and satisfying the expectations of others. Despite the support of parents to educate their daughters there is an underlying societal imperative that they will marry and produce children (Middle East, 2000), and for many students societal issues conflict with their need to learn. Marriage is viewed as a family event with varying degrees of consideration for an individual's wishes regarding a prospective partner. Marrying for love is not the custom (Mernissi, 2000) and families are more interested in historical, tribal loyalties and continuing ties with their own clan. The UAE offers significant financial assistance to assist men to become married, and if at a future date they wish to marry another woman there are incentives available to them (Goodwin, 2006, p. 17). The family exerts considerable pressure through established religious and cultural principles, and the behaviour of women in particular is very much aligned to respecting family values (Abudabbeh, 2005, p. 431).

In Western societies the expectation is for academics to engage with students to produce proactive, critical thinkers who are highly skilled and motivated to be successful. This expectation is tenuous for Emirati females who have traditionally adopted a passive role in their learning. Many students who enter university from government schools have ingrained learning habits and follow a predictable style whereby the teacher presents knowledge to be learned, the student commits the information to memory and later regurgitates that knowledge in exam situations. Students view teachers as experts who dispense information which they must learn without challenge or enquiry, and their focus is

on simply getting the answer right, rather than working things out or uncovering answers through a deductive thought process. It is also possible that there is a disconnect from certain attitudes to learning, since for many students, active engagement was not encouraged during their school years and they are therefore not naturally inclined towards active engagement. In a wealthy country like the Emirates where the population for the most part has not had to grapple with issues of economic survival and is largely supported by an active nationalisation program (Janardhan, 2003), personal effort and motivation as mechanisms for changing future prospects are difficult concepts to grasp. It is therefore not surprising that teaching styles and student behaviour in UAE government schools are considerably different from their Western counterparts. Despite intense initiatives to bring change to school environments.

Even with 12 years of English language learning, significant numbers of government high school students are ineligible to enter directly into undergraduate programs due to a deficit in their English language skills. This has significantly impacted the public and private sectors and led to a proliferation of English language programs.

The researcher observed undergraduate media students coming from a range of educational experiences, variances in familial and societal influences, and different expectations for their future personal and professional lives. She wanted to investigate these phenomena, particularly as she had lived in the Emirates for over 20 years and worked as an educator for many of those years, initially in primary education and later in higher education. Although there had been many changes and improvements made by government agencies during that time, some fundamental issues remained which still posed academic challenges for students. It became evident that while the country appeared to be a modern-day nation and had achieved significant accomplishments, there remained at its heart a culture rooted in a traditional way of life. It was therefore critical to examine the extent to which it has influenced the educational changes in tertiary education in the UAE.

This study was an attempt to bridge the gap on the subject in the existing literature. Although there is limited research on certain aspects, there does not appear to be an extensive analysis of the topic in any significant depth or detail.



## 1.5 New Knowledge and Significance of the Research

This research highlighted the educational changes that are taking place in the UAE, with particular attention to Indigenous women and their socio-cultural context. Although it focused on higher education for female Emiratis, it also illuminated the massive educational changes that are under way in the UAE. The study sought to identify and understand the factors which influenced this change, including the role of culture, gender and religion, as well as Western educational influences, and significantly, an emerging desire to raise the country's national educational practices to an internationally recognised benchmark (Smith, Armstrong & Brown, 1999). It identified the process of change that occurs when students adjust their perceptions to become part of a knowledge society, and created an understanding of the stages through which students progress during their academic journey, from passive tertiary entrants to undergraduates who became actively participating, critical thinkers. Finally, this new knowledge provides current data on issues that specifically affect female Emirati students who are adapting to the influences of a Westernised educational model within a rapidly changing traditional society.

Through this investigation of young Emirati women's perspectives, empirical data were examined to find a relationship between culture, education and gender. Indications are that an individual's actions are believed to be the result of satisfaction derived from the positive social influences they encounter, while identity is understood to be fashioned by the experiences they accrue during their lifetimes, including conditions related to their culture, religious convictions, family and traditions present in their society (Giddens, 2006).

This study examined the responses of participants within a particular socio-cultural framework in order to gain an understanding of their perspectives. Davies, Flemmen, Gannon, Laws and Watson (2002) expressed the view that the self is not fixed and supported the premise that influential conditions will generate significant change. The uniqueness of this group of women in this higher educational institution is endemic to a social and educational setting which provides opportunities for shifting views and opinions. All the participants came from different family backgrounds and a wide range of pre-tertiary educational experiences, which in contemporary UAE society, facilitates a connection with assorted cultural influences. Predominantly these influences come from Western residents working and living in the Emirates but also other nationalities present in the social landscape.

The subtle influences that flow from these interactions were taken into consideration in this study, along with personal insights into the key themes identified, to provide a rich composite of the way in which individual and social factors have combined to create the present-day society.

The current and pre-university experiences of Emirati women were explored and analysed, together with their future expectations. Although the participants were all members of the same higher education institution and the same Indigenous population, as suggested by Davies (2000), their collective views reflect a larger context.

This research highlighted the dynamic societal changes that have taken place in the UAE in recent times, stemming from economic development and the government's vision to educate and up-skill the local population. Its primary focus was on young women's transition through higher education to achieving their personal goals and becoming effective members of the workforce in a traditional Muslim environment where women's emancipation is actively promoted but family still has considerable influence over the lives of its members. According to Green and Smith (2006) there is little evidence to indicate this established principle has changed.

New knowledge is presented about the complexities of young Indigenous women's aspirations to become educated in an environment where international influences are having an effect on them. Alternative insights are offered into the stereotypes of Emirati women perpetuated by media representations and new information provided to educators and researchers to challenge their preconceptions of educated women in a modern Arab nation.

It was important to capture and examine the views of contemporary Indigenous women on issues relevant to their lives, since they represent a new paradigm in higher education still under development in a traditional society. Equally important was gaining an understanding of how change occurs for them as a result of being immersed in a higher education environment, and whether this has any effect on their opinions about society, gender issues and employment. Participants' feedback about their experiences gave authority to the transitions they are facing, and reflected adaption, growth and maturity in a changing community.

Kabir (2005) claimed that Islam is significant for the 1.4 billion people around the world who follow the faith, and in the context of the women who participated in this study, all of them Muslim, this needed to be considered to understand the influence it has on their lives. Sensitivity and appreciation were vital in comprehending the subtle impacts of religion on their choices related to university, courses and employment, relationships with males, and traditional female roles. In addition, this research endeavoured to uncover the depth of Emirati family beliefs and customs and their ongoing influence in a Gulf setting.

## 1.6 Overview of the Thesis

This study is comprised of an investigation into the educational and cultural experiences of young women living and studying in an Indigenous Arab society exposed to significant Western influences in a relatively short, historical period of time. It involved an assessment of those influences to understand how they have changed the perspectives of women undergraduates who encountered a range of diverse interactions.

Chapter two presents an overview of the literature associated with the relationship between education and culture from the perspective of young, female, undergraduates at a university in the UAE. It reviews the connections to societal influences that students experience and how these cultural, familial and educational occurrences relate to the themes that emerged in this study. The first section examines the context of these themes and provides an exploration of educational environments, students' approaches to learning and their relationships with teachers. The second section reviews features of cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital. The literature review provides a framework for understanding the current discourses shaping these women, the factors affecting their learning experiences, and the role of culture in their tertiary education.

Chapter three outlines the epistemological and theoretical perspectives that underpin the study. It describes the data collection and analysis procedures, the methods of inquiry utilised in the study, as well as a description of the demographic data on which the research is based. The ethical considerations of the study are outlined, followed by an evaluation of the rigour of the empirical research.

Chapter four presents the findings from the data regarding the themes that emerged from the educational experiences of the female Emirati students who participated in the

study. The findings were derived and synthesised from the questionnaire, the short answers in response to the questionnaire for one group of students, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with another group of undergraduates.

Chapter five discusses the themes revealed from the data related to cultural considerations. The findings were derived and synthesised from the questionnaire: the short answers in response to the questionnaire for one group of students, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with another group of undergraduates.

Chapter six completes the empirical research with a discussion of the meaning and significance of the emergent themes. These include the personal perspectives of the two groups of Emirati women in this study. The chapter examines aspects of their educational experiences as well as their feelings about the cultural impact on their past, present and futures.

Chapter seven, the final chapter, draws the thesis to a close with an outline of the conclusions reached from this rich exploration and discusses the implications of the research findings. Recommendations are made to inform future policy development and implementation.

## Chapter 2: Overview of the Relevant Literature

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the literature associated with the relationship between education and culture from the perspective of female, Emirati undergraduate students in a public, government-funded Dubai university. It reviews the societal influences that students are exposed to and examines how these cultural, societal, familial and educational factors relate to the themes of this research study.

A number of themes are explored through a critical lens, including educational environments, students' approaches to learning, and students' relationships with their teachers. In addition, aspects of cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital are reviewed to provide an understanding of the discourses currently shaping the young women in this study, the factors affecting their learning experience, and the role of culture in their university education. The findings highlighted the extent of economic and social change encountered by Indigenous Emirati women not generally understood by the outside world.

The theme of educational environments also includes topics related to learning communities, government influences, English language influences and transformative learning. These are further discussed in relation to the literature with a focus on critical reflection, learning interactions and life experiences. Finally, an outline of the literature is provided with regard to relationships with teachers including cultural preferences, personal relationships, teaching styles and Western influences.

In the literature the theme of cultural identity encompasses traditional roles, marriage, and the value of higher education, leadership and the preservation of the family. Patriarchal values, policy-making and initiatives, historical authority of the family, female careers, and the influence of family expectations are scrutinised in this chapter. Finally, gender capital in the context of societal and familial pressure, and career opportunities for women are examined.

In order to understand the recent phenomena unfolding in the Emirates, this chapter looks at the existing literature in order to present a more informed recognition of the nuances affecting this particular Indigenous group.

## 2.2 Educational Environments

### 2.2.1 Learning Communities

Students' environments are critical to their learning experience. Most undergraduates are drawn to learning communities because they provide a more holistic, integrated learning experience (Cross, 1998). Cross recognised that learning communities range from loosely structured programs offering students the option of a general set of separate courses, to heavily structured programs comprised of integrated courses. Against this backdrop students bring psychosocial sensitivity to their educational environments.

In general, classrooms perceived by students as having order and organisation, cohesion and goal direction are associated with higher achievement on a variety of outcome measures (Dart, Burnett, Boulton-Lewis, Campbell, Smith & McCrindle, 1999). These authors highlighted the desire of students to know, understand and apply, in appropriate contexts, investigative strategies that facilitate problem solving. Moreover, the female Emirati students in their research perceived a favourable learning environment as being more personal and encouraging of participation, despite no significant differences between outcomes in either active or passive learning environments (Haidet, Morgan, O'Malley, Moran & Richards, 2004). However, students who are involved with people and activities in their learning communities are significantly more likely to demonstrate increased intellectual interest and value, and derive more from their higher education (Cross, 1998).

In universities learning conditions are important for eliciting engagement from students (Porter, 2006). Kezar and Kinzie (2006) argued that the level of engagement in higher education institutions was enhanced by providing suitable academic challenges, active shared learning, sympathetic teachers and learning support. A shared learning environment mirrored community collaboration, which according to Topping (2005), led to the development of peer assisted learning (PAL) with its origins in Arab society. All the benefits of PAL, including enhanced study habits, reciprocity between students, higher examination achievement, and perseverance on task, were evident in Lee's (2010) research. Tien, Roth and Kammeier (2002) also reported improvements in both student performance and course retention when teachers used this approach, as did the findings of Solas and Wilson (2015), who found an increase in their students' self-efficacy due to group activities.

Hu and Kuh's (2003) research considered the connections between the learning environment in higher education and the levels of student achievement and engagement. They concluded the values and practices of institutions were important and impacted student commitment, and that efficiency in learning varied from institution to institution. Reason et al. (2006) described how the culture and structure of an organisation which provides an integrated, harmonised and complete approach to students' initial experiences also stimulates students' responses to engagement. Pittaway and Moss (2006) emphasised the value of orientation in helping students settle into academic situations, as these processes enable them to connect with teachers, peers and mentors, increase familiarity with a new campus, and clarify the expectations of academic life.

According to Bumbuc and Pasca (2011), the challenge is in developing the art of teaching beyond simply dispensing information, administering tests, and allocating grades, in order to support the complex demands of society. They concluded that improving the teacher-student relationship to become learning partners in a learning community depended on finding ways of transforming interesting theory into good practice.

Solas and Wilson (2015) found female students appreciated a relaxed environment where they felt "comfortable and safe" and were able to learn without intimidation. These researchers believed a non-threatening environment facilitated the emotional connection that female Emirati students in particular valued, and was a way of promoting teacher-student relationships. This is particularly important where significant differences exist in the cultures and languages of students and teachers.

Cultural stereotypes of rote learning, memorisation and passivity developed from the formal Koranic schools and such learning behaviours are evident in education institutions in the region (Akkari, 2004). Kennedy (2002) argued that socio-cultural insights and an understanding of students' previous learning experiences help to create a culturally more sensitive learning environment. He suggested adult learners were receptive to new modes of learning and able to adopt very different approaches to learning from those they were taught at school. Kember (2000) argued memorisation occurs in conjunction with an intention to understand. He concluded that students memorise material because they perceive it as a requirement of the course and assessment, but can and do adjust to active forms of learning when given the opportunity.

The value placed on memorisation during students' early education influences their approach to learning when they enter higher education. The issue continues to be discussed in Arab society, however analysts such as Waardenburg proposed that constricted subject matter has "a narrowing effect upon the minds of educated Muslims" (cited in Williamson, 1987, p. 26). The contemporary public education system in the Emirates still facilitates memorisation and recitation as central modalities of learning, although in recent years government initiatives have attempted to transform the quality of primary and secondary level experiences and encouraged schools and teachers to adopt more modern pedagogies.

Nevertheless, despite learning activities, modes of teaching and access to new concepts and ideas in post-secondary study (Kennedy, 2002), many university students find themselves in very different learning situations from their earlier education.

### 2.2.2 Government Influence

Between November 2006 and March 2013, His Excellency Sheikh Nayhan Bin Mubarak was the UAE's Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In his previous role as the UAE's Minister of Education he was responsible for both portfolios, and announced a restructuring of the K-12 school system with a specific focus on teaching methods and assessment procedures (Al Nowais, 2004).

The drive for change intensified as each year graduating students from government schools failed to meet the minimum entry requirements into government colleges and universities (Al Nowais, 2004). In the UAE, government schools fall under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. The curriculum reflects Islamic beliefs and enforces single-gender secondary schools. Gender segregation has been adopted by all government colleges and universities, and government schools are required to enforce Islamic religious studies up to graduation (International Bureau of Studies, 2005). The curriculum reforms supported by the Minister of Education after his appointment related to implementing an advanced curriculum covering contemporary subjects relevant to the UAE, while also retaining studies on Islamic and Arabic heritage (Al Nowais, 2004).

In the restructure of the educational framework, the Minister set about establishing performance targets and implementing a system to measure, monitor and record progress in government schools (Al Nowais, 2004). Fullan (2001) stated this strategy by a government



authority was a purposeful way to take responsibility and monitor progress so that a proper evaluation can be undertaken to assess success or failure.

Students' cultural values form part of their approach to integrating into their learning environment. Biggs and Moore (1993) referred to culture as the combined ways that humans live with each other in groups and how they pass this on from one generation to the next. Kennedy (2002) described culture as not just a matter of overt behaviour, but also the rules, beliefs, attitudes and values that govern how people act and define themselves. The research of Solas and Wilson (2015) focused on the way their students expressed themselves through drawing and sketching. They believed this was of particular value in Emirati social and religious culture where mature females are prevented from public displays of creative expression such as singing and dancing. As a facet of Emirati culture, art provided an opportunity for these students to create annotated representational drawings which encapsulated the content being taught in the classroom.

Research exploring the value students place on passive and active teaching processes emphasises the experiences they bring with them from high school. Despite no significant differences between the outcomes in active or passive learning environments (Haidet, Morgan, O'Malley, Moran & Richards, 2004), the students themselves reported a preference for teachers who implement a more passive learning environment. The implications for teachers who endeavour to create learning situations conducive to critical thinking may therefore be problematic unless students understand the importance of changing their insights about learning. The experiences of those students who enter university from state-run schools have been characterised by a lack of using their initiative, not applying techniques of discovery in their learning and not utilising any aspects of their creative and critical faculties (Madsen & Cook, 2010).

Other research by Solas and Wilson (2015) used strategies which they believed would stimulate critical thinking. They found that anthropomorphism, problem solving and the use of narrative to impart information did not actually stimulate or encourage students. Their findings showed that students failed to interpret language nuances or cues, and were unable to draw inferences from stimuli because they were unable to access contextual clues. Added frustration and the lack of critical thinking also affected their student's retention and transferability, assessment results and comprehension.

Institutions like universities expend considerable effort on meeting the ongoing needs of the communities within which they operate (Heath, Street & Mills, 2008). While governments, families, judicial systems and religion affect the lives of people, institutions may fragment or reorganise themselves to reassure the public of their perpetuity. In the Emirates, His Highness, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan developed a blueprint for women's education as part of his vision for women to join the working population. By 2000, 76.8% of female students were enrolled in UAE universities (Al Kassidi, 2000), the highest rate of women in higher education anywhere in the world (Fergany, 2005). The oil wealth of the Abu Dhabi Emirate was used for the benefit of the country's citizens (The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2004) and the ruler's vision to establish education as a vehicle for national development subsequently became part of the constitution in Article 23.

The UAE has a very high rate of participation in higher education. Statistics show that 95% of all females who complete secondary school apply for admission to higher education (National Media Council, 2009). In 2008-2009 the UAE University admitted 3,355 new students, the Higher Colleges of Technology admitted 7,902 students, and Zayed University admitted 1,558 students (National Media Council, 2009). These three federal institutions operate under the Higher Education Council, and all three have pursued international accreditation, mainly from US accrediting bodies (Wilkins, 2010). The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) in the UAE is responsible for all aspects of Higher Education planning, policy development and implementation, ongoing quality management, data acquisition and analysis, as well as admissions to federal universities and the scholarship award program for nationals (Wilkins, 2010).

### 2.2.3 English Language

For countries with a national language the inclusion of English as a significant medium of communication results in multilingualism that becomes a daily reality for students and teachers (Ellis, Fox & Street, 2007). This translates into cultural patterns both within and outside the university, shapes identities and roles, and consequently opportunities for learners. The greatest challenge for educators and researchers is trying to understand how cultural patterns support, hinder and change not only language, but the effect of institutional forces on particular values (Leung, 2005).

Dubai is an environment where the Indigenous population interacts with foreigners throughout their lifetimes. De Voss, Jasken, and Hayden (2002) suggested that teaching through a mode of intercultural communication requires an understanding of the students' culture. Conversely, Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Varner (2000) expressed the view that communication in any setting takes place between individuals, not cultures, and corroborated Yuan's (1997) hypothesis that intercultural communication is interpersonal. Students' preference to participate in intra-national exchanges of any ethnicity underscores Goby's (2004) conclusion that both ethnic and cultural identities exert important influences (Goby, 2004; Jameson, 2007, p. 223). In cultures such as the UAE "people interact within relatively large and complex social networks formed from long-term relations developed between individuals over time, or from strong familial ties based on trust and senses of family duty and family honour" (St. Amant, 2002, p. 201). The attitudes expressed in Goby's (2009) research emphasise unmistakably that interactions are helpful for promoting positive interactions in higher learning environments.

There often is a mismatch between the expectations of university faculties and students. This study was conducted from the viewpoint of a white, Western educator and sought to investigate the factors which influence academic engagement and progress for Indigenous Islamic women in the UAE. In doing so, it was important to identify and articulate underlying assumptions that Westerners bring to academe, as these can potentially influence student achievement. Since university academics in the UAE are predominantly Western educated (Sonleitner and Khelifa, 2004), Nakayama's (1989) argument that senior academics bring values with them to a specific cultural environment and sometimes have limited knowledge and understanding of the culture in which they operate holds true. Moreover, two out of the three public institutions in the country were historically under the direction of an American provost (Mills, 2008).

Crabtree (2007) stated the aim of the institution in her study was to offer a North American liberal arts-type education with a curriculum designed to produce fluent English language speakers. The curriculum was supported by academics recruited predominantly from America and some individuals from other parts of the world. In the UAE, despite government high school students completing 12 years of English-language instruction, significant numbers are still ineligible for direct entry into undergraduate programs due to a

deficit in English language skills. The difficulty of adapting to a university environment because of a deficit in English language skills is constantly under discussion. Equally problematic is adapting to a non-English speaking environment for Western English-speaking academics (Jewels & Albon, 2012), who, whilst they may not teach English but teach in English, often misconstrue students' inability to express themselves. The issue of students entering university in the UAE with an English language deficit was raised in the Accessing Higher Education Language Debate Forum, 2012, which concluded students were still unable to engage in undergraduate programs because of their inability to operate at the required level (Majority of Emirati Students are Unprepared for University, 2012). The forum revisited figures previously reported in 2010, which identified 90% of public and private secondary school students as ill-prepared for university because of a shortfall in their English language skills. This was further supported by Gjovig, head of the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) and part of the National Admissions and Placement Office (NAPO) in the UAE, that 18% of Emirati students who sat the federal placement examination designed to enrol them into undergraduate degrees, were ill-equipped to enter these institutions. One ramification of the shortfall in English language competency, as outlined by Dr Marshall Drummond, a former Provost of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the UAE, was the increased amount of time students needed to improve their basic skills before moving into academic foundation programs (Majority etc., 2012). Interestingly, the HCT, which opened in 1998 to provide tertiary education for local female students, taught through the English medium. Most students undertook a foundation year to improve their English in order to give them a better chance of success in their courses. The stated mission of Abu Dhabi Women's College (2006, p.1) is to provide society with "Emirati women with exceptional academic, technical and professional learning experiences in the classroom, on campus and in the local and global community".

Research shows a relationship between level of academic success, professional employment and civic life, and fluency in a wide range of language structures, uses and modes. Studies also suggest learners acquire such a repertoire most reliably through meaningful roles that provide extensive practice in emotionally supportive environments. Opening up roles in "real" situations that offer development, hypothetical reasoning and comparative analysis for problem solving provides critical language practice needed for individuals to gain fluency (Heath, Street & Mills, 2008).

#### 2.2.4 Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is an essential aspect of Emirati women's progress through tertiary education. It explains "how adults learn to make meaning of their experience (Mezirow, 1991, p. 198). In the context of a university, Clark (1993, p. 47) declared that "transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterwards, in ways both they and others recognize". The essence of this type of learning is to facilitate deeper reflection and critical consciousness of students' educational experiences. According to Mezirow (1991) it involves "reflectively transforming the beliefs, attitudes, opinions and emotional reactions that constitute our meaning schemes or transforming our meaning perspectives" (p. 223). Merriam and Caffarella (1995, p. 318) stated that "transformational learning theory is about change, dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live". For media students at the university under study, their experience of the environment offered an opportunity for change to occur. Mezirow's (1990, p. 1) theory defined learning as "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action". Since higher education plays a pivotal role in the daily lives of a large proportion of young women in the Emirates, transformative learning is significant. Cranton (2006), King (1997), Mezirow (2000) and Perry (2000) noted that higher education plays an important part in transforming students by encouraging them to expand their minds, assess their assumptions, discover new connotations and broaden their understanding of the world around them. Although no specific research has utilised Mezirow's theory within learning environments in the Arab world, Taylor (2007) reviewed the empirical studies of Mezirow's transformational learning theory and found it had captured a retrospective picture of subjects' learning experiences.

In the UAE higher education offers many opportunities, and transformation through educational experience is a reality for many female Emirati students. Madsen and Cook (2010) used transformative learning as a conceptual, theoretical structure in their study to identify the impact on female Emirati students of influential individuals, learning assignments, activities, and external events. The transformational outcomes they identified confirmed that changes were occurring and cemented the belief that learning can transform individuals in ways that are critical for training and development. Their study also supported the notion that transformative learning advances empowerment, fundamental to individual and national development (Madsen & Cook, 2010).

At a personal level, transformative learning is typified by critical awareness of one's personal assumptions, while at a universal level transformative learning leads to broader social progress by promoting dialogue and more knowledgeable insights of social assumptions (Daloz, 1990). Madsen (2009a) supported the theory that transformative experiences during students' higher education can "result in interest, intention and action toward varying degrees of social transformation" (2009, pp. 29-31). Madsen and Cook (2010) reported the longer students are influenced by their college environment the greater the increase in learning and development and the more a student is transformed or changed by the experience. They identified variables related to change, awareness and prediction which indicated a deeper shift in students' perspectives the longer they were engaged in higher education. Their findings showed that the three transformative learning components at the centre of the study were in fact linked, and that reflection was a predictor for two out of the three components. Furthermore, interesting learning assignments and activities undertaken by their students emerged as predictors of future behaviours.

## 2.3 Students' Approaches to Learning

### 2.3.1 Critical Reflection

Academics are expected to interact with students to produce proactive, critical thinkers who are eager and highly motivated to be successful. This implicit expectation is tenuous for Emirati female students who have traditionally taken a passive role in their learning. Many who enter university from government schools have ingrained habits of following a predictable learning style where teachers present information, the student commits it to memory, and then recounts it in a test situation (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011). Students appear to have a preference for teachers who are viewed as experts, dispensing information for them to learn without challenge or enquiry (Madsen & Cook, 2010). The goal is simply to get answers right, rather than working them out or uncovering answers through deduction. In order for students to develop their learning skills they need to understand that thinking is connected with problem solving, and that fundamental cognitive functions are characteristic of all learning (Madsen & Cook, 2010). According to Hestor (1994) basic learning tools include perception and recognition, organisation, storage, retrieval, transformation of data and reasoning.

Mezirow's (1991) transformational learning theory outlines how adults create meaning and interpret experiences that affect them personally, as well as their approaches to learning. He stated: "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings."

Critical reflection appears to be central to transforming perspectives on experiences. Madsen (2009a, 2009b) suggested that reflection helps students to not only think about thinking and behaving differently, but actually changes how they think and behave. It also helps them understand how others think about issues and creates a sense of greater potential, a belief that they have more options and the capacity to make a difference in their workplace and communities. Merriam and Caffarella (1995) and Mezirow (1991) charted a ten-step process for observing an individual's adjustment to transformation. The three core components (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995; Mezirow, 1991) of this transformation are mental construction of experience, critical reflection, and development or action.

The ADWC (2007), through its strategic plan, promoted an approach to encourage critical reflection by female Emirati students. They embedded a range of learning techniques into their curricula whereby students were able to experience learning through action research projects, supervised practicums and case studies. These options created imaginative experiences for students to discuss and debate issues, engage in collaborative team projects, and express their opinions with others to solve problems and make decisions individually and within groups. Inevitably students changed their approaches to learning and cultivated positive interdependence and social capability (Madsen, 2009a). Furthermore, the results gathered by Madsen and Cook (2010) confirm that students experienced increased self-reflection, confidence and a reconceptualisation of their future during their higher education courses. In this way, higher education has the potential to be a vehicle for educating and changing inherited mindsets, existing perspectives and acculturated world views (Cranton, 2006; King, 1997; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Perry, 2000).

According to Cruz and Duff (1997, p. 89) there is "a deep relationship between what happens in the classroom, how information is presented, who presents it and who receives it,

who interacts, how the interaction occurs, and the learning students' experience". These authors suggested students use the networks they encounter to increase their social and cultural knowledge, while the activities offered in the classroom help them to understand the rules. The rules include knowing how to behave, when to speak or write, when and how to request information and from whom. It intrinsically assists students to participate socially and linguistically, and for a large proportion it allows for an understanding of the culture of the classroom (Hymes, 1972).

Cruz and Duff (1997) proposed the academic opportunities students encounter in the classroom should facilitate a response to teachers in ways that are not simply about recall and providing uncomplicated answers, but also allow individuals to engage with one another and their teacher. This dialogue involves drawing upon all their linguistic, social and cultural knowledge in order to develop academic literacy. When students understand the definition of classroom discourse is a "socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal [that one is playing] a socially meaningful 'role', then the notion of socializing our students is of particular significance as we work with diverse learners" (Gee, 1990, p.143).

Wortham (2001) and Palinscar (1998) recommended discussion as a key method for learners to become involved in social transactions in class. They claimed "from a social cognitive perspective, discourse is the primary symbolic, meditational tool for cognitive development" (Palinscar, 1998, p. 361). Dillon (1994) proposed discussion for enabling understanding and resolving issues related to the subject matter. Understanding the discussion process and its educative purpose, the opportunity it provides for personal growth and the value of group reflection presents compelling evidence to support this pedagogical technique as beneficial for students (Cazden, 1986). Also, it is worthwhile as a component of learning programs (Sprod, 1994; Splitter & Sharp, 1995). Previous research shows that when students engage in discussion made possible by teachers they are able to draw upon other individuals' knowledge, assume other people's ideas, reflect upon their own thoughts, and internalise styles of knowledge and thinking characterised and practiced in the communities they are part of (Bruner, 1996; Blumenfield et al., 1997). Social interaction allows learners to structure knowledge acquisition by encouraging them to express their perspective and analysis, which



can be amplified, examined, detailed, critiqued, and related to other group members' understanding in a public domain. Tobin, Tippins and Gallard (1994) valued the role of discussion because "group interactions provide a milieu in which students can negotiate differences of opinion and seek consensus. Perhaps even more important, opportunities for students to generate questions and interact with each other develop their ability to speak out" (Tobin et al., 1994, p. 49). Vygotsky (1978) pioneered work which demonstrated the importance of student interaction. This was further conceptualised by Resnick et al. (1993) and confirmed discussion provided a public forum to try out what could become a recognised internal knowledge representation: "private reasoning as an internalization of processes originally carried out publicly and in interaction with others [including] argument, contradiction and negotiation" (Resnick et al., 1993, p. 348). Similarly, Palinscar (1998) stated from a social constructivist viewpoint, classroom activities that stimulate discussion are believed to offer mechanisms for higher order thinking.

### 2.3.2 Learning Interactions

Brown and Campione's (1996) investigation into communities of learners found participant structures that cultivated student-student and teacher-student discourse were favourable for "providing the format for novices to adopt the discourse structure, goals, values and belief systems of scientific practice" (Brown & Campione, 1996, p. 267). Shulman (2000) concluded contemporary strategies of teaching demand discussion in the classroom in the form of dialogue, conversation, argument and verbal exchange. He viewed such exchanges as essential social expressions for abstract understanding and surmounting illusions of understanding. Dorster, Jackson and Smith's (1997) research established students reacted positively to classroom discussion about alternative solutions to problems, which led to a better appreciation of the material. Hollander (2002) noted, despite agreement in the higher education literature regarding a link between classroom discussions and growth in student learning, there can be difficulties with the organisational elements in that some students may be overly talkative or too reticent, the content may be problematic, or students may lack the appropriate skills to participate in effective discussions. The findings of Miller (1990) highlighted a potential problem for students who need explicit direction or instruction and practice in asking questions and giving responses, in order to benefit from intellectually engaging discussion.

While educators, researchers and theorists are in agreement about the value of discussion for academic development, students' attitudes are also key to the success of this pedagogy. Dorster et al.'s (1997) study pointed to positive feelings about discussion amongst students, yet did not present information about the students' capacity to make use of the potential of a classroom discussion. Pontecorvo (1987) claimed students' perspectives in utilising discussion as a learning activity requires a collective approach and problematic situation to observe the components for a knowledge-building session. Rather than being a passive spectator of people or activities, the learner must be able to develop an active constituent of their own learning and be "continuously involved in cognition about self and environment" (Winne & Butler, 1994, p. 573).

Butler (1998) extended the hypothesis of Winne and Marx (1982), who found students interpreted teachers' instructions according to their own previous knowledge and motivations. She reconceptualised Vygotsky's (1978) view to a position where learners design their own knowledge rather than the teacher building the intended knowledge. The influence of relationships that exist between students and teachers to yield more learning in some lessons than others revolves around a number of criteria. Morgan and Morris (1999) identified student interest, student self-efficacy, teacher control, teacher methods, interpersonal skills, personalities and emotions all play a part in successful student learning.

Learners from a variety of public and private school backgrounds who connect in a new academic community are involved in a process of interacting with teachers and others to understand how they can achieve their goals. Student literacy improves when they identify context and nuances and recognise they are not just learning new rules and knowledge, but also a new culture (Cruz & Duff, 1997).

The transition from school to university presents challenges for students who are unfamiliar with the adjustments that need to be made. Those who are unmotivated and reluctant to put in effort to engage may even be indifferent, since motivation is intrinsic to changing one's thinking (Hestor, 1994) and affective, sociocultural and risk-taking characteristics of cognition are the very source of intellectual power. When students perfect or harness these skills they are able to use reliable cognitive mechanisms like critical analysis, problem solving and creative thinking. By developing their intellectual authority the

realisation is born that alternative explanations can be brought to bear on accepted beliefs and tradition (Chory & McCroskey, 1999).

Teaching styles and student roles evident in UAE government schools are considerably different from Westernised models (Bleakley, Brice & Bligh, 2008) and according to McLaughlin and Durrant (2016) the more individualistic features of learning found in Westernised universities do not generally translate well in Emirati settings. Western educators in an Arab context are frequently frustrated by students' ability to memorise numerous volumes of notes and text book material, yet the skills required at undergraduate level to invoke critical examination and independent thinking are deficient (Madsen & Cook, 2010). According to Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) independent thinking is difficult for students who are generally more familiar with a restrictive teacher and place of learning, and where knowledge exists outside the learner. In such environments the subject is delivered and presented in the form of unchallengeable truths and discrete information, and concepts are preferential over large ideas. Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) found students were inculcated into a mindset of getting the "right answer" by working alone in a generally competitive way on skill-based assignments that promoted uniformity. When used excessively this form of passive learning removed opportunities to reach any deep understanding of the subject matter.

Madsen (2009b) identified an important change in student learning focused on moving away from rote memorisation and passive pedagogies to more active engagement and stimulating pedagogies. Activities and assignments, such as group projects, classroom discussions and personal reflection all provided transformational experiences which fostered students' academic and personal development. The students in Madsen's research came from rote-based learning environments to a college that promoted outcome-based learning, explicitly requiring students to consider accountability, openness, success, excellence, team work and professionalism. Solas and Wilson (2015) found students responded to teachers who encouraged new ways of learning by collaborating with their peers. This brought about improved study habits, better performance and a change to active participation in their learning.

The introduction of modern, pioneering learning technologies also motivated different approaches to learning which students were encouraged to embrace. King (2003) found

significant links between learning assignments, activities and transformational learning in her study of adults in learning environments. Transformation was also evident in the research conducted by Solas and Wilson (2015), who found that their students had transformed their learning habits through the kinds of activities employed. This was achieved in part by gamification and developing new mental schema through a social constructivist paradigm. The techniques they employed promoted active, social pathways for learning in the classroom, and these interactions with peers facilitated a transformation in attitudes towards learning.

Madsen and Cook (2010) observed that understanding the process of transformation and change students undergo during their higher education needed a sympathetic grasp of their past schooling, pedagogical experience and familial influences. They recommended closer scrutiny of students' primary and secondary schooling, since these experiences combined to shape the mindset and values of undergraduates. According to Madsen (2009b), the students at ADWC appeared to have been exposed to a range of learning experiences that were very different from those they had encountered at school.

According to Bhabba (1994), female Emirati students in universities become part of an increasingly interconnected world through their educators, whose knowledge and experiences in the classroom reflect third space theory. English (2003) described international instructors as global teachers who work in diverse geographical locations. Bhabba's (1994) theory of "third space" is described as a place of hybridity, emanating from cross-cultural interaction that manifests as an internal and external state of being. He viewed hybridity as "the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (p. 211) and new knowledge to grow, and allows individuals to "elude the politics of polarity" (p.39) for an improved social and cultural perspective. Students occupy this third space where differing or varied beliefs, thought processes, ways of knowing, and experiences interact and find symmetry. Wang (2007) described third space as a position where one discovers a sense of proportion between what may be construed as seemingly oppositional forces, ideologies or thought processes. She argued they have the opportunity to move "between, beyond, and with the dual forces simultaneously" (p. 30). In this movement of attitudes towards learning, according to Vadeboncoeur, Hirst and Kostogriz (2006), "our memories and experiences, identities and identifications, discourses and social languages" (p. 163) are to be found in assorted and

shared discourses. The shared discourse between students and their teachers enables change in approaches to learning and builds a bridge between experiences and culture to form a third space (Bhabba, 1994). Where social interaction, mutual discourse and new knowledge exist “there is no dominant correct meaning prevalent” (Knain, 2006, p. 657) since a new construction of meaning is negotiated within a new context.

### 2.3.3 Life Experiences

Teachers who do not recognise the importance of incorporating students’ life experiences into their practice miss opportunities for students to add local knowledge, and more importantly, create “dis-invitations” for students to contribute in classroom discourse. The use of an instructional script by the teacher, based on their own cultural reference, poses further limitations where it is the only one to be used in an activity (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011).

Highly educated Emirati women are considered to be a public representation of power, status and family honour (Nashif, 2000; Salloum, 2003; Whiteoak et al., 2006). In the UAE higher education for women is promoted, supported by government (UNESCO, 2003; Whiteoak, Crawford, & Mapstone, 2006) and highly desired by society (Al Fahim, 1995; Salloum, 2003). However, according to Halbach (2002), the requirement for students to adapt their approaches to learning in higher education is problematic, and the inclusion of “Western values” (Garson, 2005, p. 322) is a complex issue that increases the demand placed on students. “Western” educational theories and practices (Bleakley, Brice & Bligh, 2008; Garson, 2005; Halbach, 2002) embedded in Western concepts of lifelong learning, reflection, critical thinking and experiential learning have therefore been brought to students through external methodological approaches that embody different beliefs and value systems to those of their own community.

Changing the approaches to learning of Emirati students in a structure of “third space” (Bhabba, 1994) requires acknowledgment of their experiences in order to build instructive moments relevant to their lives. This creates a bridge between the content of the education and their personal experiences for optimal opportunities for change. Families in the UAE have the option of sending their children to private or public schools, and for undergraduates entering higher education, the view is that their schooling plays an important part in their academic success. The number of Emiratis enrolled in private schools in Dubai rose by 3.2% in 2014, and based on Knowledge Human and Development Authority (KHDA 2014)

records, they have doubled since 2001. The figures also show that Emiratis accounted for 12.7% of pupils in private schools, the second largest group of students in the private system. According to a 2012 report, 65% of Emirati students in private schools attended American programs of study and 15% of Emirati students were enrolled in both publicly funded government schools and British curriculum learning entities (KHDA, 2012).

The *Dubai Private Education Landscape Report* (2014) showed that nearly 31,000 UAE nationals were registered in private schools in Dubai in 2013-2014, with a total of 13,718 girls and 17,276 boys enrolled in a variety of educational institutions. The report cites the main reason for parents choosing private schools as “better teaching and learning”. Parents believed private schools provided better English language instruction, had better school leadership, were more conveniently located and offered superior extra-curricular activities for their children (KHDA, 2012). The *Emiratis in Dubai Education* (KHDA, 2012) report also confirmed in international standardised test results “Emirati students in Dubai private schools outperformed both Emiratis in public schools and pupils in other participating Arab countries in reading and mathematical and science literacy”.

This increasing interest in private education by Emirati families has raised concerns about preserving national identity. In the UAE, federal and local government bodies have included this issue in future development plans (*Preserving Emirati Identity, UAE paper, 2011*). Abdullah Al Shaibani, the secretary-general of the Dubai Executive Council, commented that “youth is the future of any nation, so preserving Emirati national identity is crucial to us in light of the current demographics” (2011, p. 1). He further elaborated that education plays a pivotal role in preserving national identity amongst young people, and stated these policies were already part of the state curriculum in public schools but needed to be integrated into the private school sector (*Preserving Emirati Identity, UAE paper, 2011*). The Dubai Partnership Agency’s encouragement of appropriate policies and collaboration between private and public entities was initiated by the Dubai government as a national priority.

## 2.4 Relationships with Teachers

### 2.4.1 Cultural Preferences

According to research gathered in 2008, (Saafin, 2008) Arab tertiary undergraduates in the UAE consider certain features important in the teacher/student relationship. Students in the study particularly sought flexibility in their relationship with their teachers. They wanted more than just instructional skill and looked for a “cultural” quality and rapport that mirrored a warm family atmosphere (Saafin, 2008). The study concluded Arab students’ value and appreciate the “human” element in their English language teaching, and supports the findings of this research. Western-educated academics attempt to deliver language programs through effective teaching, and in this respect they provide a professional service. However, understanding the cultural nuances of this particular region can easily be missed. Saafin’s (2008) survey identified respect for students as a highly desired characteristic. Making fun of them or placing them in situations where they lose face in front of their peers caused intense dislike and complaints about the teacher. Riel (2011, p. 2) stated: “the importance placed on honour means that Arabs try to avoid being shamed in public”. In Middle Eastern cultures important exchanges usually take place between people who have a longstanding, trust-based relationship that signals their identities and determines their credibility (Weiss, 1998).

In a multicultural setting, communication is paramount for students and teachers. Reinsch and Turner (2006) described interpersonal communication as a process in which “one person encodes or creates a series of symbols and signs while another actively (and selectively) decodes or creates a message based partially on some signs emitted by the first person” (p. 344). Goby (2009) suggested students are more influenced by the personal traits of the teacher rather than any cultural, ethnic, religious or national characteristics. Her research indicates that individuals who perceive positive traits in their interlocutors will engage with them, but will be reluctant to interact with those they perceive as having negative personal characteristics. As the UAE is a multicultural melting pot and its higher education institutions attract a wealth of international educators, there is a high level of professional interactions, which Jameson (2007) referred to as “transaction culture” or “third culture” (p. 230).

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) stated an educational environment created by a teacher whose beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are evident, has a remarkable effect on student

learning and engagement in a university setting. According to Means, Meyer and Bharadwaj (2007) students are prepared to work harder, extract deeper understanding from teaching sessions and are more willing to articulate an opinion when teachers are perceived as being open, well prepared and responsive. Bryson and Hand (2007) also found support from teachers who create an inviting learning atmosphere, demand high standards, and make themselves available for discussion about academic progress, promoted student engagement. Reason, Terenzi and Domingo (2006), in their research with first-year students, observed significant improvements in academic performance when students felt supported by their teachers as compared with those who did not feel supported. Equally, students claimed their encounters with new and diverse ideas and contact with teachers who emphasised understanding brought about a willingness to spend more time studying and be more academically engaged. Poncini (2003) was of the view that interactions between native and non-native speakers of English in an English-medium establishment brings greater homogeneity to communication than if there was a larger blend of native and non-native speakers of English.

Many studies that examine teacher-student relationships focus on interactions in the classroom and use quantitative methods to measure the learning experience of students after contact between the teacher and student has ended. Few studies have focused on the effects of teacher-student contact outside the classroom (Fusani, 1994; Jassma & Koper, 1999; Pascarella, 1980) or on students' perspectives of relationships outside the classroom based on daily interactions (Rawlins, 2000).

University classrooms provide a significant arrangement for creating an organisation system. Richmond and McCroskey (1992) defined an organisation as “an organized collection of individuals working interdependently in a relatively structured, organized open system to achieve common goals” (p. 2). Chory and McCroskey (1999) proposed “the college classroom may be viewed as an organization” (p. 2) whereby the classroom provides a social context for teachers and students to work together to achieve a common goal, namely student learning (Chory & McCroskey; 1999; Jassma & Koper, 1999; McCroskey, 1992).

Teacher-student relationships are created and nurtured both inside and outside the classroom. Rawlins (2000) viewed teaching practice in the classroom as “a judicious and caring political community” (p.14) where students express different views and identities as



well as sharing responsibilities and common goodwill (Teven & McCrosky, 1996). Where students were able to communicate and practice their English language skills in a non-threatening setting with their peers, Solas and Wilson (2015) found teachers facilitated engagement by allowing students with stronger English language skills to explain concepts in their mother tongue. This helped foster goodwill within the classroom and assisted others who found the material challenging. Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Varner (2000) stated communication occurs between individuals not cultures, therefore it is the individual who relates to the person of another culture. This supports the findings of a study by Yuan (1997) who hypothesised that this form of communication is interpersonal and not purely intercultural. From her interviews with organisational leaders, Goby (2009) formed the strong view that students were more inclined to form groups built on national identity rather than task requirements. She observed a preference in her participants to prioritise national identity when choosing who to communicate with. While the research confirms the notion that like individuals essentially communicate successfully (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Dodd, 1998), the impact of globalisation in a region like the Emirates has resulted in more heterogeneous interactions between teachers and students, particularly in higher education.

On the other hand DeVoss, Jasken and Hayden (2002) viewed “focusing on the characteristics of students’ own cultures” (p.76) as a major challenge for teachers in forming relationships based on intercultural communication. However Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) found teachers who are prepared to evaluate their students’ personal learning histories and re-examine the extent to which they are a product of traditional educational practices, including teacher-centred instruction, fact-based subject matter, and a dominant university culture of coping and compliance, will develop an understanding of how past instruction has shaped their actions and behaviours. The flow-on effect of these influences, argued by Bumbuc and Pasca, (2011), are that teachers use such representations to “imagine lessons in their classrooms, develop innovations and plan for learning” (p. 62). Furthermore, they believed teachers are not usually led by instructional theories, but more than likely by their view of what is proper and possible in the settings within they work.

According to Willis and Allen (2011), cross-cultural research depends significantly on the causal relationship between the researcher and the subjects being investigated. By adopting a modest approach participants will disclose open and honest opinions and feedback

about their experiences. Such an attitude diminishes the urge for researchers to presuppose an understanding of unfamiliar contexts, and allows them to collect and analyse data in an unbiased way.

### 2.4.2 Personal Relationships

Goby's (2009) study suggested students are predisposed to relationships with teachers who display attributes of a personal rather than a cultural nature. Riel (2011, p. 3) explained: "Arabs emphasise personal relationships. Thus personal and social issues are of primary importance in communication with individuals".

Perspectives formed by students about the extent of teachers' care and concern, and students' subsequent affective learning have highlighted some specific factors. McCroskey (1992) reported empathy, understanding and responsiveness as the three key features of a caring teacher. In this context, empathy is described as positive behaviour towards students and an ability to view issues from their perspective, understanding refers to teachers' sensitivity to students' problems, while responsiveness requires listening to students' views and reacting quickly. Affective learning increases when students adopt positive attitudes to their learning and become more motivated to learn and apply the concepts taught in the classroom (Chory & McCroskey, 1999; Kearney, P., Plax, T. G., & Wendt-Wasco, N. J., 1985). Christensen and Menzel (1998) found a significant correlation between students' perceptions of caring teachers and their affective and cognitive learning.

Communication between teachers and students outside the classroom also has a direct influence on student learning (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). As a mode of friendship teaching is characterised by common traits that appear as communication practice within a cultural environment. Rawlins (2000) explained it as "educational friendship emphasises positive and edifying communicative stances and relationships of teachers with individual students and toward classes as collectives" (p. 5). The friendship referred to is the relationship between two people who share affection, equality and mutuality. Teachers' affection for their students is seen as caring for and about them, a shared goodwill and pursuit of a common goal (Rawlins, 1996, 2000; Teven & McCroskey, 1996). On the subject of equality, Rawlins (2000) argued "we stand or should stand as equals with students in the quest for knowledge, self-improvement and edification" (p. 8), while mutuality requires reciprocal responses from

students to the efforts of their teachers, as well as participation in creating a friendly learning environment.

A study by Clark, Rogers, Murfitt and Ang (2008), designed to examine the receptiveness of individuals in choosing who to interact with, showed solidarity between call-centre operators and clients as well as a polite attitude were paramount for effective assistance. In the context of students' interactions with teachers, solidarity and receptiveness can be interpreted as the willingness of an individual to work towards a given goal. Demonstrations of solidarity are widely acknowledged as essential for all forms of negotiation (Beamer, 1999), and given that students establish and develop relationships with their teachers, solidarity can be viewed as shared aims.

### 2.4.3 Styles of Teaching

A study by Goodlad (1997) of over a thousand university classrooms found styles of teaching not only weak, but the learning environment bland. Students sat and listened to their teachers with minimal engagement so that “teachers were able to control the intellectual activity to ensure uniform ‘exposure’ to the curriculum and maintain discipline” (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011, p. 61). An appreciation of the daily routines that underpin relationships between students and their teachers needs to be fostered in a larger context to reflect the norms, values and expectations that create meaning in actions across universities (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011). These authors viewed “teaching as more than addressing content; it is also about bringing all students to a shared understanding of what a content of a course is and how to participate in it. Being a competent member of the classroom involves learning when, with whom, and in what ways to talk, and knowing when and where to act in certain ways” (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011, p. 61).

Introducing new structures to endorse participation and redefine the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students helps to change what knowing and learning is. Research conducted by Solas and Wilson (2015) noted through group work there was increased student engagement, participation and understanding. They found this led to an increase in students' self-confidence and continued performance, and concluded teachers were able to significantly alter students' perspectives about learning, as well as impacting on cementing friendships inside and outside the classroom.

Cobb and Yachel (1996) found students were predisposed to inferring answers they assumed their teachers subscribed to rather than articulating their own insights. However, when freed from any prior expectations, the social norms in the classroom changed and a more exploratory way of dealing with the subject matter emerged. Talks, activities, discussions and real-world artefacts present ways for teachers to construct meaning for their learners to engage with, and students themselves enhance the classroom culture by bringing a wealth of experiences to share with the group (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011). These authors recommended teachers “redistribute power, privilege and responsibility for learning in the classroom and develop public classroom guidelines for negotiating curricular decisions with learners” (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011, p. 63). They went on to suggest teachers step aside from authoritative discourse so that scholars are able to cultivate different models of interaction. Students who are encouraged to use new expressions, sources of information, tools and dialogue have an ideal opportunity to transform their academic performance, develop teacher-student partnerships and take advantage of a different approach to learning.

Jewels and Albon’s (2012) research found that Middle Eastern students engaged in courses delivered in English regarded teacher feedback as vital to their academic success. The feedback became a catalyst for transformation when teachers understood the difference between students’ inability to express themselves in English (linguistic intelligence) or misinterpreted the content (logical intelligence) (Jewels & Albon, 2012; Prophet & Bade, 2009). Being sensitive to the diversity of modern classrooms in the Emirates, where educators provide social, cultural and educational comment, helped nurture a collaborative approach (Solas & Wilson, 2015).

Teachers who help students become more intuitive, critical, reflective of their assumptions and imaginative engage in a transformative mode of teaching (Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1991) described educators who enable students to be “inclusive, integrative, discriminating and open to alternative points of view” (p. 224) as individuals who teach differently. He viewed teachers as being instrumental in providing opportunities for students to make meaning of knowledge and interpret their own experiences. Madsen and Cook (2010) researched students’ perspectives of transformative learning at ADWC, based on their reports about the changes that had occurred during their learning journeys. Notably, students agreed their opinions, views and expectations had changed, and conceded that opportunities

to reflect on past decisions and behaviours had influenced their educational experiences. They also claimed to have been significantly influenced by certain individuals, by learning activities and other external factors encountered during their college career.

Jewels and Albon (2012) believed there was a need for explicit pedagogies for Arab cultures, a view supported by Solas and Wilson (2015), who found specific strengths and weaknesses among different ethnic groups due to their physical and social environments. In their study in the UAE, McLaughlin and Durrant (2016) reported on the benefits of a more structured approach in advancing students' achievements and independence, particularly where there was a high level of teacher input and feedback.

#### 2.4.4 Western Influences

The government objective to promote Emiratisation through education programs is part of a drive to advance the quality of learning for citizens, in order to become more competitive in the job market (Martin, 2003). The goal to generate large numbers of ready, willing and able employees places pressure on the higher education system and calls for a change in relationships between students and teachers that alter their traditional ways of learning. Given their experiences in the public education sector, with its conservative practices of teaching and learning in stark contrast to Western models, Richardson et al. (2004, p. 432) argued that "Arabs prefer prescriptive learning environments where they are told exactly what to do and directed along a single path". While the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research both endorse more active, non-traditional teaching, teachers' efforts in this regard often "produce anxiety and disengagement amongst [students]" (Richardson 2004, p. 432). This researcher maintained students were reluctant to take more responsibility for their learning because of their previous experience in school where "passive learning and memorization of tracts is the expected way of learning" (Richardson, 2004, p. 432). For university teachers to establish new patterns of engagement it involves undoing twelve years of routine thinking habits in the (average) four years spent at university.

Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) stated although there was not a script to help students move from ingrained ways of interacting with teachers, the university classroom presupposes orientations that provide a frame of reference for the required adjustments. For teachers, this framework represents patterns of beliefs and practices consistent with a constructivist

philosophy; however it is difficult for some students to relate to, especially when it usurps their deep-rooted cultural perspectives. The authors were of the view that “the predominant images of the student and teacher relationships are some of the most persistent known in the social and behavioral sciences” (Bumbuc & Pasca, 2011, p. 61).

Morris (2005) argued when Emirati females are taught by a preponderance of non-native instructors, principally in higher education, they are exposed to difficulties and new life experiences because in many instances their teachers come from Western, developed countries. He added that instructors embed their own culture, which is often very different from Emirati society, into their teaching. The nature of students’ relationships with educational instructors, he argued, is significant for males and females, but mainly for women. He claimed students are constantly exposed to different societal roles which may affect their views and present choices or alternatives they were previously unaware of. He also stated many female students encounter male instructors for the first time, often from overseas, and they are therefore very different from anyone they had encountered before. Moreover, university is dissimilar to any other education environment.

The role of the government in establishing, facilitating and funding this arrangement is also important because it adds to the legitimacy of the social context within which these relationships are cultivated (Morris, 2005). The implications are that females can assume previously restricted roles in their studies which could offer different prospects and allow them to consider new definitions as wives and mothers (Morris, 2005).

## 2.5 Cultural Identity

### 2.5.1 Traditional Roles

Traditionally Arab culture has defined the role of a woman as that of caretaker. Harfoush-Strickland (1996) considered access to higher education, to a certain extent, bound by the cultural and religious beliefs of the society within which females live. The traditional Arab family is one where men provide financial support while women look after the house and the children (Joseph, 1996). This fundamental attitude is equally emphasised by the traditions of Arab culture and the religious imperative of Islam. Al Oraimi (2011) explained that UAE society has unwritten standards and laws enabling women to participate and achieve their own personal goals. Although the UAE has championed many modern

developments, it remains patriarchal when dealing with women. Al Oraiimi (2011) further added that the value placed on women limits their political empowerment, largely because the country is undergoing a process of adjustment and maturation of its social values. Haddad and Smith (1996, p. 139) declared “the new Islamist society then, is one in which the role of women and the importance of family are understood to be divinely prescribed”. However, this is now also in transition since few men can continue to provide for all their women, and creating a young, educated labour force has addressed this issue through economic emancipation (Bahgat, 1999).

The fathers of the current cohort of female Emirati students were better educated than the mothers, since Emirati men have historically had greater access to education and employment opportunities (Madsen & Cook, 2010). The more recent growth in women’s education in the UAE emerged for a number of reasons (Ferghany, 2005; UNDP, 2007). Firstly, the country’s political leadership has supported women’s education since the nation’s inception. All education is free for Emiratis in the public system and women from different socio-economic backgrounds are allowed to enter higher education. International data indicates that fathers support their daughters to achieve a level of education which exceeds their own. This is supported by Hill et al. (2004) who found parental education was positively associated with their children’s academic ambitions.

Oil revenues have financed widespread education for all Indigenous citizens of the UAE. Al Oraiimi (2011) claimed the government used both a gender perspective and a gender-sensitive perspective to benefit women. She attributed the special status held by women in the public education system in the UAE to the country’s need for educated women. Moreover, because of the country’s wealth there was no discrimination between funding education for men or women and as a result, Emirati women seized the opportunity to access higher education.

In 2007 literacy rates in the UAE were 90%, one of the highest rates in the world (Embassy of the UAE, 2009). More recently the female literacy rate in the UAE was 95.8% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). According to Islamic principle, education should be accessible to both boys and girls and is considered an expression of Imman (religious faith) (Haw, et al., 1998, p, 150). The high illiteracy rates of the past have been addressed in

contemporary UAE and the government has introduced a robust policy of education for both sexes.

Despite females outperforming males on every educational level in state and private sectors (Hokal & Shaw, 1999, p. 173), opportunities for women to join the workforce after post-secondary education have been problematic. Unlike women, men have traditionally had post high-school opportunities to study abroad, join the military, police force, or go into the family business without completing higher education (Madsen & Cook, 2010). Riel (2011, p. 2) stated “men are expected to get an education and a career, while many women are raised with the sole goal of being married. After marriage, a woman’s primary role is to bear and raise children. Females have a great deal of latitude within the family, and mothers are revered in the Arab culture”.

### 2.5.2 Marriage

For young Emirati women the issue of marriage has conflicted with their aspirations to pursue higher education and careers, and many single women have postponed marriage until much later in their lives. The Federal National Council recently discussed what has become a severe demographic crisis as a consequence of a large sector of society delaying having children (Mohammed, 2014). The advisory council, comprised of appointed representatives who put forward the views of the Indigenous population to the government, considers and develops legislation related to social issues such as marriage, rising divorce rates and the changes impacting Emiratis (Bristol-Rhys, 2007). Since the Emirati population is considerably outnumbered by the expatriate population, a growing trend of spinsterhood is raising concerns. Not only are young women choosing higher education and delaying marriage until later on in life, there is also evidence to suggest the extremely high cost of dowries are hindering the means of young men to choose a wife (Bristol-Rhys, 2007). Consequently, the UAE Marriage Fund, a government institution which grants financial aid to men who wish to marry but do not have the funds to do so, reported that men blame the high cost of dowries for the low marriage rates (Bristol-Rhys, 2007). Mohammed (2014) reported that polygamy is endorsed by both religion and the law, and surprisingly both the men and women surveyed in his study agreed that delaying marriage and parenthood was a reasonable solution to the problem surrounding decisions about marriage.



A female Emirati writer, Al Saad al Minhali, has refuted this solution to the national agenda. As reported by Crabtree (2007), polygamous households and their practical living arrangements extend to both nuclear and extended families. Wives live in their own houses with their children and may have parents and in-laws living with them. They do not generally have anything to do with the other wives or their domestic provision, while the husband alternates between each household dividing his time between the families. Islam dictates men have no more than three wives and must ensure his time, material possessions and personal attention are equally shared with each of them. Unfortunately, in reality this is not always the case and families' wellbeing can be negatively affected.

Tribal traditions still affect family decisions, particularly in relation to younger daughters who marry before the first-born and a preference for not marrying into a "lower social status". The trend of modifying historical traditional tribal customs connected to marriage is likely to continue as increased levels of education are achieved (Mohammed, 2014). Families cooperate to maintain the economic welfare of the family and are responsible for taking care of the unemployed, the elderly and the sick, a fundamental aspect of Arab society (Sha'aban, 1996). Individuals also help to promote and obtain employment for family members through a strong network of contacts (Hijab, 1996).

### 2.5.3 The Value of Higher Education

The classroom is a microcosm of the power relationships within the wider society (Hayes, 2006). Students who feel their intellectual values or way of life are not consistent or understood can disengage from higher education and pass up the benefits it has to offer. Furthermore, some students develop an exit strategy mindset, focused solely on obtaining an undergraduate degree rather than embracing learning for its own sake. Young adults have already learned from previous experience at school the ways in which social codes, such as family tribes and gender, impact inside and outside the classroom. The power relationships within the family and the community can impact significantly on women's attitudes and their desire to conform.

According to Crabtree (2007, p. 577) "academic studies do not appear to be undertaken for the love of learning solely, but rather that families view an education at this level as providing the final polish to a young girl's life, that marks her out as being successfully poised on the brink of adult life, commensurate with Islamic and cultural expectations of

womanhood”. Old-fashioned teaching methods prevalent in the education system in the UAE appeared to perpetuate traditional attitudes towards women and their role in society.

#### 2.5.4 Political Input

Even though the UAE has developed a policy of change, prevailing Arab opinion across political, social and economic spheres has been divided in terms of the progress that has been made from the perspective of other countries. Consequently, the stereotype of women as wives and mothers is largely prevalent in secondary school curricula (UNDP, 2005). In the UAE, official laws stem from the constitution which does not discriminate between men and women in respect of their rights. However, there are exceptions in regard to the duties of women. Over the years, the state and its decision makers have provided equal professional, health and educational opportunities for men and women, and has acknowledged that in some situations, women are given special opportunities because they are not fully empowered socially (Al Oraiimi, 2011). Madsen and Cook’s (2010) research highlighted the unusual conditions faced by women in the Arab world in relation to their educational access, against the backdrop of the UAE’s rapid economic and social advancement. They noted that female students in the UAE were overcoming the philosophical limitations and ingrained habits of their past educational experiences, consequently achieving successful higher education outcomes and productively joining the workforce. Recognition of increasing options for women in society opened students’ minds to the possibility of contributing to the success of the country. This was a move away from simply working for financial reasons, and underscored the value of education as a means of self-actualisation and having more personal choices (Madsen, 2010). Furthermore, as the involvement of women in higher education and the workforce have increased, communities have become more aware of their contribution. The positive role played by women in the UAE has brought about a change in the cultural paradigm, as they have started to contribute significantly to the development of the country. They have been actively involved in the public and private sectors, maintaining a connection with the past to preserve traditional values, but at the same time adopting modernity. Al Oraiimi (2011, p. 85) stated “despite educational and job-related achievements, women still play traditional roles in a complementary manner, and social values rooted in patriarchal/tribal values still survive”.

### 2.5.5 Leadership

Leadership principles evident in Arab culture stem from a patriarchal concept of family structure with clearly defined, restrictive roles for women. Issues of meritocracy and individualism are closely tied to family and tribal affiliations, and for educated women their identity is still subject to patriarchal beliefs.

The patriarchal society that exists in the UAE, according to Al Oraimi (2011), has provided women with an education, which in turn has given them access to the job market. However, the boundaries of male authority are still evident. Al Oraimi (2011) expressed the view that women had greater participation in decision making in the traditional patriarchal system of old than the one that currently exists.

Individual and group motivation varies according to culture and the prevailing economic situation. Blunt and Jones (1977) alleged the leadership styles of individuals depends on what followers expect. In cultures where the history of their leaders is firmly cemented in the past, this translates into followers with little involvement, because of the cultural bias. Riel (2011) claimed “one of the Bedouin values that has influenced Arab culture is a style of leadership that is both hierarchical and consultative” (p. 1). Historically, Bedouin tribes placed their authority in a sheikh, and although a single ruler, the protocol was to consult with others before making a decision, which would confer upon him the status of a “just” ruler.

The prophetic-caliphal leadership model described by Khadra (1990) outlined four characteristics: personalism, individualism, lack of institutionalisation, and the great man predisposition. Personalism engenders feelings of importance and evokes a central power which overshadows interactions, not just in institutions, but also in family groups. Although group members are encouraged to express their opinions, it is accepted that the leader or male authority will make the final decision. Individualism refers to making one’s own decisions regardless of the opinions of the group. On the other hand, individualism is practised to a greater or lesser extent depending on tribal and family traditions. For women, the characteristics of personalism and individualism are manifest in strong personal power, but also with regard for family and tribal connections which affect their chances of becoming pioneers as well as providing them with opportunities. Her Excellency, Shaikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi, the daughter of a ruler of one of the Emirates, has had several ministerial

appointments in the country's cabinet (Salama, 2004). In March 2014 she was appointed President of Zayed University, and in February 2016, as the UAE's Minister of State for Tolerance. To be an influential woman is widely promoted in the Indigenous population, and more and more women are taking up leadership roles as opportunities have materialised for educated women. However, leadership is a fine balance of patriarchal structures and strong family allegiance on the one hand, and meritocracy and individualism on the other. Her Excellency, Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi has been praised for her "outstanding role in advancing the performance of the ministry" and for giving "golden opportunities to many females to contribute to the development of the UAE" (Hanafi et al., 2006, p. 7).

Hofstede's elements of collectivism versus individualism are widely accepted for studying a culture's conduciveness to commercial development (Morris, Davis & Allen, 1994). The collectivist nature of the UAE (Trompenaars, 1994) embodies an outlook that rejects any kind of communication difficulties within their community. In collectivist societies "often, the self is measured by how well it orchestrates relational solidarity" (Thatcher, 2001, p. 471). This implies a desire for harmony and a positive self-image for individuals (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

In the UAE, Islam is an important part of society's collective character (Riel, 2011). Many fundamental religious beliefs are based on the concept of sacrificing one's individual desires for the greater good. This group-orientated culture places significant focus on family and religion and perpetuates a hierarchical society. According to research conducted by McLaughlin and Durrant (2016), Emiratis have a collective cultural orientation with a strong sense of compliance, manifested through their social customs, dress and religion. The UAE reflects a strong collectivist mindset "in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede, 1994, p. 260). Morris, Avila and Allen (1993) concluded in their study that equilibrium between individualism and collectivism offers a very suitable environment for commercial activity, and women are able to exploit this relationship. Tiessen (1997) suggested those operating in an individualistic culture generally have a higher rate of creativeness, but collectivist cultures are better suited to enhanced support from efficient and well-established networking systems. In the UAE, where Emirati women have traditionally been segregated from men, they have lacked female

gathering spaces (Al-Dabbagh, 2008) which have typically left them with limited levels of support from family networks (Inman, 2000; Maxfield, 2005).

Abby (2002) conducted a comparative study on US and Ghanaian business owners to understand the forces of cultural leanings on individualism and collectivism. He found individuals were motivated by personal development in an individualistic society, while in collectivist groups they were motivated by group goals. Eroglu and McCrohan (2008) reported both personal development and contribution to society in their study of female Emiratis. It was challenging for women operating within the constraints of the family's deep-seated cultural norms and conservative society, and success in business is still limited (Preiss & McCrohan, 2006). A number of women were discouraged by fathers or husbands, depending on the views of their menfolk, because the male opinions influenced their choices post higher education (Baud & Mahgoub, 1999). Eroglu and McCrohan (2008) clarified that by saying "many families in the UAE prefer their children to gain employment in the public sector. Public sector jobs in the UAE are well known for their generous benefits, comfortable working hours, and less demanding work regimes, thus families tend to disapprove of their child looking towards a riskier career in the entrepreneurial domain over a career in the public sector" (p. 179).

UAE society is strongly inclined towards religion and tradition, particularly in respect of women's roles and their career choices. Behaviour within a cultural framework that exemplifies the cultural norms of a Muslim family, where women are expected to take a passive role (Afshar, 1994) can significantly affect education within a homogenous group. Al Orami (2011) stated education in the UAE has not permitted women to attain social position as the mainstay of the family, neither are they viewed as equal partners with men. They are still merely part of the family because the prevailing social system does not accept women as entities in their own right. She went on to add that this was the result of a dominant, authoritative mindset and historical influences of a well-established patriarchal society, where working women are not seen in a context of being independent, but rather promoting the common interests of the group. Instead, women synthesised any personal fulfilment into acceptable career choices while the government strives to empower them and offer them broader work opportunities.

In a patriarchal environment students can be reluctant to contribute or challenge the viewpoints of others, despite being given opportunities and encouragement to do so. Women who choose to challenge traditional cultural expectations often encounter resistance and criticism from society, due to underlying behaviours “which assign the ultimate leadership and decision-making role in the family to men” (Al Faruqi, 1988, p. 43). This notion is generally accepted in traditional societies, which means most women have not needed paid employment outside the home because their male relatives provide for parents and divorced or widowed sisters (Hijab, 1988). Historically though, women in the Emirates have had the option of combining two roles: being productive and paid a wage, and an unpaid, traditional domestic life (Al Oraiimi, 2011). These overlapping roles existed before the Emirates became an oil-producing nation, and women who chose to work sought permission through “negotiation” or favour from their male relatives. This arrangement was in no way based on rights or duties, and male guardians had legal authority to decide whether a woman may work, travel or marry (Sakr, 2002). Nevertheless, many women developed assertiveness and maintained compliance with the system, but at the same time, served their own needs (Sabbagh, 1996).

### 2.5.6 Preservation of the Family

There is clear evidence of the Emirati population’s aspiration to maintain their cultural identity and hold onto their traditional values (Harik & Marston, 2003). This is particularly apparent in the UAE where large numbers of expatriate workers from all nationalities have infiltrated the local environment. The speed of economic development has also heightened the desire to maintain the traditional culture (Hijib, 1988; Khan, 2014). For the Indigenous population, this has meant preserving the family system along with a sense of security and belonging (Hijab, 1988; Sabbagh, 1996). Women are also prevented from certain professions and activities which are acceptable in Western cultures, particularly where they are deemed a man’s prerogative. Criticism and family dishonour are dependent on women’s modesty and purity, while men’s honour is reflected in their ability to protect and control the women in the family (Harik & Marston, 2003; Haroush-Strickland, 1996). This is in contrast to the Western model where individuality is an important aspect of identity (Francis, 2002). Upholding the family’s reputation means decisions made by individual family members must also consider the impact on the entire family and its position in the larger community. As stated by Riel

(2011, p. 2) “a person’s honour could be damaged by not living up to one’s responsibility or by the actions of one’s family”.

In spite of educational and social progress in many aspects of Emirati life, gender normative behaviour within the family still corresponds to the prescribed roles linked to religion and culture. Practices related to child rearing continue to inculcate differences between males and females from a very early age (Crabtree, 2007). As Dahl (1997) affirmed, in Islam men and women are considered to be complementary but in a hierarchical position to each other, with both of them having unique qualities which equip them for definite duties and responsibilities. Those duties and responsibilities are appropriate for their gender and cannot be substituted or transferred. The role of marriage and women’s identity in Arab culture are emphasised in both traditional and modern-day customs, which define women’s position in society, and in many ways, her worth at a familial and societal level (Dirie, 1998; Harik & Marston, 2003; Sha’aban, 1996; Soffan, 1980). A traditional cultural expectation would be “a woman is daughter, sister, wife and mother. This position earns her respect: “If she does not behave in a manner that befits this position, then she loses respect” (Jassim, as cited in Goudsouzian, 2004, p. 13). Conservative Muslim families often engage female chaperones for their unmarried girls in order to protect their reputation (Mahdi, 2003). Crabtree’s research found “Emirati families obviously vary widely in terms of their outlook and conduct. In this study “families appear to stand at the more conservative end of the continuum of Muslim family values” (Crabtree, 2007, p. 580). Arranged marriages are the norm in Arab households and require a father’s consent at any age. Bristol-Rhys (2007, p. 27) observed: “Emirati women, no matter what their age, need the approval of a male relative in order to marry”. The cultural restrictions placed on women therefore affect their marriage choices, and it is interesting to note that the number of unmarried women is increasing.

Some women with established careers are demanding more favourable marriage terms than in the past, in order to allow them to continue their careers after marriage (Soffan, 1980). Mohammed (2014) reported unmarried men still prefer wives with aspirations to conform to traditional roles despite increasing numbers of spinsters in the UAE. They favour wives who do not work, but if they insisted, part-time work would be preferred. There is an implicit belief that for men to be successful it is impossible for women to harmoniously merge family and work. The societal development of young children in the Arab world has conventionally

involved mothers and female family members rearing children within a domestic setting, while fathers have little to do with the day-to-day care of their children or socialisation processes. Crabtree's (2007) research found that women meet all the physical, educational and early religious needs of their children, however, as boys become immersed in a male world from the age of five, girls predominantly remain in an all-female environment (Bouhidiba, 1977, pp. 126-141). Bouhidiba (1977, p. 127) commented on the distinctly separate areas of the male/female divide in the Arab world becoming a little closer, yet in no way coming close to the more androgynous way of parenting evident in Western communities. He predicted that women's increased involvement in higher education and employment, as promoted by the UAE government, would over time impact women's role as single-handed caregivers in the family home.

Generally the word "culture" is synonymous with ethnicity, religion, nationality or racial group. The terms which could be used to describe biological and geographical factors have a broader meaning when applied to the subgroups within a culture that has its own special ways of doing things. The downside of a culture that supports women in marriage is the high cost associated with marriage and weddings. The "mahr" or dowry has for a long time been a significant element of marriage negotiations in Bedouin society. It is comprised of not just one gift or single amount, but of several components given at prescribed times during and after the wedding celebrations, such as household furnishings and jewellery, each of which has symbolic significance in addition to financial value (Bristol-Rhys, 2007, p. 22). In Saudi Arabia, "due to the economic and social changes in society, a girl's first priority is finishing her studies. Her second priority would be to find a job. And only her third priority would be marriage" (Qusti, 2004, p. 14). Nevertheless, it is still impossible in traditional environments for single women to live alone, and they remain dependent on their families for protection and influenced by strong social customs until they are married (Harik & Marston, 2003). In a nation like the UAE there exists a range of differences as a result of the population's history of migration, group isolation and geographic locale (Heath, Street & Mills, 2008).

Westerners hold key positions in the academic field, partly due to the fact that there are not enough Emirati nationals to fill all the academic positions in universities. As a consequence, many foreign, Western-educated academics are involved in the public higher education system. Their influence on students is not only confined to their teaching, but also



to aspects of their cultural identity (Minnis, 2000). According to Gallant (2008) pressure from the family to maintain religious and cultural traditions results in a fine balance between the desire for educational excellence and the need for students to adhere to expected customs. McLaughlin and Durrant (2016, p. 12) stated: “students have a strong affective component (tied to learning outcomes) and achieving goals may be significant”.

Perspectives of change reported by students of ADWC in Madsen and Cook’s (2010) research indicated young female Emiratis were impacted by marriage, divorce/separation and job loss. Their opinions of life-changing events manifested in a general sense of change, which unlike the other two variables examined, identified a much deeper impact on their overall learning experience and altered behaviours and perspectives. Past years have seen several emerging perspectives and interpretations of the role of Emirati women. The former Minister of Economy and Planning for the UAE, Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi (2007, pp. 33-35) declared: “these women, whether they are doctors or homemakers, are on the front line of our community in transition. They are demonstrating that women have a voice, as well as a unique perspective, and a key role to play in the social and economic development of the Arab world”. Bristol-Rhys (2007) suggested Emirati women have not had major interactions with the wider public in the past because social norms dictated their behaviour. Her study confirmed more and more Indigenous women felt their attitudes were changing rapidly in response to a combination of educational and economic factors. Khaleej Times (2005) reported one young woman as saying “this is a new country, you know, we are changing every day, and this makes some of the men upset because they are used to telling women what to do and what not to do and they are just beginning to understand that those days have ended”.

## 2.6 Cultural Sensitivity

### 2.6.1 Patriarchal Values

Crabtree’s (2007) research raised the patriarchal value which holds influence throughout the Arab world that sons are more valued than daughters, even though this contradicts Islamic principles which endeavour to raise the status of women (Jawad, 1998, p. 14). The birth of a son is generally celebrated more lavishly than the birth of a daughter. For example, more animals are killed as a symbolic token for the birth of a boy, echoing the traditional patriarchal practise in some other parts of the world. Marriage and procreation is an expected

norm in Emirati society, with an overt understanding that these milestones confer a level of authority which promotes subordinate youths to adulthood. The birth of children, and particularly a son, brings a certain status to women, and the convention of becoming pregnant as soon as possible after marriage is still highly significant (Minces, 1992). Bristol-Rhys (2007, p. 30) said: “for an Emirati woman, her wedding day will be the biggest and most public day of her life and now, even with women going to college and working, the wedding still carries great social importance”. Marriage conveys status and social standing on women and their families, especially when the occasion is marked by prominent consumption in such a wealthy nation.

Married and unmarried women evidently hold different statuses in Emirati society. In her research, Crabtree (2007) highlighted that marriage confers a higher status on women, reflected in the change of terminology from “girl” to “woman”. Her status is further elevated when she has children, particularly if they are boys, and these life events guarantee her significance and authority within the family. As a result of this specific demarcation, married women are likely to spend more time at home, while unmarried women, who helped out with domestic chores in the past, are now unburdened because of paid domestic help. The option of becoming a student in higher education therefore provides an alternative routine to long hours of restricted freedom (Crabtree, 2007). In the Muslim world, the family represents the principal foundation for the purpose of procreation and social stability (Jawad, 1998, p. 30). Families customarily comprise large numbers, and even though there has been a reduction in the overall number of children in keeping with Westernised trends, larger families are viewed in a favourable light in the UAE. These family traditions are in keeping with Islamic standards and perpetuate a patriarchal, patrilineal model, whereby the guardianship of women is the duty of fathers, husbands and older sons (Al- Khateeb, 1998).

The authority of the father as traditional head of the household has a major influence on the career decisions of females (Al Lamki, 2005; Wilkinson, 1996). However, a woman’s choice to become part of the labour force is also a religious consideration. Islam is the official religion of 95% of the Emirati population (Tanmia, 2004), and the country generally adopts the Wahabi interpretation of Islam (Masoud, 1999), which adheres to a more traditional and conservative doctrine. The emphasis is placed on equal value for men and women who are considered complementary to each other. The underlying principle of this faith is that

women's duties are concentrated on housekeeping and child rearing, while men are expected to provide the family income (Moustafa, 2005; Predelli, 2004). This attitude is further reinforced by contemporary and traditional institutions and group relationships in society reflecting a "neo-patriarchal" philosophy (Sharabi, 1988; Stork, 1993).

Marriage and procreation are important in the Emirati social order and viewed as inseparable. Although there are many new opportunities for young women to achieve financial independence, the prevailing customs are unquestionably adhered to. Infertility of a man or woman is considered a great tragedy; such a condition would be grounds for divorce for a woman and entitle a man to assert his right to polygamy under Islamic law (Al-Shamsi & Fulcher, 2005). Riel (2011, p. 2) stated "families tend to be very cohesive, with extended families living with or near each other. Young people usually live at home until they are married. It is still typical in the Arab culture for marriages to be arranged". The male prerogative, underpinned by Islamic views, maintains the idea of men as guardians and breadwinners, and does not allow women to make any contribution to family income. In Islamic practice, the income of a wife or daughter through employment is hers alone, and men are solely responsible for the family finances (Al-Kateeb, 1998). In the same way that customs dictate this norm, so too do women's expectations of their male family members to not contribute to female responsibilities. Al-Kateeb (1998) commented on Saudi women's reports of men risking emasculation and loss of respect if they became domesticated in the family home. Despite being largely dictated by Arab male prerogatives, women exert their own pressure on men to undertake acceptable activities. This behaviour is self-regulated by the apprehension of gossip within the community which could potentially damage the family reputation (Crabtree, 2007).

Non-working married women lead a relatively unpressurised life, with a daily schedule which includes prayer, meal preparation and childcare. Many have additional domestic help. Leisure activities consist of watching television, personal shopping and meeting family members in the home. In recent years shopping has become a social trend, and many shopping complexes provide suitable spaces for women to spend their time alone, with friends or their children, to enjoy recreational activities. Crabtree (2007) highlighted the traditional role of males in the family, who even today take responsibility for food shopping, although increasingly, changes in the modern workplace is affecting this custom. Parents

maintain considerable attachment to the marriage of their children and having families of their own (Crabtree, 2007). For sons, employment is a given, however for daughters the question of employment is not necessarily viewed in the same way. Deeply ingrained attitudes towards women working in situations that do not bring them into direct contact with men are generally regarded as more attractive prospects for daughters. Crabtree's study indicated many mothers wished an easier life for their daughters than they themselves had experienced. Her participants' comments illustrated that after marriage and motherhood, the greatest blessing for a woman was a high standard of living. There was however some disagreement between older and younger relatives about current lifestyles and the difficulties faced by women due to Emirati society's composition of trans-generational individuals and the significant changes that had taken place.

### 2.6.2 Policy-making and Initiatives

Core initiatives of the Dubai Women Establishment Strategy for 2008-2012 were to develop policies and legislation to improve the role of Emirati women in society. A number of issues were considered in order to help women reach their potential. Critically, finding a good home/work balance was important, with ample ongoing opportunities for training and work combined with promoting women to leadership roles and enhancing their image. National policies enabled women's contribution to the economy by allowing them to work from home. Underpinning these strategies was a resolve to remove barriers for women in the workplace, particularly in the private sector, and to encourage their return to work after they had started a family. The organisation also publicised women's contributions and raised their profile as role models and mentors (United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2009, p. 238).

Another recent woman-centric idea, referred to as SOUGHA (meaning "a traveller's gift" in Arabic), was aimed at supporting a resurgence of home-based handicraft for UAE women as a means of providing them with economic independence (SOUGHA, 2011). Increased interaction and networking through such a grassroots structure has allowed challenges and community issues to emerge in a culturally sensitive way, which is believed to be appealing to a female disposition (Erogul, 2009).

### 2.6.3 Historical Authority of the Family

Crabtree's (2007) investigation reflected the range and diversity of expected norms within individual family structures, including nuclear, extended and polygamous households. Although the extended family was traditionally multi-generational, this had started to change. Crabtree's research found more families were orientating themselves around a nuclear structure whereby grandparents lived geographically closer to their children but not under the same roof.

The traditional, nomadic past induced nostalgia for the mothers interviewed in Crabtree's 2007 study. The political independence of the UAE in 1971 and the discovery of oil since the UAE was formed from an area formerly known as the Trucial States (Schvaneveldt et al., 2005, p.77) have radically changed the people's lifestyles. These events created a large divide between the older and younger generations in terms of their formative experiences and expectations. Many mothers spoke about the changes which had occurred since their younger days when it was customary for women to have community responsibilities and accountability for all the family's needs, while men were away from home fishing or working further afield. During such times the mother's duties included managing a variety of tasks, ranging from childcare, water collection, day-to-day domestic responsibilities, food gathering, taking care of the livestock, weaving, and making clothing for the family. Before the advent of oil traditional pursuits were the cornerstone of Emirati life, with pearl diving, fishing and maritime trade the dominant forms of community work. It was not uncommon for women to be engaged in these occupations when there was no male around to help care for the family due to widowhood, divorce or long absences from home (Ebrahim et al., 2008). They were actively occupied with trading, and some even owned ships (Abu Nasr, Khoury & Azzam, 1985).

Since cultural limitations prevented women from negotiating with non-related males, it was customary for a male family member to conduct business on their behalf. Their business activities did not bring them any public recognition, despite having the freedom to be involved in what was deemed to be male pursuits (Soffan, 1980). The contrast between women's previous lifestyles and their current, cloistered existence emphasised their former, active involvement in fishing and agricultural activities. As a result, these women believed the closer community network of old had eroded, and although females had gained

remarkable opportunities through higher education, they lacked the knowledge and skills to perform the basic duties formally practiced by their mothers (Crabtree, 2007). The fathers in her study claimed that unlike their daughters who had acquired the necessary skills to become employed, their uneducated wives would not be able to find paid employment. Crabtree (2007) noticed feelings about the past were idealised by parents who remained committed to traditional values, and she highlighted the importance of appreciating those values in the context of a rapidly changing society. The social and political tensions in families where mothers were valued for their domesticity but devalued for a lack of education and seclusion from society stood in stark contrast to their daughters who still had expectations of marriage and motherhood despite their higher education having provided a different perspective on life.

#### 2.6.4 Female Careers

Research related to women's progress in the workforce has explored the barriers to their careers (Kottke & Agars, 2005) and home/work balance (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). However, there is general consensus that today careers for working women are both multi-faceted and multi-dimensional (Omair, 2010; O'Neil et al., 2008). The influence of Emirati fathers on their daughters' career decisions is very much connected to the traditional patriarchal relationship (Williams, Wallis & Williams, 2013). In the UAE, where the labour market is made up of 20% Emirati and 80% expatriates, discrepancies between demand and supply, principally in the private sector, have been caused by difficulties in attracting and retaining Emirati employees, even though Emiratisation policies have been in place for years (Williams, Wallis & Williams, 2013). Despite being less obtainable (Simpson, 2012) public sector employment is favoured for its higher salaries and better working conditions than private sector employment. For female Emirati graduates wishing to adhere to family preferences, public sector jobs are at "saturation point" (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; UAE, 2005).

The study of Williams et al., (2013) illustrated how fathers influence their daughters' career choices, and highlighted the inherent social and cultural limitations placed upon them. Other studies have found fathers are the essential authoritative figures in Emirati families, especially in regard to education and work choices (Al Majali, 2005). Some fathers not only perceive public-sector jobs to fit a more conventional ideal, but also a superior package in

comparison to private-sector employment, when taking into account the attractive entry-level salaries, more sympathetic working conditions, better holiday benefits, job security, reduced working hours and cultural sensitivities (Harry, 2007; Salih, 2010; Omair, 2010). They expect their daughters to be home when they come home from work, which is one of the reasons why families prefer public sector jobs (Shaban et al., 1995). Long working hours and shift work are regarded as threats to their code of modesty, and fathers' limitations on working hours reinforce the cultural bias that encourages daughters "to view themselves as always linked with, reciprocally shaped by, and mutually responsive to family and relatives" (Joseph, 1996, p. 200).

Williams et al., (2013, p. 5) showed "fathers often explicitly support their daughters in furthering their education and careers, but also impose many implicit restrictions on their daughters which can inhibit their career choice". Women entering the workforce endeavour to balance their personal career ambitions with their familial duties. Working in the public sector allows them to juggle their obligations because of shorter working hours and a more protective working environment (Hamdan, 2010). As stated by Williams et al. (2013, p. 140), "reinforced by religion and society and upheld by families, the UAE retains a strong commitment to patriarchal gender norms". Similarly, the government reinforces male and female social conventions by providing separate work areas (Gallant & Pounder, 2008).

Research conducted by Al Oraiimi (2011) concluded education is an important means of empowering women, particularly in Islam. She claimed Islam calls for education to be seen as a religious duty for both males and females. In early Islamic periods Muslim women achieved a high level of education, and although gender was not a factor at the time, the adage "knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim man and woman" was evidently practised (Al Oraiimi, 2011, p. 84). Morris (2005) commented that larger numbers of working women does not necessarily point to a change in gender roles. His remarks recognised the importance of education and employment opportunities for women, but also raised questions about how this would change the role of women in a conservative culture. Morris (2005) was of the view that gender-specific roles were instilled in Emirati women by their interactions with teachers of the same nationality and by working with other Emirati females who shared the same values. He argued the status quo was replicated because of the cultural context, and that empowerment of women through education and job opportunities was not a certainty.

### 2.6.5 Influence of Family Expectations

University campuses are located throughout the Emirates and the country is small enough for students to attend an institution in an Emirate other than the one they reside in. Road networks are well constructed and provide easy access to universities. Crabtree (2007) commented on the diverse stages of development in the Emirates, with each Emirate having its own unique character and different norms of dress and social conduct. Every Emirate has its own Indigenous ruling family and different sources of revenue. According to Crabtree (2007), the differences between living standards in each Emirate contributed to families' expectations of their children, however although significant, this was not necessarily conclusive. In the student population she examined, Crabtree (2007) "expected there would be some interesting divergences in the perspectives of students and their families, in view of the nation's rapid development over a mere thirty years or so, and the exposure of the younger generation to global influences. For the student population of the university, such influences have deliberately inculcated as part of their education, but were unlikely to be equally familiar to their parents" (Crabtree, 2007, p. 577).

The UAE was a largely illiterate society before becoming a federation in 1971, as prior to that, people only had admission to religious education (Hurreiz, 2002). Today it has been transformed into a modern society through government-led development in all areas of education (Godwin, 2006). The rising affluence in the UAE, according to Crabtree (2007), has not resulted in a marked influence on the family structure or gender roles. She concluded: "educated daughters of participating families were well equipped to achieve good career prospects if they and their families so wished" (2007, p. 585).

## 2.7 Gender Capital

### 2.7.1 Societal and Familial Pressure

The cultural values which are inevitably linked to society's division of labour and the role of women could be considered an extension of its religious beliefs. However, contrary to popular belief, there is an absence of explicit instructions for dividing labour in the Quran, which in fact allows for and supports a myriad of variations (Wadud, 1999). Women raised as Muslims in Arab society believe it is not the religion that oppresses them but rather the historical culture of patriarchy (Hale, 2001). Kazemi (2000) identified two inter-related factors which have led to the subordination of women in the Middle East, namely legal



doctrine and cultural attitudes that favour the power of the patriarch. He suggested the largest gender gap is evident in the Middle East, which has been very resistant to change.

The guardianship system is a provision of Sharia law, and requires a woman to seek approval from her guardian when contemplating action. Women are unable to assume responsibility or make decisions for themselves (Al Oraiimi, 2011) and accordingly, the idea that women should have freedom on the grounds of gender, or their legal competence and decision-making ability carries absolutely no weight. However, the establishment in the Emirates does involve women in decision-making, and seeks to empower them in a way that is consistent with the Islamic faith. Kazemi (2000) stated while Islam in itself is not the original reason for these prevailing attitudes, the religious ideas do reinforce patriarchy.

Meanwhile, Jaber (2001) developed a principle of patriarchy to include two distinct areas: the first was concerned with men's authority over the women in the family, and the second was public patriarchy, evident in state-run political and religious organisations. As in other Arab countries, laws promulgated in the UAE reflect the issue of gender. The term "gender" was claimed by Al Oraiimi (2011. p. 81) to mean the social definition that men and women follow in agreement with the roles given to them by society. She went on to say roles start as unwritten social laws and gradually become written into official law. Furthermore, the roles of men and women are founded on biological differences which become a social classification and in turn create a division of labour based on the "muscle power" of each sex. In areas of divorce, marriage, inheritance and child custody rights, laws discriminate against women (Kazemi, 2000).

Unlike men, women in the UAE were unable to pass on their nationality to their children, and their political influence has been limited (A Hundred, 1999). However in 2011, the President, His Highness Sheikh Kalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, issued a decree enabling the children of Emirati mothers and non-national fathers to apply for citizenship once they reached the age of 18. Family law and religion are strongly connected in the Muslim faith, particularly since the rules for Islamic law, known as "Sharia", are rooted in family law. The prevailing attitude is "men are responsible for the 'maintenance' of their wives (and children) and wives are required to show 'obedience' to their husbands" (Moghadam, 2006, p. 223). Men whose wives or daughters work outside the home face social pressure from the community because it is suggested they are unable to financially fend for their women folk.

They suffer from “aib” or a sense of shame which often prevents women from being able to work, even in the public sector (Omair, 2010). There appears to be less shame associated with women working in government (Harry, 2007).

The Emirati attitude to nation building has been considerably impacted by increasing numbers of female graduates choosing to join the workforce and disputing the traditional “homemaker” role. Religious declarations or “fatwas” have compelled parents to encourage their daughters to work outside the home for the greater good of society (Elaas, 2009). This has been cautiously cultivated with consideration for maintaining female modesty, integrity and honour. Kandiyoti (1991) stated this challenge to cultural family traditions in favour of paid employment had resulted in a “patriarchal bargain” engaged in by young women as part of a new set of gender rules in a fast-changing society.

Emirati women are mindful of the family’s reputation depending on honour, dignity and modesty, and they accept the restrictions placed upon them, particularly with regard to interactions with men outside the immediate family (Joseph, 1996; Moghadam, 2006). Veiling is one highly visible example of their cultural practice. For many Arabic women it is a personal decision to veil, linked to their thinking on not just religion, but also on issues of reassurance, fashion and protection (Harik & Marston, 2003). Bartkowski and Read (2003) argued that rather than being restrictive, veiling provides women with the freedom to access opportunities which would otherwise be considered inappropriate. They claimed: “veiling, a traditional practice reinforcing gender difference, can actually promote equal opportunity for Muslim women where co-educational schooling and paid employment are concerned” (Bartkowski & Read, 2003, p. 88).

In the UAE, the national identity of women is closely associated with wearing an *abaya* and *shayla*, worn as a symbol of patriotic pride. Segregation in public educational institutions is considered the custom, reflected in the many separate higher education campuses. This attitude also applies to activities such as shopping and going to work (Harik & Marston, 2003).

### 2.7.2 Career Opportunities for Women

As working women juggle work commitments and domestic responsibilities there is an implicit objective to accommodate patriarchal rules while also endeavouring to meet their

own needs (Harik & Marston, 2003; Sabbagh, 1996). Evetts (2000) referred to action, culture and structure impacting on women's work choices. He claimed the cultural dimension, such as family ideologies; structural dimension, such as the division of labour; and action dimension, such as women's good judgment, all impacted on women's careers. These factors still influence career opportunities for women in a developing societies today, and in the UAE women are encouraged to adopt socially acceptable careers. The late President, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, said "I am promoting women working in places that are suitable to their nature and give them respect and dignity as mothers and makers of generations" (cited in Al Siksek, 1987 p. 110).

The topic of paid work reflects the increasing opportunities becoming available to female Emiratis who wish to join the workforce. As more young women have come into contact with men through education and employment there has been a relaxation of previously strict standards. Nevertheless, the mothers interviewed in Crabtree's (2007) study expressed an inclination for their daughters to seek employment that prevented contact with men in the work environment. She observed parents had an unrealistic understanding of the kinds of work environments their daughters might find themselves in, yet mothers were pleased their daughters could achieve financial independence – impossible for most women in previous generations.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century UAE, the need for developing Indigenous human capital significantly changed the thinking in this Islamic country with regard to education (Al-Khateeb, Darrat & Elkhail, 2007). The notion of investing in human capital coupled with the associated benefits of educated individuals and an educated workforce aligned perfectly with the strategies of nation building and economic development (Akaari, 1999). Crabtree's (2007) research found despite the country's political aspirations for women to enter higher education, only a minority planned to use their skills in the workplace, and few participants intended to pursue a career after they graduated. The late President, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, was frequently quoted as saying: "women have the right to work everywhere" (UAE Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, 2008). His legacy led the government to put considerable effort into educating women in the UAE and assisting them to take up leadership roles in business and other sectors of the labour force (Nelson, 2004; United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2008). Although favourable numbers of Emirati women are taking up the

option of becoming entrepreneurs compared with other Gulf countries, this is not occurring to the same extent as countries like Norway, Finland and Singapore with similar GDP per capita (Erogul & McCrohan, 2008). The government understands statistical evidence is required for developing female-friendly initiatives, and as stated in the United Arab Emirates Yearbook (2009, p. 239) “as part of its efforts to ensure Emirati women play a key role not only in the local arena but throughout the Gulf region, the DWE has initiated several women-centric programs with the active participation of private and public sector organizations”.

Notably, government initiatives to support women’s careers are not focused on gender impartiality, but rather on allowing women to fill public roles while still maintaining culturally prescribed norms (United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2009). The former Minister for Economy and Planning in the UAE, Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi said:

By creating an environment in the UAE that enables women to be flexible in their approach to work, to choose a career path, to balance the demands of home, and the office, to contribute to the development of this nation, we are unquestionably contributing to the growth of the UAE’s GDP (2007, pp. 33-35).

The increasing trend of working women and the requirement to achieve successful results in higher education to obtain jobs are evident in the UAE. In the early 1980’s, approximately 60% of Emirati girls and 30% of Emirati boys who started school ultimately went on to higher education. However, the process of educating women for the workforce is more than just an issue of national need, but also one of individual aspirations. Women are desirous of a good lifestyle but also want to take on more challenges and responsibilities as the country’s economy continues to grow (Reed, n.d).

Original research by Mezirow (1991), later utilised by Madsen (2009a), showed evidence of transformational adult learning in ADWC students. Her findings documented a perspective transformation in higher education, where the pedagogic experiences young women encountered in the learning environment provided avenues for career and work opportunities they would otherwise have been unable to access. Goby commented:

Traditionally social values have curtailed female activity outside the home but recent robust government intervention has sought to mould a rapidly developing economy in which female figures can rise to public forums, while at the same time adhering to traditionally enshrined female roles (2011, p. 329).

As women's roles have changed in society, so too have men's. The increasing numbers of women in the workforce have required men to redefine their expectations of their wives and daughters (Harik & Marston, 2003). They have had to adjust to a new social discourse, which while rooted in cultural and social traditions is starting to embrace attitudinal changes necessary for developing gender capital. The transition of the UAE from a traditional society to a modern one was described by Al Oraiimi (2011) as a time when many social attitudes had changed. She commented on the reorganisation of social structures to replicate modern social models, and elaborated on gender concepts which legally allow men and women to interact on an equal basis while maintaining traditional social relationships. Meanwhile, Whiteoak, Crawford, and Mapstone (2006) anticipated a change in the outlook of men in the UAE as women continue to outperform them in the educational arena and succeed in attaining significant employment opportunities.

Reed (n.d.) outlined the career challenges for female Emirati graduates in the context of the Emiratisation program. He concluded that educated women who are motivated to work in the private sector as opposed to the public sector and are given appropriate opportunities, would impact human capital and growth in knowledge-dependent industries. For Emiratisation to be successful he claimed educated Emirati women would be vital in all areas of the labour force. Goby (2011) noted despite living in a privileged society, the UAE has the largest number of women in higher education globally. She stated: "this results from government agencies in business and public ventures attempting to replace some of the country's vast numbers of foreign workers with UAE citizens" (Goby, 2011, p. 329).

The UAE government has actively advanced programs to place more Emiratis in the workplace. Their objective is to help all citizens find work, and specifically to encourage women to take up jobs and roles outside the home in partnership with international organisations (Manpower Group, 2012). The department responsible for ongoing employment creation is Tanmia, which operates as a special division of the UAE's Ministry

of Labour, with a mandate to counteract the heavy reliance on foreign workers. Brooks (2004) commented on concerns of both local and transnational private companies affected by government policies stipulating Emirati quotas in companies with more than 50 employees. However, many female graduates prefer to work in the government sector because of higher salaries and better employment conditions, which has resulted in less demand for work in the private sector. The International Monetary Fund recommended the UAE government reduces the benefits to Emiratis employed in government departments to discourage this trend from continuing (International Monetary Fund, 2004). Yet despite these recommendations government employees received a number of substantial pay increases which maintained the flow of graduates into the public sector (Khaleej Times, 2005).

Madsen (2010) alleged higher education opportunities in the UAE come with a high price in terms of expectations for success. Students who fail to achieve lose the option of attending fee-exempt federally-funded institutions. For young females limited by financial constraints the only pathway to working outside the home is through success at college, and so this public conduit is extremely important for their future contribution to society. Madsen's research found women who took advantage of education at ADWC replaced the old, established stereotypes with an image of young, modern females who use their connections to engage creatively and professionally. By embracing fresh developments in educational pedagogy, public institutions have brought about personal change for students and established a connection with gender capital.

Crabtree (2007) observed strictly enforced social controls in families, designed to maintain appropriate conduct and preserve the family honour. Conservative views of gender norms that led daughters to move from school to marriage and motherhood coupled with constraints on their freedom of movement and purpose, led Crabtree to conclude expectations were not so different from the uneducated mothers in her study. She found the political pressure for women to conform to traditional, gendered roles in spite of their education and marketable job skills sent a mixed message and created confusion in the workplace, educational establishments and within Emirati families (Crabtree, 2007). In the author's view the expectations placed on females regarding education, career prospects and domestic roles were filled with ambiguity.

### 2.7.3 Lifelong Learning

Whitman (2003) reported on an OECD Education Ministers meeting in April 2001, where the future expectations of tertiary education providers, largely encompassing “lifelong learning”, were outlined. It was proposed that the patterns identified could lead to the formation of policies and practices to ensure students are able to develop the skills and competencies needed in the workplace. The organisation found “the link to the qualities and qualifications profiles of the labour force (Whitman, 2003, p. 193) was related to a policy agenda that should strengthen institutions, providing a ‘harder edge’ in education and training”. Whitman further concluded “education may and indeed should help young people and adults develop independence and creativity in thinking, curiosity and initiative” (Whitman, 2003, p. 195). The implicit benefit of his theory is significant in times of change, especially the ability to be adaptable, and demonstrates initiative and entrepreneurship. Whitman (2003) recommended a number of strategies for government tertiary education providers: to produce a range of factors, including program criteria and evaluation in addition to qualification frameworks and incentives to formulate well-defined objectives. As a result effective leadership within higher education increased through government support and programs, which were developed to cater for students’ backgrounds, interests and choices, and not just for human capital.

## 2.8 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter relates to educational and cultural aspects of young female Emirati undergraduates engaged in a program of study at a public university in a Gulf country, with a focus on the perceptions and traditions underpinning the community in which these women lived and studied. The social changes that have occurred were examined in relation to the empowerment of Emirati women who are currently in a time of rapid, significant economic change. Unless these changes are documented appropriately it will be impossible for the outside world to have an accurate understanding of these women’s experiences and the society in which they live.

It was necessary to examine the historical setting from which recent higher education developments have emerged in order to present the juxtaposition of traditional, cultural and societal tensions these Emirati women are encountering in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The themes identified in this study highlighted educational environments, students’ approaches to

learning and relationships with teachers, as well as cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital. The literature provided a context for these themes and showed that previous research had only partially covered some of these factors.

Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) identified the importance of teacher-learner relationships and recognised the need for teaching to go beyond merely dispensing information, administering tests and allocating grades. Their findings supported the sentiments of this study's participants who believed their university education provided them with opportunities to look beyond merely "being right". Bumbuc and Pasca's (2011) research found university teachers wielded significant influence, emanating from their own personal experiences. These authors also confirmed students bring their own personal histories and learning habits with them to the learning environment. Meanwhile, Kezar and Kinzie's (2006) study recognised suitable academic challenges, active shared learning, sympathetic teachers and learning support in higher education institutions enriched students' learning experiences.

The work of Madsen (2009a) and Daloz (1990) found students acknowledged transformative learning had occurred while at university. This finding was supported by the current study, as was Madsen and Cook's (2010) research, which found a college environment increased the potential for students to be transformed by their experiences. Empowerment and independence were regarded as direct consequences of higher education by Madsen and Cook (2010), who also observed a lack of critical thinking in most of their undergraduate participants entering university in the UAE. Learning through enquiry was acknowledged by Madsen and Cook's (2010) research to be the method employed by teachers for synthesising theory and practice in projects and assignments with students in higher education. Madsen and Cook's (2010) findings also concurred with this study, which found teachers' scrutiny of their students' earlier educational experiences provides an understanding of their approach to learning.

Crabtree (2007) observed strict social codes in families to uphold gendered conduct befitting the family's honour. For example, friendship with males in a place of learning was frowned upon. Nevertheless, her participants were willing to talk to males but were clear about the boundaries of their encounters which might otherwise become problematic. In this study, participants appeared to have evolved and adopted a more tolerant



view of professional relationships with males. Like Crabtree's research which identified evidence of parents' considerable attachment to their children becoming married and having children of their own, this was also important for participants in the current study. Williams, Wallis and Williams (2013) noted fathers' influence on their daughters' choice of careers which combined the traditional patriarchal/female relationship to maintain their cultural traditions. Their findings also aligned with the results of this study.

Madsen and Cook (2010) concluded the future role of women in UAE society presented more options for them to redefine philosophical limitations. In this study, participants were enthusiastic and excited about the opportunities they believed were available to them, confirming the value of higher education for women and the government's vision to promote education for all its citizens. Madsen and Cook's (2010) research showed in the past Emirati men not only had access to education but also greater employment opportunities, so it was heartening to see the situation has changed considerably. Their findings identified the future role of women in society not just as wife and mother, but also as individuals capable of making a contribution to society. Today, many opportunities exist for Emirati women because graduate education has allowed them to pursue business and careers.

The next chapter presents the methodology of the study and outlines in detail the research process selected for cataloguing the philosophical and practical aspects.

## Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

A range of options and approaches to methods and methodology can be used by researchers when undertaking a study of people. Those choices involve implicit assumptions about reality and knowledge (Crotty, 1998). As this particular study was concerned with the social and educational understanding of a group of Indigenous women it was important to adopt a research process that matched the research needs.

This chapter outlines in detail the research process selected to answer the research questions. It is divided into two sections: Section 1 outlines the epistemological view underpinning the methodology of the research. The participant selection under investigation is detailed and the case techniques outlined. The research design and research methods are described, as well as the research instruments used for the data collection. In Section 2, the approach to the data analysis is discussed, the ethical difficulties clarified, and the strengths and restrictions of the study reviewed.

### 3.1 Section 1: Methodological Approach

#### 3.1.1 Epistemology

Qualitative researchers argue that knowledge is formed and constructed through interpretive processes by individuals who are assembling perspectives of reality (Giangreco & Taylor, 2003). As researchers are significantly involved in the process, the epistemology and methodology of the research are affected by their own lens of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Gallagher (2006) stated reality and knowledge have many dimensions. This study fits with a subjectivist epistemology and places the findings in a social constructivist paradigm.

Crotty's (1998) constructivist viewpoint infers it is impossible to be objective when interpreting meaning, as meaning is constructed by individuals connecting with their own experiences. In order to adequately capture the female Emirati students' experiences it was necessary to examine the ways in which the researcher's views of reality might shape the questions. Her experience of institutional settings, longstanding connection with the cultural and educational systems, as well as familiarity with the participants made it important to acknowledge Crotty's (1998) concepts of referentiality and relatedness in the constructivist approach. A constructivist approach refutes any idea of a single, true or valid explanation of

social reality in favour of a wider and more diverse appreciation of a phenomenon (Crotty, 1998; Brookes & Brookes, 1999; Glaser, 2002). Consequently, the constructivist approach was best suited to examining not only the varied perspectives of the students under investigation, but also the similarities and differences in their perspectives, influenced as they are by family, society and education.

By utilising tools of deduction and induction the involvement of the researcher effectively constituted an aspect of the research instrument, since the circumstances under scrutiny were filtered and interpreted through her lens of reality (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach & Richardson, 2005). Yin (2009) claimed the expertise and ability of the researcher gives the study credibility, and suggested investigators take advantage of their skilled knowledge to advance analysis.

The qualitative data collected by the researcher presented the realities and complexities of the situation, and helped to form an understanding about different students' shared educational experience from their own cultural perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### 3.1.2 Theoretical Perspective

To understand the philosophical attitudes in this study and the context they provide for the chosen methodology and methods, an interpretivist theoretical orientation was used. This paradigm aims to construe the social world via culture and history, and is concerned with *verstehen*, an understanding of how people act and interact (Crotty 1998). Candy (1989) described this form of interpretive research as seeking to create accounts of phenomena rather than law-like generalisations.

Advocates of the interpretive approach (Candy, 1989; Crotty, 1998; Walsham, 2006) claimed the socially constructed nature of reality is played out by individuals. The philosophical underpinnings of this study recognise the relevance of a comprehensive dialogue about educational and cultural contexts in order to build an understanding of the students' perspectives of the changes during their formal and informal interactions. The interpretive approach considers the point of view of the subjects under examination, and is central to understanding the attitudes and opinions expressed by their insights. In this study, the interpretive approach was grounded in the students' day-to-day lives as they progressed through their higher educational experience.

Gubrium and Holstein (2003) identified the need to confront existing accepted realities for endorsing alternate realities. Consequently, in this study young Emirati women were able to speak about their world on their own terms. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) claimed the interpretive view of a social process cannot be summed up in hypothetical deductions, but by getting inside the world of the people involved in generating the particular social process. In this context it was impossible for the researcher to assume a neutral position, since it has been acknowledged that she had a connection to the topic and the participants were instrumental in identifying the phenomena under study.

Candy (1989) identified three crucial concepts underpinning the interpretive approach. He talked about “intersubjectivity”, which refers to human interaction according to consensually agreed rules validated by people in a given social situation. He also referred to “motives” as events or circumstances which create other events or circumstances; and “reasons” as the expectations that influence individuals to behave in certain ways and achieve a particular state of affairs. These three concepts provided the framework for the methodology in this study, to enable an understanding of young female Emirati students’ perspectives of their social world, their familial and educational experiences, and their current understanding of career potential.

Delving into this topic with a purpose of understanding the thoughts and views of the young people involved, meant structuring the study on the belief that their opinions, behaviours and experiences can be revealed through multiple interacting factors. The underlying assumption was that the whole needs to be examined in order to understand the phenomena, and is based on Giangreco and Taylor’s (2003) argument that knowledge is fashioned and individuals’ perspectives are assembled through ongoing interpretation. Utilising interpretivism to underpin the qualitative research assumes the insights gained from discovering meaning will lead to greater comprehension of the whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It is equally relevant for this type of research to explore the depth, richness and complexity of the phenomena being investigated. Qualitative studies can be said to mean “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). In this way, the study was aimed at providing descriptions and details to grasp the personal circumstances of the participants. Myers (2002) described qualitative studies as “tools used in understanding and

describing the world of human experience, and since we maintain our humanity throughout the research process, it is largely impossible to escape the subjective experience” (p. 1).

In this study, context was especially important since the students in the participant selection exemplified a world made up of a range of multifaceted perspectives. A holistic approach was required to understand this fragmentation in its entirety, which took into account the unified whole rather than focusing on disjointed variables.

### 3.1.3 Research Methodology

There is a strong connection between research design and the particular choice of methods which create outcomes (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology of this study and its relationship to the methodologies and choice of methods were anticipated to clarify the intentions behind the process. By doing so, readers of the study are able to inspect the information uncovered and place it in their own version of reality.

In accepting Crotty’s (1998) view of knowledge and truth as not fixed or singular, the outcomes of this research should be seen as indicative of the individuals who participated rather than conclusive evidence about all female Emirati students. Explicit connections linking the design, methods and outcomes served to clarify the relationship between the epistemology and the methodology. The strength of the study is its rich, contextual information that emerged from the detailed, in-depth feedback obtained from different sources (Creswell, 2009).

### 3.1.4 Qualitative Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) described qualitative research as an activity which places the observer in the world and involves using a lens of interpretation and naturalism. Qualitative research is therefore focused on phenomena in their natural setting and endeavours to make sense of what is seen, so that any interpretation can be understood in terms of the meanings the subjects bring to them. In this way the perspective of qualitative methodology forms a link between the epistemology of the research and the research methods.

## **Participant Selection**

The participants selected for this study comprised of undergraduate female students enrolled in a media course in a non-fee-paying, government-funded university in the United

Arab Emirates. The target population attended two different academic media classes in an undergraduate degree program at that university. There were 22 students in the first group of participants and 21 students in the second group. All were based at the same campus.

Participant selection was based on a non-probability, purposive, convenience approach (Burns 2000) and participation was undertaken voluntarily. Because a non-probability, purposive sampling method was used, some deficit in terms of the study's representativeness and generalisability is acknowledged. However, in-depth investigation of these participants provided a significant small-scale qualitative study illustrative of their journey. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) identified a move away from over-reliance on large samples of quantitative methods in educational research, and emphasised the value of small-scale cases. Burns (2000) suggested studies of this kind help produce information about numerically small, but socially noteworthy groups. Despite the importance of representativeness, it was less significant for this study than details of the students' experiences from which similarities and differences could be deduced.

Participants were selected for the questionnaire and interviews based on variables related to age, marital status, home and birth location, pre-university educational experiences and the length of time they had been enrolled at the university, based on the framework recommended by Smyth and Hattam (2004). Since the research was aimed at investigating the relationship between education and culture, it was imperative to select students who felt comfortable expressing their attitudes and opinions on topics that may have been considered controversial.

The characteristics of the first set of participants were similar to the participants interviewed in the second data collection stage. Age, marital status, home and birth locations, pre-university educational experiences and the amount of time they had been enrolled at the university were not explicitly detailed for the second group; however the group was a typical representation of the surveyed participants since the university and media course were composed of a homogenous student cohort. Participants were recruited at the university where the researcher was a staff member and were able to communicate their ideas, attitudes and opinions clearly, since their English-language skills were adequate for responding to the survey and interview questions. Each group of students volunteered on an individual basis

after being invited to participate in the research as part of a doctoral investigation (see Appendices F and G).

The students enrolled in the media courses typified the changes taking place in the UAE in that they were young Indigenous women undertaking higher education. This was aligned with the government's drive to promote women's education and the important role of the media in influencing the perspectives of the wider community.

### 3.1.5 Research Design

The research design involved the creation of two in-depth, interlinked inquiry instruments. Some of the findings from the first phase were subsequently incorporated into the development of the second phase. In both phases the cultural and educational encounters of female Emirati media students were investigated from the standpoint of the participants themselves.

#### **Phase 1: Electronic survey**

Questions 1-88 focused on participants' demographics and perspectives towards educational and cultural issues.

Questions 89-100 were open-ended questions designed to elicit more detailed responses about educational and cultural matters.

#### **Phase 2: Face-to-face interviews**

The intention was for the survey (Questions 1-88) to provide details related to the research questions and demographic particulars of the first group of participants (see Appendix C). This was important because all the students at the university were Indigenous females with comparable educational experiences and similar traditional family backgrounds. Using a survey was a cost-effective and time-efficient way of garnering data from individuals in an anonymous setting, who may otherwise have been reluctant to voice an opinion (Denscombe, 2007). The decision to use a questionnaire was dictated by its efficiency for data collection and ease of analysis (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001).

The rationale for the survey questionnaire was based on the conceptual framework and original research questions (see Appendices A and H). The survey design was referenced from the literature review, the purpose of the research, and the researcher's experience of teaching university students. The questionnaire consisted of a combination of 88 closed and 12 open-ended questions and was administered electronically to media undergraduates studying a media writing course. The 88 closed questions were designed to collect demographic data about the participants in order to establish fundamental knowledge about them. It also served to capture simple qualitative data around participants' attitudes and opinions related to educational and cultural issues. This information revealed key facts about the group's background and created an opportunity for the first group of participants to answer open-ended questions regarding the educational and cultural issues under study. Creswell (2009) argued open-ended questions allowed respondents to express themselves in a descriptive manner, and in this study the open-format questions gave participants a chance to reply in their own words.

The open-ended questions in Phase 1 comprised 12 questions, concentrated in part on examining cultural norms related to societal and familial attitudes, the role of women in their traditional culture, identity issues, experiences in school and university, learning styles, and future career expectations. They also included questions exploring respondents' attitudes and feelings towards their past and current education (see Appendix B).

The researcher examined the comments from the first group of students to the open-ended questions in Phase 1, and developed more complex questions to explore, enhance and understand the deeper issues relating to the second group's opinions, attitudes and feelings about their culture and education in the face-to-face interviews in Phase 2.

The following research questions directed Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the inquiry:

- What factors influence the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?
- What is the role of culture in the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?
- What are the perspectives of personal change that take place for female Emirati undergraduates in a traditional society?



As with any kind of qualitative research, methodological challenges can be encountered during the process of gathering data. Brenner (1985), Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputton (2007), and Partington (2001) explained the potential problems, some of which were evident in this study. Taking into account the characteristics of young students and the contextual features of their lives, these needed to be acknowledged as recommended by Hitchcock & Hughes (1995). Tact, flexibility and patience were necessary to maintain an ongoing relationship with participants, who although keen to contribute to the research study, had busy lives involving their studies and family commitments. Delays in the survey section of the data collection phase were problematic due to their forgetfulness in returning the questionnaire. While conducting interviews, absenteeism and requests to postpone required rescheduling some meetings. In the initial stages, some participants lost their consent forms and had to be given additional copies to sign, or they simply forgot to return their signed forms. While collecting the data it became apparent that an understanding of the respondents' lifestyles, history, outlook and customs was critical. It was also essential to connect with formal and informal networks to build trust with the students and maintain their interest in the research.

In addition, explicit procedures needed to be followed prior, during and after the interview process (see Appendix H). Before the interview day the researcher met with each participant and showed them the questions they would be asked at the interview. The researcher also explained anything that was unclear and informed them that the interviews were to be recorded, the information was confidential and they would not be identifiable. During the interviews which were conducted individually, the questions previously shown to the participants were used, the interview was conducted in a classroom setting, respondents were advised the interview could be paused at any time and they had the option of having any part of the recording deleted. They were also informed the recording would be available the day after the interview if they wanted to listen to it again or delete anything. A timeframe of one to one-and-a-half hours was allocated for each interview and a flexible approach used to give participants time to explain issues of importance to them. The interview focused on how they understood and interpreted the issues and proceedings (Bryman, 2008).

### 3.1.6 Justification of the Research Methods

Fundamental to all research methodologies is the need for a rationale for using a particular method. Bryman's (2006) idea, supported by Tuckett (2005), was for rationale and practise to be united to ensure the data articulates any significance about the subject being investigated. Since this research was intended to view certain attitudes and opinions from the perspective of the participants, it was important to use methods that facilitated an appreciation of their world. In this respect, an interpretive approach based on a theory-building method was developed to allow theory to grow out of an understanding of the subject matter.

The theory-building process was continuous rather than a series of hypothesis-testing investigations. Creswell (2006) suggested the researcher reflects on whether the phases should be performed simultaneously or sequentially. In this study, data were collected sequentially and one phase was used to contribute to data collected in the next phase. Creswell et al., (2008) considered it not always possible to uncover everything through only one research approach, yet on the other hand, Silverman (2011) cautioned researchers not to presume a more complete picture or enlarged reliability from combined methods and cumulative data.

A largely qualitative, mixed methods research design was used to explore issues relevant to the cultural and educational challenges facing the young Emirati women in this study. The intention was for the transcription and analysis phases to build theory by closely matching the analysis to the complexity of the topics. Utilising a mixed methods design with qualitative data-collection informed by a grounded theory approach, used grounded theory as a means of data analysis and not merely a means of collecting data. The importance of grounded theory in this piece of research was to provide richly detailed primary data, described by Charmaz (1995) as involving "full" or "thick" written descriptions, which when examined as findings contribute to theory-building.

The interpretive research paradigm embedded in this research method provided the opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of participants, by focusing on how they thought and felt and concentrating on how they acted in their habitual contexts. At the core of the investigation was an assumption that the students were able to generate meaningful constructs of their world. This exemplifies the beliefs of Weber (1993)

who espoused establishing a valid and objective science of the subjective nature of the social world.

The methods used in this study were shaped by an interpretive perspective, enabling the researcher to collect substantial situational information and to investigate commonalities. By collecting some quantitative data, the questionnaire provided a means of measuring variables and concepts related to the demographic details of the participants, while the use of open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews captured a fuller picture of the data. The advantages of using mixed methods is to investigate a given research question by making use of suitable previous research and/or more than one perspective.

The quantitative research allowed for measurement of the data. It was not used to merely identify the data according to numerical values, but also to establish objective knowledge that could be accepted independently from the outlook and standards of the participants involved.

The qualitative research concentrated on meaning through words rather than the frequencies and distribution of numbers in the assembly and analysis of the data. It searched for an understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the situations or events from the participants' perspectives (Greene, 2003). The mixed methods approach used both questionnaire and participant interviews to yield complementary data, and the evidence gathered provided an overall understanding of the phenomena under scrutiny flowing from the single perspective of the inquirer as the instrument (Smith, 1983).

## 3.2 Data Collection Processes

### 3.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed electronically and designed to capture demographic data about the group through closed questions, to supply numerical information about the characteristics of the group and present an overview of their background. The dichotomous questions (1-88) were quick to complete. Responses to questions 1-88 were collated in a Word document to establish a numerical base and straightforward mechanism for analysing the demographic data. The closed questions also provided data regarding the perspectives and opinions of participants on educational and cultural issues, and were used to develop the semi-structured interviews.

A small-scale set of open-ended questions linked the second phase of the data collection as proposed by Aldridge and Levine (2001). The strategy involved collecting the same information from all participants in the group by asking them the same questions. By doing so it was possible to see elements of objectivity and generalisability usually linked with scientific methods, as well as key foci of the selected participants, their response rates, and the way in which the analysis was carried out.

Provision was made for participants to respond to the open-ended questions and reflected themes which were embedded in the research questions. Students could write their own accounts without the limitation of pre-set response categories, however care was taken in crafting the questions to minimise irrelevant and redundant information. This allowed participants to give honest responses in a way that unearthed rich and unexpected details of particular authentic interest, frequently considered a key characteristic of qualitative data (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007). Following Fink's (2003) recommendation for qualitative survey analysis to explore meanings and experiences, a number of open-ended survey questions were created as a form of eliciting opinions.

Adding these questions to the survey assisted in scrutinising the educational and cultural descriptions underpinned by participants' beliefs and practices as identified in the literature. By including open-ended questions in the survey, which was also for the collection of demographic data, the possibility of influencing participants' answers through body language or tone of voice was avoided. Topics focused on cultural sensitivities, attitudes related to respondents' cultural identity, learning styles, experiences and viewpoints of educational environments, relationships with teachers at university, and their understanding of gender capital (see Appendix B).

The questions addressed the requirements of the research and the important factors under inquiry. The aim was to probe, clarify and extend the details provided by participants in the context of the literature review and the research questions and targeted a small group of participants selected from the undergraduate population enrolled in a media course. Although this study did not include the responses and demographic details of the total population, the participant selection was believed to be reflective of the whole population. As participants in the first group comprised a convenience group, it provided details which could be used to test the representativeness of the total population.

The rationale for using open-ended questions fits with a sociological tradition of identifying themes related to the uniqueness of individuals (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007). Incorporating open-ended questions into this interpretivist study made it possible to investigate the texts written by participants and identify emergent themes, so that deeper or multiple meanings could be examined in the subsequent face to face interviews (Cohen et al, 2007).

### 3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews followed the first-phase questionnaire in order to develop and expand on the data elicited in the survey. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) described how to create a protocol for an ideal interview structure to enable dialogue between both parties for discussion and expansion. Burns (2000) also contributed suggestions for semi-structured interviews which were used in this research. The interviews focused on issues at the core of the investigation and enabled participants to expand on opinions gathered in the open-ended questions included in the survey. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim for the purpose of capturing all the nuances of the various comments and establishing the credibility of the data collection procedures (Tuckett, 2005). A total of eight participants agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews.

Using an in-depth, probing method presupposed a uniform instrument administered to a group of participants would ascribe variations in answers to differences amongst themselves rather than differences in the instrument (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The interview process was informed by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) and Burns (2000), and prefaced by an explanation to participants about the number of questions they would be asked and the acceptability for them to elaborate or not comment at all. The questions reflected topics identified in the literature review, so interviews were restricted to those topics in order to identify the scale of the phenomena under study and allow accurate comparisons within and across the group.

Being sensitive to the students involved conducting the face-to-face interviews in a classroom setting. They were enthusiastic about outlining their lives and experiences and non-plussed about other individuals around them while the interviews took place. The researcher already had a relationship with them, so it was relatively easy to conduct the interviews, however it was important not to dominate the discussion and provide a comfortable space for them to tell their stories which took the form of a conversation with

open parameters for natural expansion (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). This approach led to the discovery of enlightening and revealing explanations about the role of cultural influences in their educational process.

In conducting interviews, the recommendations of Brenner (1985), Burgess (1988), Burns (2000), and Partington (2001) were considered, and every endeavour was made to create a safe environment to aid effective interviewing. Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were provided, and prior to conducting interviews, a rapport was established by the researcher to inspire confidence in the respondents. Participants were advised of their rights to read the interview transcript at the conclusion of the interview, were given time to consider their responses and were able to listen to any recorded answers. A non-judgmental atmosphere was created and participants were free to speak at length.

The interview began with a conversation and easy question, and gradually moved from general to more specific topics. The opening question was designed to elicit a discussion about educational environments and was followed by a transition question which asked about the participants' relationships with their teachers. Three key questions formed the core of the interview and addressed cultural sensitivity, learning styles and gender capital. In concluding, participants were asked to express their feelings about their cultural identity so they could divulge information they believed to be important.

The questions were linked to responses in the open-ended survey questions. The conversation explored their individual replies so that a sense of commonality, if any, could be identified. By allowing respondents to speak off topic it was possible to capture rich detail as the conversation developed. All participants were asked the same questions (see Appendix H).

A number of epistemological conditions as outlined by Smyth and Hattam (2004) served to preserve the integrity of the data collected from the interviews. This framework was used to identify the education, culture and practices of the participants, and whether these were conditional, understood, created and practised at university and within their social contexts.

### 3.3 Section Two: Data Analysis and Ethical Issues

The data collected for this research were principally of a qualitative nature rooted in an interpretive approach. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advocated immersion in the data as a vital

part of the findings, since it echoes the fundamental nature of participants' viewpoints. Traditionally, a grounded theory approach involves the discovery of theory through analysis of data, so rather than starting with a hypothesis, the first step was to collect data using a variety of different methods and mark the key points with a series of codes. The codes were then grouped into similar concepts to form categories which reflected a theory or reverse-engineered hypothesis (Bosit, 2003).

Analysing the data using grounded theory (Bryman, 2008) presented an orderly strategy for formulating hypotheses based on conceptual ideas and confirming the hypotheses through constant evaluation of conceptualised data on different levels of abstraction. Significantly, grounded theory is aimed at ascertaining participants' main concerns and how frequently they try to resolve them. Throughout the process of analysing the data considerable thought was given to capturing participants' unedited responses in order to avoid any overt intrusion (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

To produce trustworthy data Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) recommended the use of triangulation to eliminate any bias. The researcher therefore used multiple data sources to cross-check information gained from responses to the questionnaire, the open-ended questions and the interview transcripts. The opportunity for participants to listen to their recordings during and after the interviews provided the necessary checks to clarify and interpret their comments (Tuckett, 2005). Flyvbjerg (2006) recommended this method for accurate interpretation of data. He claimed data gathered not just in one strand but compared against data from other sources allows the research to be treated as a whole rather than a fragment. Of equal importance is constant comparison enables unexpected themes to be identified.

The three separate components of data analysis in this research were combined to provide a deep and rich account of participants' feelings, viewpoints and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). This approach made it possible for the inquiry to identify what the participants had to say and how they made meaning of their lives.

### 3.3.1 Examining the Transcripts

The audio recordings of participants' interviews were transcribed verbatim and transferred to individual hard-copy documents. The transcripts were initially read by the

researcher for meaning and content. As themes became evident, the data were reviewed numerous times, followed by sorting and searching for defined concepts. Coloured highlighters were used to identify sections of the text which showed the emerging themes.

The data not only revealed the themes but also the language used by participants in conveying original expressions, thoughts and views (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher made numerous comparisons of the transcripts in order to compare responses across the group.

### 3.3.2 Coding the Data

Research that involves an inductive approach requires identifying meanings and discovering relationships between the data by creating themes and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first step of the analysis was to utilise “open coding” in order to see what was contained in the data. By reading the transcripts thoroughly, making notes in the margin and asking questions about the information, a process ensued which uncovered multiple meanings in the text. This meant the rich detail and descriptions could be identified for the next stage of coding which involved conceptualising the data.

The data-coding guidelines as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) propose three actions in respect of data analysis. Firstly, it is necessary to reduce the amount of data. Secondly, the research needs to be conceptualised and labels developed to describe the data. Finally and most importantly, any preconceived ideas or prejudices must be put aside so that the data can serve as a guide for interpretation and analysis.

Coding in some form is central to all research. At least three types are used to collect and analyse information: pre-coding, researcher-imposed coding, and qualitative coding. The use of pre-coding in the questionnaire/survey facilitated participants’ responses according to coding categories, since the questions were constructed to examine the aims of the research. Pre-coded categories are often influenced by a particular set of priorities related to the research; namely the purpose of the research, the consumers of the research, or the insightfulness of the researcher in selecting factors considered significant to the data collection. There is no basis for labelling this kind of pre-coding as inferior or superior to other forms of coding because research is never assessed in terms of absolutes. Rather, a



fitness for purpose method can determine the basic criteria for conventional pre-coding formats, like yes/no or agree/disagree questions. For the purpose of researcher-led, broad-based categories, pre-coding can form an ideal part of the study.

Quantification is achieved by measuring features of the data which impose coding categories and by counting the frequencies in each category. The factors which influence the nature of the coding categories are then identified to show only strong trends in the data. In this way simple, very broad categories become defined. The final coding is implemented during qualitative data analysis, where code categories are identified on the basis of comprehensive knowledge of the data. All research codes reality in one form or another; it is the way in which the coding categories are arrived at that varies radically. In some research studies, development of the coding categories is the main reason for the endeavour, while in other instances the coding is more familiar, as in self-completed questionnaires with a closed-question format.

In quantitative research, the data which is structured into categories can be quantified into frequencies of occurrence, while qualitative research demonstrates the categories which align to the detail of the data. By pre-coding data in a way whereby participants choose from response categories, the research at the data collection and coding phases becomes combined into a form of qualitative data collection. Qualitative data collected through interviews for example, may mirror the main quantification characteristics judged important by the researcher for pragmatic or theoretical reasons. However, the broad principle of qualitative research is that the coding or categorisation process is essential for shaping the categories.

Simply put, coding is a method of assigning codes or labels to raw qualitative data, identified from words, phrases and sentences. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested the use of open coding and axial coding as appropriate ways of analysing research data. They described open coding as the researcher's recognition of words and phrases in a transcript or text that allow a label to be created. The grouping of codes or labels identified in the open coding phase eventually needs to be organised into some sort of order, so axial coding with themes or categories ensues. In the following stage two types of axial coding surface, namely non-hierarchical and hierarchical. Sometimes referred to as flat coding, responses can be grouped in a non-hierarchical manner, whereas in hierarchical coding, several codes are clustered together to signify significance, effectively creating subgroups. In this research the format of

coding as outlined above underpinned the analysis, as it provided a way of dissecting meaningful segments of text in the transcripts. The master list of codes formed a blueprint for any new segments encountered (see Appendices D and E).

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations, Processes and Procedures

In order to construct an ethical representation of participants' contributions to this research it was important to provide a safe and open environment where they could tell their stories with confidence. Although the initial survey was anonymous, the researcher's familiarity with the group made it possible to know who the respondents were. However, the use of pseudonyms was employed to code the transcript data for analysis.

It was therefore the researcher's express desire to advise participants about the value of their comments, and reassure them of their anonymity and protection from ridicule or censorship, no matter how brief or detailed their opinions were. In turn, this meant being open to viewpoints which may have been different or contrary to the researcher's own understanding of the subject matter (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). It was also extremely relevant to challenge prevailing assumptions about young female Emirati women with regard to their education and culture.

Ethics clearance for this research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at both Edith Cowan University (the institution at which the researcher was enrolled) and from the Ethics Committee of the institution where the participants were recruited. Ethics clearance enabled the questionnaires to be administered and interviews to be conducted on appropriate days and times.

Questionnaire respondents were assured of anonymity, and written permission was obtained from all participants. They were provided with details of the study and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. In addition to these strategies, the rationale of the research was reiterated prior to the interviews with further guarantees of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Permission to use the tape recordings for the purpose of maintaining accuracy and avoiding bias was also obtained from the participants. They were informed that the findings of the research would be made available to local and international audiences as recommended by Cohen, et al. (2007). The researcher acknowledged a potential conflict of interests in recruiting participants from classes taught by her and the inherent familiarity of

such an arrangement; however this was managed by using open-ended questions to generate dialogue, thereby restricting the interviewer's responses and adopting a reflective listening style.

Professional experience invariably fashions the interpretation of participants' perspectives on a subliminal level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Nevertheless, by "being explicit about personal opinions, perspectives and value orientations" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p.198) it is possible for a qualitative study to maintain credibility. Every effort was made to minimise any influence on the participants by using open-ended questions and restricting dialogue during the interviews to clarification only, as proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2000).

### 3.4.1 Strengths and Restrictions of the Study

There are numerous accounts of the difficulties faced by researchers when dealing with new and unforeseen findings (Burns, 2000; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 2003). The two main causes for concern in the literature are related to dependability and credibility. As with any findings which rely on the interpretation of individuals' thoughts and feelings, this study was also mindful of the limitations about the quality of the information being convincing or believable.

Although the participant selection in both parts of the study were small, the qualitative research revealed findings wholly restricted to the opinions of the participants, and therefore cannot be generalised or assumed to be representative of a broader population (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The more in-depth details obtained from the quantitative data determine whether the findings are representative. However, the findings of this study may well highlight issues that exist in other contexts (Brantlinger et al., 2005), and in this regard the research provides a springboard for examining similarities and differences in other situations, in addition to further enlightening interested academics, administrators and teachers about specific cultural groups.

### 3.4.2 Rigour of the Study

It is problematic to apply quantitative standards of reliability and validity to qualitative data, which by nature offers rich, subjective, individual information. Therefore other viable alternatives (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2003) were used in this study,

namely “authenticity” and “dependability”. There has been broad debate about the standards used to judge the quality of conclusions resulting from qualitative research. However, while the usual rigour focuses on the application of the method, some researchers believe it is equally important to consider the rigour in the process (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Classical social scientists regard the method as important for drawing generalisations from the findings, while modern social scientists prefer to capture human life via emotions, feelings and experiences. The latter approach was used in this study to grasp what young, Emirati female media students had to say and to understand how they made meaning of their lives. This method of inquiry enhances social data by including the experiences and emotional traits of the human experience (Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

### 3.4.3 Authenticity

Authenticity, as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994), is made up of viewpoints, feelings, events and settings, to provide an account of the individuals involved. By including two separate groups of participants in this study it was possible to create a forum for all voices to be heard on issues related to their individual experiences. Although the stage one questionnaire provided demographic data for just one group, the participants selected were broadly representative of the kinds of students enrolled in the media course at the university. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire allowed those participants an opportunity to elaborate on their feelings, viewpoints and experiences. In stage two of the investigation, the more detailed accounts of participants’ experiences were used for confirmation and to extract greater richness and depth (Lincoln & Guba, 2003).

### 3.4.4 Dependability

In a principally qualitative study there are bound to be some limits to the dependability of its findings. As articulated by Miles and Huberman (1994), in order for a study to be dependable it must be assumed that it can be repeated with a consistency shown in the observations recorded. However, it is equally accepted that conducting a similar investigation and using the same procedures may not necessarily produce the same outcomes. For quantitative investigators this poses a dilemma in terms of legitimacy; however Burns (2000) argued that despite the subjective nature of the individual’s perspectives, a predictive insight into participants’ behaviour is achieved.

Despite criticism of qualitative research for being anecdotal, small-scale and lacking in rigour, when conducted properly it can be reliable, credible and valid. It is appropriate and necessary for qualitative data to be tested for trustworthiness (Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008; Gary, 2006). Denzin et al., (2011) cited dependability, transferability and creditability as key aspects of the trustworthiness of qualitative data. In considering the credibility of research findings it is imperative to establish that the data accurately represents and means what it claims to, and in this respect researchers should be mindful to validate all approaches to make the work more compelling.

Creswell (2006) and Creswell and Plano (2008) reiterated the need for evidence of credibility and dependability in research findings when analysing methods of data collection which produce comparable outcomes. Moreover, Flyvbjerg (2006) recommended the use of a tape-recorder to help remove bias, since precise transcripts rather than summary notes are documented.

An effective researcher can also build a strategy into interviews to ensure that trustworthiness occurs through member checks. This provides an opportunity to not only play back the recordings, but allows contributors to clarify and interpret their comments (Tuckett, 2005). Flyvbjerg (2006) confirmed the value of member checks for making sure data have been interpreted appropriately. Constant comparison of data avoids any one aspect of the research being viewed as a fragment but rather as a whole, and makes it possible to identify unexpected or emerging themes.

The data collected for this particular research generated an alignment with the descriptors of the participants and allowed for replication at a later stage with a different cohort of students. Although the outcomes may be different, it is possible to conduct a similar investigation using the same procedures. In this way the current study provides a predictive insight into other female Emirati media students' attitudes and behaviours. In qualitative research it is possible to replicate the inquiry but not the data or the findings. The interviews recorded reflected the views of a range of participants at different stages of their education, which meant that information could be cross-checked across multiple data sources. The use of a digital recorder to capture participants' responses removed potential bias, as the transcripts were analysed strictly according to what was said. It also facilitated clarification by participants while the interviews were being recorded. Subsequent readings of the

interview transcripts aided the researcher's comparison of the data in order to identify new or emerging themes.

### 3.4.5 Generalisability

Smyth and Hattam's (2004) interpretation of generalisability in qualitative research referred to generalisation to a similar case and is somewhat different from the usual statistical explanation. As this study was rooted in an interpretive process with the objective of articulating individuals' perspectives of reality, the concept of generalisability refers to the extent to which the findings may pertain to a wider population or different contexts. The findings of this study were analysed in a social constructivist paradigm, so in order to verify their usefulness it was important to determine the extent to which they refer to other settings or a wider population. Essentially, the study articulated the inferences that could be drawn from the data and how broadly the findings can be applied. The value of generalisability in a qualitative study depends on the researcher's understanding of the topic under study and her ability to apply critical thinking to the experiences of others for deducing salient factors.

This piece of research used the views of Smyth and Hattam (2004) as a reference point for generalisability. Yin (1994) was concerned with rigour in non-experimental research and concluded that studies do not need a minimum number or randomly selected cases. However, he emphasised the benefits of working with the situation that presents itself, and proposed using a qualitative approach where it lends itself to the structure of the research.

The participants in this study were not regarded as a selection of a much larger population of students about whom the study was intended to generalise, but as an example of students in a particular context and specific community. While selection of this group did involve consideration of representation, the primary concern was not generalisation but developing a satisfactory description, interpretation and explanation of the research (Maxwell, 2005).

External validity is concerned with comparability, which means the ability of other researchers to expand on the facts supplied by the richness and depth of the original study. While translatability relates to the extent to which research can be translated across languages, it is acknowledged that translating from any language inevitably involves certain

cultural assumptions. Optimal ways of ensuring meanings are carried across languages in ways that reflect different viewpoints were essential to the theory and procedures in this case.

The trustworthiness of the findings increases once the data analysis and conclusions are verified in a logical manner, encased by participants' perspectives and the project's data sequence of evidence (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Establishing a chain of evidence which shows a logical connection between the research questions, procedures undertaken, the raw data and the results, makes it possible for others to arrive at similar conclusions. A representativeness check establishes the data's chain of evidence and confirms an individual or group perspective of reality (Leedy, 1997). The findings can also however, inform stakeholders of issues which may be present in other contexts (Brantlinger et al., 2005) by scrutinising individual contexts for similarities and differences applicable to their domains.

As previously mentioned, the participants of this study were known to the researcher and as a result there was a close bond between the parties. This familiarity led to a deep understanding of the context being investigated via media students of this particular university. Since they formed just one part of the wider university population, it is believed the interpretive process which revealed their perspectives of reality could apply to other students in a similar setting.

The researcher produced a set of logical interview questions based on her insights of the culture and a review of the current literature on the topic, and then considered the procedures that would generate a reputable and appropriate range of data. Participants' responses were coded according to themes believed to be most important for establishing credibility, as well as having potential for significant conclusions.

### 3.4.6 Conclusion

This chapter described the ways in which this research investigated the relationship between education and culture of female Emirati university students, underpinned by a constructivist epistemology conversant with an interpretivist paradigm.

A mainly qualitative, mixed-methods approach grounded the study in the participants' everyday lives and social reality. Educational researchers are encouraged to harmonise dissimilar methodologies in order to align the purpose and context of their research (Odom et

al., 2005), and established researchers like Dewey and Skinner concurred that methodology needs to reflect both the research questions and purpose of the study.

The aim of this study was to identify and understand how young, Emirati women were responding to higher education opportunities. Furthermore, the study sought to examine the role of culture in their university experiences and the changes that female Emirati students undergo in their personal and educational development. Through the use of a questionnaire, open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, quantitative and qualitative data were collected to present the opinions and experiences of the respondents. While limitations with qualitative methods have been acknowledged, there are also benefits to be derived from this kind of study, particularly with regard to gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of participants and their views of reality.

The following chapter outlines the findings that emerged from the data collected via the methods outlined above.



## Chapter 4: Educational Experiences

This chapter is the first of two that presents the data from the two groups of female Emirati media students who articulated their views on key education and cultural issues. In collecting the data the intention was to present “a space of enunciation” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 18) for both groups of students, which in this study refers to understanding young people’s views of their education through an examination of their life strategies. In this chapter their educational experiences are scrutinised, and in the next, the cultural impact of their education. The main focus of the data is on the educational experiences of each group, seen through a combined analysis of survey questions, short-answer responses and face to face interviews.

The questionnaires and interviews were designed to probe participants’ perspectives of their past and present experiences and the data uncovered a broad range of responses regarding their educational experiences at school and university. These data are outlined in three sections, namely educational environments, learning environments and students’ relationship with teachers.

### 4.1 Demographic Overview

In this study participants shared a common Indigenous background rooted in the cultural traditions of the Emirati people. Out of 13 participants 11 (75%) were single and 2 (25%) were married. None were divorced. The majority of single women were aged between 22 and 25, and the two married women were both 25 years of age. Two students did not provide their age. The oldest participants in the group were born in 1987, a second group of participants was born in 1989, and the youngest women were born in 1990. A few students did not disclose their year of birth.

Demographic information about the educational background of the married participants’ husbands indicated they had a degree. One respondent said she would prefer her future husband to have a degree. The cultural norm in the Emirates is for married women to have children – in this group one of the married women had two children, while the other had no children. The larger cluster of single women reported they were not in a relationship and did not have any children, which is the cultural norm for single women in the UAE.

The UAE is comprised of a number of urban centres with smaller towns and villages spread out across a desert landscape. In order to establish a profile of their places of birth and domicile, participants were asked to provide details. Within this group, all 13 participants had been born in the UAE, albeit in more than one Emirate. The majority was born in Dubai, a large cosmopolitan city, one was born in Sharjah, a smaller city, and one was born in Ras Al Khaimah, an even smaller city in one of the less residential northern centres. The data showed all the participants, whether married or single, lived in the same Emirate in which they were born (see Appendix C).

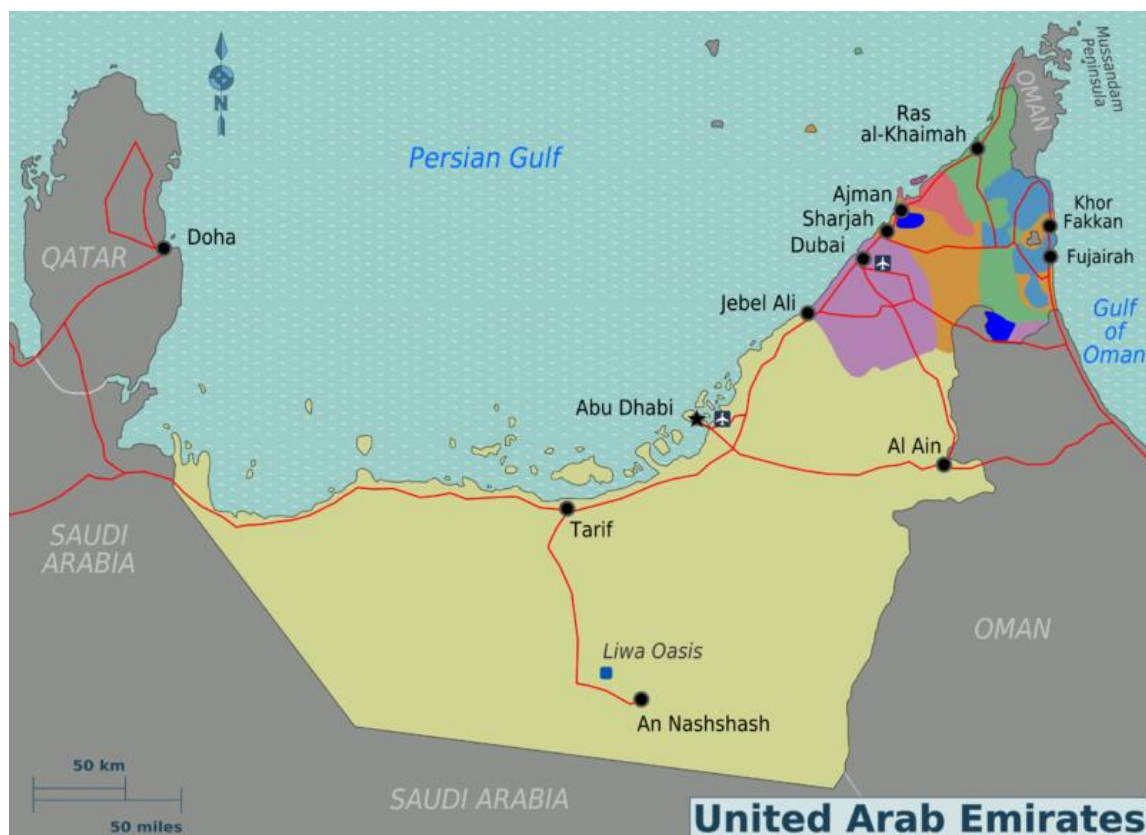


Figure 2: Map of the United Arab Emirates

All 13 participants came to university before being married. Around 75% had completed high school, while the remaining participants had not. A larger proportion of participants attended private English-speaking high schools, with a smaller proportion schooled in Arabic-speaking government schools. All participants had only ever studied in the UAE. Two of the 13 participants had completed the university's intensive English-language foundation program as a pathway into their undergraduate studies. Eleven of the 13

participants entered the university's general education program directly from high school. The data showed participants were all at different stages of their higher education. Students complete their undergraduate degrees through an accumulation of credited courses, so they are able to temporarily suspend their education for reasons of marriage, childbirth, illness and family constraints.

Each participant was asked the same set of questions and given the opportunity to elaborate and discuss the issues they wanted to. A number of themes related to Educational Environments were revealed by the data, and these themes make up the six key themes of the section that follows.

## 4.2 Educational Environments

Six key themes were identified in regard to participants' educational environment. These covered issues related to 1) transition from school to university; 2) challenges and opportunities faced by participants in the university context; 3) the role of English language in this transition; 4) the impact of a segregated educational environment; 5) participants' personal growth and responsibility; and 6) their cultural empowerment.

### 4.2.1 Transition from School to University

All participants agreed that studying at university was a different experience from high school (survey questions 28 and 79). The data uncovered differences which included variations in the rules and ways in which the institutions were organised, as well as teaching methodologies. Participants made numerous comments about how challenging university was because of the different organisational structures they had experienced at school and because of the new expectations at university to be independent and proactive. They were familiar with presentations but not projects, and had no particular skills to write reports or undertake research. Equally challenging was the new style of teaching at university, which was different from the teaching methods they had encountered at school. Teachers at public high schools directed them to open a book, listen to an explanation, and then notified them there would be an exam the following week. Participants used memorisation as a technique for preparing and passing examinations at school.

Some participants had attended schools which were more like university in the sense that lessons were comprised of lectures, notes and quizzes, so for them, their school

experience was similar to university. One participant stated that university was not that much different from high school because attending an English-medium high school with native English speakers replicated the university environment.

University wasn't much different from our school [private] because we had the same system, we weren't stuck in one class, we had different classes and different sections, and we went to different buildings and moved around (S16).

Participants identified the limitations imposed by their primary and secondary schooling when they reflected on the differences between school and university and how these experiences had changed their views on education. Comments which highlighted the differences were consistent:

It's totally different in school. We have specific subjects that are very limited and narrow in thinking while in the university having a media degree opens you to the whole world (S3).

This perspective was evident across the groups. Participants felt high school was limited to subjects they were compelled to study, and were not necessarily aligned with their interests.

The data showed that the medium of instruction was influential in imparting language abilities, which some students brought with them from high school to university. The responses showed 10 participants were taught in English at private schools, whereas three were not taught in English at private school prior to entering university. Participants expressed the view that the advantages of attending an English-speaking school were compromised if the environment was made up of non-English speakers. They reported when teachers switched between English and Arabic it diluted the benefits of learning in English.

A common theme discussed in the interviews was the benefit of participants' school experiences. English-medium private high schools were frequently mentioned as more closely resembling university models, facilitating a smoother transition into tertiary education and a more positive experience of higher education.

### 4.2.2 Challenges and Opportunities in the University Context

Participants reflected on the limitations of working only from text books in high school. They felt this was the reason for the deficit in their abilities needed at university. The following quote illustrates this concern:

In school we have a book, come to the exam and that's it. Even if we had to do research, it's only about the internet and we don't really evaluate the information we got, but here what the teacher wants is obvious. Don't cheat, be creative, be different, don't use other people's ideas (S18).

The participants very quickly observed that the expectation at university was to be creative and do independent research. Participants believed university shaped a new focus on a range of different tasks set by professors, which created diverse learning experiences, for example projects and reports. One individual expressed a commonly held perspective that although she had entered university with limited academic abilities the environment promoted positive change which allowed her to flourish as an undergraduate.

The group clearly articulated an array of factors which had brought about new experiences at university. They identified tasks and activities not previously encountered. In their opinion, project work promoted writing and collaboration with others which some participants had not experienced at school. These kinds of activities first surfaced in their general education courses, while in their subject specialisations they were required to make proactive decisions about which areas of interest to pursue and engaging in interactions with external parties. Skilled women are an intrinsic part of promoting a knowledge society in the Emirates, an attribute endorsed by leaders in the community. One participant described how in the following way:

I feel when you work with projects you have different things to work on, not just about the writing, you have to develop your ideas, you have to talk to with others and then write (S17).

### 4.2.3 English Language

In the general education program English and Arabic are assigned important academic status, along with an emphasis on course outcomes. However, English language foundation

courses undertaken by some participants were regarded as having little relevance to their future undergraduate programs. Participants who undertook the English language program understood the levels were designed to inculcate language skills through vocabulary, reading, using library facilities and writing. At university though, they were confronted with enhancing their English language competency by moving away from repetitious grammar exercises to a more interactive, student-centred form of learning that encouraged exploration and shared understanding. This was a new experience for some.

One participant who started university on a higher level of the English language program stated: “We used to do increased vocabulary development. We spent time learning new vocabulary” (S17). Some participants believed an improvement in English came about through reading. Other improvements in their university courses were believed possible due to the knowledge and skills acquired at both primary and secondary school and transferred from one environment to the other. Showing their university lecturers what they had achieved previously at high school was a new experience. One participant described this in the following way:

A cousin came to university three years back, they were doing simple procedures, so she brought all of her art books and she showed them to the Dean and they took her straight to her project (S18).

Many participants articulated despite being in a learning environment it was necessary to actualise their futures by graduating in order to secure jobs. They viewed their education as serving a purpose beyond mere personal growth, and intrinsic to the country’s economic development. Participants could relate to the benefits of their university courses; they discussed the programs they were studying and the alignment of subjects with their career aspirations and interests.

Seventy five percent of participants claimed they had not previously been given the option of selecting courses. All 13 participants liked their university studies (survey questions 2 and 17). The flexibility and freedom to select courses according to personal preference is apparent in the data. Students expressed immense satisfaction at being able to focus on subjects at university which they found valuable. The issue of personal choice was captured in this comment from one student: “What I studied at school was by way of obligation,

however in university I study something that I want to study and something I am passionate about” (S6). The implication is participants had a limited choice of subjects at school. The freedom to choose subjects and courses at university was a new experience and allowed them to focus on topics they liked. This newfound liberty to actively participate in their education signalled a move away from their confined high school experiences.

The English-language program at this particular university in the Emirates was a non-accredited program designed to improve students’ English language skills, unlike the general education and major programs which comprised credited courses that contributed to completion of their degrees. The aim of the program was to minimise discrepancies between the English-language competency of students and the academic level required for entry into the general education program. Students were placed at levels according to ability, with level 3 catering for elementary learners and level 8, the most advanced. Ten participants in this study entered mainstream undergraduate studies directly from high school without the English-language program; one participant attended the English-language program; and two participants did not indicate their pathway. In order to progress to the general education course students are required to pass the university’s equivalency test. This was a major adjustment for some, and included passing an IELTS examination at band 5 to exit from the English-language program.

Participants were challenged by having to adjust to new ways of doing things, particularly those who started at the beginner level of the English-language program. Throughout the different levels participants learned many English language skills. Those who had been through the English-language program as a precursor to their undergraduate studies were encouraged to participate in lessons and engage in unfamiliar activities as a result of their schooling. Creating a vocabulary log, engaging in paired or group work, reading a certain number of library books and writing reports were all new experiences. Although all respondents had transitioned through a general education foundation, only a few had been through the English-language program. For those who thought they would enter mainstream university after school, having to go into a pre-undergraduate program was a major adjustment. It took a year for them to settle and those who were initially upset went on to enjoy the experience. Varying opinions were forthcoming from participants about this aspect of their studies; however after their initial reservations many believed it was a valuable

experience. Some felt the time spent in class was boring, yet others reported that they enjoyed the practice of writing essays and reading more complex texts which translated into useful skills in the general education program.

The ability to analyse, especially in majors, was viewed very differently from the English-language program which covered only the basics and provided no instruction on how to apply skills in a practical way. Participants criticised the fact that the skills they learned were not helpful after they transitioned into undergraduate studies, where more advanced academic skills rather than an aptitude for language were required.

#### 4.2.4 Segregation

One of the major issues identified by interviewees was university segregation. The data revealed that just over 50% of participants did not believe it was important to study on a segregated campus, while just 50% felt it was important. However, when individuals were asked whether it was acceptable to study on a mixed campus, the data showed a different response. Only 25% said it was not acceptable, whereas 75% stated it was suitable (survey questions 7 and 83). There was strong agreement on the issue of mixing with unrelated Emirati males, particularly since students would have to adjust to working in a professional non-segregated environment. The perspective was that segregation at university was an obstacle to developing effective communication with males in a professional environment. Segregation replicated the traditional educational environment in mainstream government schools, and in many ways continued the time-honoured custom of protecting single young women until they married. Respondents felt that relating to males within a university setting would be beneficial in the workplace, and interaction with administrative male staff was advantageous for improved professional exchanges. Respect emerged as a significant characteristic of behaviour between Emirati men and women. Participants reiterated the importance of respect between genders, and in the experiences of women in dealing with men. On the whole, segregation between the young women in this study and local Emirati males in the university was seen as an obstacle.



#### 4.2.5 Personal Growth and Responsibility

It is interesting to note the positive attitudes expressed by many participants in this study emphasised personal motivation and individual strength as being good for females and the culture. Being in a learning environment helped them develop their strategies and motivated them to achieve their goals. Explicit promotion of women's education was a recurring theme articulated by all participants in relation to their contribution after graduation. This was explained as follows:

The good thing Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Khalifa did was about the UAE in the 2030 vision, they published it for everyone. Everyone can reach it and read it. Each individual should work to make the vision real (S19).

Participants had to make several adjustments once they commenced their academic journeys at university. Taking responsibility for their actions was a key feature, and they commented on the need for making changes to familiarise with university processes, such as accessing examination timetables. This was a big change in behaviour compared with high school. One respondent commented:

It made me more aware of what's happening around me, that everything has timing and there is a schedule that we should be checking every once in a while, and we should be checking both our e-mails for any updates (S20).

Part of the adjustment involved an overall awareness about taking responsibility for their learning. Personal responsibility was frequently mentioned when respondents' reflected on aspects of their participation which had developed during the course of their university life. It was clear that adjusting from school to university was a significant change and the students reported that it happened quickly. Being at university afforded them an opportunity to consider their perspectives; this was necessary for taking responsibility for their academic progress. There was a shift away from simply reacting to familial influences in expected ways towards more personal responsibility (survey questions 92 and 93). The difference between university and high school was interpreted as a need for being more organised, since high school educators and administrators previously took responsibility for organising and directing their learning with little proactive contribution on their part.

Their choice of university was determined by a number of factors, frequently the attitudes of family and friends' and the attraction of an all-female, Emirati environment. Belonging to a group who shared social and cultural ideologies was viewed as a safe space and presented fewer difficulties or threats to accepted customs and traditions. In particular, certain universities were preferred because they offered more personal assistance. To some extent this also mirrored participants' ambivalence towards taking responsibility. Since the prospect of an unfamiliar system was daunting, their reluctance stemmed from an inclination to avoid situations where they may lose face. One participant described this in the following way:

Here at university you've got people to guide your first year at university, you've got a lot of assistants that can tell you what exactly you need to get done for you to graduate (S20).

Other adjustments concerned building personality. Participants explained that university changed people's minds about how to deal with others. Communicating with confidence was one of the issues they raised. Respondents believed the university environment was relaxed and flexible, and immersed them in experiences which transformed their perspectives.

A key point to emerge from participants' responses was related to ways of engaging in day-to-day university life. University rules were construed as being aligned to the workplace. For example, it was necessary to carry an identity card for security and timekeeping purposes, and students were only able to leave university at precise times and for legitimate reasons, such as illness or permission from a family member. Any breach of these regulations could negatively impact their final grades. There was a strongly held perspective amongst the group that restrictions on leaving campus were imposed to replicate the reality of their eventual work environments, and participants viewed this as preparing them for the adjustments needed in the workforce. One participant said:

Being attached to my culture when I am in the workforce I will be able to act in the way we had to in the university; I will maintain the cultural expectations for female Emiratis (S3).

Administrative obligations made participants realise they would have to be aware of systems within the university environment. Timetables and schedules for lectures, lessons and examinations were new experiences and caused difficulties. Aside from the practical arrangements, adaptations had to be made for dealing with curriculum programs. For example, general education courses involved more subjects and were challenging to research. For many, changing from the English-language program to a general education course and later to subject-specialised courses required written evaluation skills, which participants commented on as follows:

In general we had various subjects to study, like Humanities and Arabic. What we learned from the levels (English-language program) was different from what we got in General. For example, writing assignments, doing research, bibliographies, even the writing style was different to what we learned in the levels, we were only about IELTS, but in General it's about the university, the teacher, it's about evaluating every step and every word you're going to write (S18).

Despite having to acquire new skills, participants reported positive change from the option of studying subjects of their choice, and were optimistic about the time they spent in the general education program because of the variety of subjects available to them. There was a growing awareness that academic development required questioning, evaluating and challenging ideas. They became increasingly confident to engage with material in an active way, and their attentiveness in the general education program developed as they progressed to their subject specialism courses. Other comments from participants touched on revisiting specific academic skills at university which they were first exposed to at school. As they gradually became immersed in a more proactive learning environment, their understanding of the links between knowledge grew, as did an appreciation of how skills and abilities build over time. The realisation that expertise acquired today could be valuable tomorrow encouraged them to remain active even in new learning situations.

As participants adapted to university and engaged in learning, their synthesised experiences blended into new attitudes:

Students have to be more dedicated to their studies and relate everything they experience to their studies and majors in order for them to understand the concepts they are being taught (S11).

Participants indicated it was necessary to extrapolate meaning from their university courses and internalise them in meaningful ways at an individual level. Engaging in their courses emerged as a relevant development when they enrolled in their majors. Some participants noted an increased awareness of real world issues as a result of being at university, which had previously been outside their spheres of reference.

#### 4.2.6 Cultural Empowerment

From a community and government perspective, the objective was to cultivate a knowledge society. In keeping with this, the university encouraged the student population to improve and develop their critical thinking skills. Students brought a diverse range of experiences with them from school and needed further development in order to achieve success at university. The interview data indicated participants' beliefs that courses, professors and teachers alike promoted critical thinking. They claimed it took time and hard work, but acknowledged an ability to think critically would help them understand how things worked in the outside world:

It's in all the courses, all teachers or professors ask students when they assign a project or any type of assignments. You've got to do some reading, you've got to do some research, you come up with your own assumptions and your own critical thinking about the topic (S20).

Realisation of the links between participants, the university and the community dawned as participants increasingly started to interpret the knowledge they were being exposed to. The emphasis on growing a knowledge society implied a demand for graduates to bring critical thinking to the workforce.

Aside from their academic development, there were also changes taking place in participants' perspectives about personal issues, for example, the impact of higher education on the tradition of marriage and the balance between work and family expectations. These were issues for potential growth and maturing insights within the community, and raised questions of independence for participants. Opinions varied; some were reluctant to comment

and others voiced neutral opinions to avoid criticism. Participants expressed the view that despite looser constraints at university compared with school they still lacked full independence:

At school, you're force fed things that you may never use during your lifetime and you feel compelled to do it in order to graduate. In university however, you are still semi-force fed things, but I choose to do it and excel in what I do in order to succeed in my future career. During university, you have this sense of independence. At university, however the students aren't granted their full independence as university students. In many ways we're still treated as high school kids (S13).

The data showed for participants, independence was largely shaped by a collective understanding of their position in society. These shared beliefs and moral attitudes which are part of traditional Emirati culture frame young women's autonomy and the amount of freedom they expect. The findings reflected an appreciation for independence and acceptance of the societal framework of the Emirati people. Respondents interpreted the constraints placed upon them at university as an element of their place within the community. Levels of independence for daughters and wives varied according to family attitudes, and cultural norms were always a consideration for these students. Higher education was viewed by many as a mechanism for empowerment and a means to promote change for the betterment of not only women, but society as a whole.

Participants were asked about incidents which had caused them to re-evaluate their position on women in Emirati society (survey question 93). They talked about a number of changes, most notably that higher education had made them more powerful. Using this authority to promote emancipated prospects and a way for women to change the views of society, was reiterated throughout the data. Within the government sector women had increased standing in all departments, with greater numbers of female ministers, judges and ambassadors currently serving the population. Such opportunities to participate at a national level also coincided with increased representation of women within the Federal National Council which provides an advisory role in the House of Legislative Council.

Participants were encouraged to embrace leadership roles at university, reinforcing its role in materialising students' aspirations. The students in this study viewed their involvement in university initiatives as promoting pathways to leadership through skills development, and beneficial for the future. Increasing numbers of women in leadership positions in the military, aerospace, defence, engineering, business and education has changed participants' perspectives about their role in society. One respondent expressed it as follows:

College made me understand that not only males can do it and not only other female nationalities can. As a female local we have the opportunity to expand and make something out of ourselves other than being married and raising kids (S4).

This point of view was repeated by many participants. Opportunities and expectations to contribute to society were commonly held beliefs, as well as female roles expanding to include a career. The potential for taking on leadership positions emerged as aspirations for this group, one strategy being to first develop in business and then become a leader in their field. Owning a business was seen as a way of becoming independent. An education that could translate into a career and subsequently, a position in the public domain was also highlighted. Participants became aware of their own potential to create change through a synthesis of education, career, independence and leadership.

Meanwhile, inherent cultural pressure produced a different perspective for some, expressed in the limitations still affecting students at university. Participants stated the freedom to choose courses of study and future careers was not available to all students due to constraints imposed by conservative families. These students were limited by a need to show respect and harmony towards the family. In spite of studying media subjects, in itself reflective of a certain liberalisation, participants understood limitations could be imposed irrespective of personal choice. On the other hand, many participants intended to take up lifelong careers and not merely settle for marriage. The views expressed on this subject were indicative of students keen to make changes to prevailing attitudes:

As an Emirati woman, I was told that my professional career will only span a few years, until the point where I must quit, sit at home and raise the kids and tend to my husband. However, I anticipate a change in this attitude where women can be educated and have life long careers that they can have the choice to quit whenever they choose to. Also, after spending a week [overseas] during a service learning trip I see myself and others breaking the status quo and embarking in fields that were otherwise left untrodden (S13).

Although significantly different from previous generations, their choices still required careful consideration of their families and the traditional culture within which they lived.

#### 4.2.7 Learning Environment

Transitioning from school to university was scrutinised to identify the indicators participants had commented on. Those who came to university from government high schools had very different experiences from those who entered from private high schools. The core of this research was aimed at uncovering the differences that had impacted participants' experiences and identifying the extent to which their attitudes were changed.

The data revealed three key themes. The first was different approaches to learning and their influences on culture. The second was the impact of different pedagogies and curricula on students' learning experiences, and the third was the impact of private and public-school backgrounds on students' transition to tertiary learning.

#### 4.2.8 Approaches to Learning and Culture

This section outlines the way in which participants' thought processes were impacted by their learning experiences. The aim was to identify those that had changed their perspectives towards traditional roles. Data collection focused on how, if at all, participants' university education had altered their views on traditional roles. Their responses indicated education had opened up possibilities and they could achieve anything they wanted to. Further scrutiny exposed their thoughts about a future society where gender segregation no longer applied:

It showed me that a woman can be involved in anything and can do anything. And that that gender segregation is just an idea that with time would be off people's mind and won't be an issue anymore (S5).

The participants were enrolled in a publicly funded institution which, in many ways, upheld the prevailing attitudes of gender segregation in higher education. However, some respondents considered this unwise:

During my time in here I have come to believe that probably the biggest mistake is it not being co-ed since that itself acts as a threat to our traditional culture drastically – girls are rebelling against the 'system' if you will (S13).

Other participants expressed a different perspective. They felt university education had exposed them to different cultures leading to a deeper understanding of their external world. Interaction with culturally diverse people and participating in projects which put them in unfamiliar situations had given them new insights. One participant said: "by [becoming] educated about other cultures, it opened my mind and let me challenge my culture's opinion about the world (S9).

As the students gradually absorbed new influences at university they began to challenge their personal beliefs, and interactions with other cultures through lessons and cultural events, for instance TEDx conferences (TED is an international non-profit organisation which aims to spread Technology, Entertainment and Design ideas in short talks) and the Dubai International Film Festival, noticeably changed their thinking. Furthermore, the university environment gave them ample opportunities to compare their personal viewpoints about other cultures, and as a result their perspectives broadened. Participants confirmed personal change had occurred and specifically mentioned the influence of external events, such as volunteering with Habitat for Humanity and visiting the US as part of a cultural exchange program during their higher education:

Traditionally, women are expected to get married and raise their children, but now after gaining knowledge and getting a Bachelor degree, hopefully a Master's degree soon [after]; new ambitions are wanted in the mind of many



Emirati girls. This university doesn't just want to educate women: they actually want the students to contribute to the world. As a student myself, I got a chance to go to the US in April and meet wonderful individuals. (S10)

Traditional roles were challenged as a result of exchanges with professors, discussions with experts and liaison with PR and advertising agencies to develop campaigns. Contact with external influences appeared to alter students' opinions about the potential of women working in the media and promoting their messages through different mediums such as film, print and social media. Participants had opportunities to meet industry professionals, visit trade fairs and join various social enterprise schemes as part of their university courses, and came to the conclusion a career was equally important for young women, partly because this was aligned with a government strategy and vision.

Other viewpoints suggested these influences had not brought about a change in outlook on traditional roles of wife and mother. One participant (S12) said: "it has not altered", reflecting the view of others in this group for whom there had been no change. These differences of opinion about the traditional roles of women are indicative of the wide range of beliefs stemming from personal perspectives, family influences and individual experiences.

Over time, attitudes changed for participants as they developed increased understanding of the need to think more critically. One participant stated: "I believe my ability to think more critically and to criticise the things I came across has progressed and improved over the years while I was at university" (S15). Of those canvassed in the questionnaire, almost 75% believed they had developed a basic ability to think critically at school, but that it was not enough. The way they worked with teachers in high school had not provided opportunities to work independently, nor did they have to defend a point of view or present new material. Adopting a more critical approach to tasks at university was different from school because it was expected of them.

The ability to analyse and critique academic matters and issues of national and international relevance steadily developed as participants began to grasp the importance of improving their reading skills and understanding. Being able to think critically, present an argument, and develop their capacity for evaluating information were all viewed as positive

skills acquired at university, in particular, their ability to analyse information in an academically rigorous way. As expressed by one respondent:

It's not the way we used to read in school. The context was more or less the same of the books. Sometimes I wouldn't really understand and I wouldn't have the ability to evaluate. But at university I became more able to do so (S20).

A further change evident from participants' feedback indicated that finding their own information gave them a form of academic independence and was a move away from teacher-directed learning. However, transforming critical learning skills into an appetite for challenging their culture rested on a combination of other factors, such as personality (participants who were more confident and outgoing), perspectives (such as taking on a leadership role), familial (participants whose fathers allowed them to go abroad unaccompanied) and educational experiences acquired in private English-medium schools.

The data revealed a growing awareness of participants' metacognitive understanding of their own learning needs and challenges. They commented on having to examine their thinking when they transitioned from school to university and understood the need to participate and make their own decisions. Initial expectations of university being like school were replaced with shock when they found it more difficult:

At school it was choose a project which was very simple, very easy and I thought business was like that, so probably it would be the same in university. When I came here it was much, much harder which then made me feel I'm not a business person, probably I'm someone else. So media was for me (S18).

Another example of personal introspection was evident from their attitudes to motivation, which they described as necessary to engage with their studies. For those who had been educated in an environment where enthusiasm did not prevail, a change in attitude was essential:

Motivation is where personal efforts come. Students who work on improving their skills and English language will definitely notice a greater difference from when they first came to the university and now. Students have to realise there

are priorities in life and once they've got their priorities planned out they can then work on them by themselves (S20).

An inability to identify their weaknesses was believed to stem from high school. As they progressed through university, students began to realise that knowing and addressing their shortcomings was helpful for improving their abilities. They grew to understand the value of academic skills in communicating to a wider audience and articulated a desire for doing things perfectly, thereby recognising their own shortcomings. Over the course of their studies they became more adept at analysing their own development.

Improvements occurred in several areas during participants' university years. Those who started in the mid-level English-language program had improved their English language skills beyond high-school level. Reflecting on the effects of their high school education prompted a review of their range of experiences. This started with an examination and evaluation of the quality of knowledge and learning techniques they had brought with them to university, and led to an appreciation of the academic requirements of university. Participants were able to see how high school had not adequately equipped them for university. Nevertheless, they understood that the absence of a specific connection to the subject of media in high school had not prevented them from gravitating to the subject at university, and this nurtured an appreciation for subjects of transferable academic value. One participant said: "before I let someone [else] read my writing, but now I think when I re-write, read it, I think it's okay and I do it myself. I re-write, re-read it I know [when] there's a mistake" (S20).

There was general consensus that the study of related topics created value and beneficial outcomes. Participants acknowledged an indirect link between their high school studies and university courses, and they were able to see the benefits of this incidental transfer of knowledge.

#### 4.2.9 Pedagogy and Curriculum

All the participants in this study claimed studying at university had taken a more proactive approach compared to high school (survey question 53). Almost all of them (survey questions 65 and 74) said their learning strategies at university were different, however, a few

participants claimed their methods were unchanged. There appeared to be a mixture of personal and academic reasons for this, as illustrated by one participant who said: “at school I used to study a lot, but when I came to university, I became a bit lazy because of the project and presentations, there are no exams. So that’s why, I studied the same way” (S17).

For others, a newfound ability to read complex and detailed texts was one of the markers of change. Respondents who came from government schools recognised the need to improve their reading, as the following quote illustrates:

I’m reading a lot of books in English now, like stories, novels and even other books about life and psychology. I hope I can understand the mindset, what kind of style I have to write in, what kind of words I have to choose, so it might appeal for people to read my books (S19).

Participants reported high level reading skills were critical for fully engaging with their learning. A deficit in reading skills was articulated by both private and public-school students, but as demand increased for them to engage in research, so too did their willingness to improve. Participants spoke about their experiences at school and the impact on their competency. They claimed being placed into groups according to ability in high school had limited their improvement and caused difficulties with their writing later on.

The barriers to reading extensive, complex material were anecdotally attributed to previous school experiences. An ability to memorise was a common learning technique brought from high school. Awareness of the limitations of this learning method grew during their university years, despite the view of some participants who alleged their methods of learning had not changed since school. Respondents quickly realised the potential of synthesising strategies to help them learn, including listening to music, memorising information or writing down key points and memorising them. They asked friends, relatives and teachers for help with answers and also reported seeking alternative ways to access information.

Respondents talked about a predictable way of learning, described as part of day-to-day teaching at school. They evidently experienced a consistent daily pattern of teaching in

government schools which failed to impart the required skills to prepare them for university. The following comment explains:

Teachers came to the class, started teaching, started reading from the book, started to explain the lecture for us and what we had to do , we didn't take notes, we just listened to the teacher. There wasn't any research, reading a book, reading a story. It was all about just studying the work up to the exam (S19).

Perspectives of learning gradually altered as participants moved through university. They viewed the changes they were experiencing in two ways: either as an individual or as someone who was called upon to act within a partnership arrangement. The administrative processes for entering a general education program were unfamiliar and different to anything they had experienced at school. With the progression into specialised subject programs students were imbued with an intrinsic appreciation of language and assimilation skills as prerequisites of success.

Media participants who completed the questionnaire were asked to comment on their perspectives towards learning at university. Almost all of them said higher education programs had changed their approach (survey question 4). Three out of 13 attributed the change to taking responsibility for their studies:

Here now in university I am more responsible. Here we must work from research and lots of papers, there are a lot of presentations. Several times we do presentations to feel more confident, to be independent, so I can communicate with people now (S14).

Handing in work was a new experience for participants, particularly in their subject specialism. In these programs it was important to work independently and responsibly to achieve good results:

At school you should hand in the project and if you hadn't they [the teachers] would seek you out and they'd report you. Here in university, [the teachers say], I don't care: hand in your work, you're good. You don't hand in your work, it's your problem (S16).

The questionnaire sought to explore whether participants' perspectives to study changed rapidly once they were at university. Nine respondents agreed that change had happened quickly (survey question 10), while the rest of the group did not reply to this question. However, the data revealed all participants' attitudes to studying had changed since enrolling at university (survey question 27), perhaps suggesting incremental change. At the same time, these students also acquired a new perspective on how to learn. Differences in content and focus were evident between the various programs, yet changes in participants' perspectives appeared to be consistent and cumulative.

Respondents commented on competitiveness to achieve good grades and rivalry during their tertiary education. They felt the stakes were uneven because classmates ranged in age and ability and some were more familiar with the subject matter than others. Competitiveness drove some students to learn harder, develop confidence and a more "polished accent" which was considered a positive attribute.

While at university, participants were given the opportunity to study in an international faculty. The questionnaire asked participants to reflect on whether international teachers had changed their ways of studying. Five participants disagreed, whereas eight confirmed international teachers were beneficial to their studies (survey question 76). Those eight participants found being taught by international lecturers a valuable part of their higher education experience and appreciated their intervention in identifying areas in need of improvement. According to those students international teachers facilitated their progress through the English-language program in a short period of time, allowing them to pass the equivalency test and move on to the general education course.

Participants were asked to outline their future educational plans and the survey data revealed the majority planned to continue studying to Masters and PhD level (survey question 47). They talked about the considerable influence of international teachers in shaping their desire to pursue further education in the Emirates and overseas, and conveyed the personal importance of this encouragement.

Perspectives of learning altered for the respondents as they became involved in new classroom activities. One way in which this change occurred was through a shared, collaborative approach to learning. They were required to seek out information as an

individual or part of a team and apply that knowledge to a particular problem. Participants remarked on how this practice fundamentally changed their perspectives of learning. Further investigation via the questionnaire attempted to identify a time when their perspectives of learning had altered, and participants were asked if they could remember a particular incident or moment when they realised this had occurred. The data indicated a distinct transformation from previous ways of engaging in their studies, highlighted by remarks such as: “I used to be a practical learner but now I have learnt to understand from books, other sources and lectures. My abilities have expanded to a wide variety of learning styles” (S4).

Moreover, their explanations signalled a change in their views on previous learning methods, like memorising material in order to pass examinations. Participants seemed to have developed new insights about old learning techniques that were no longer as valid as they once were. One participant explained it as follows:

I no longer memorise, I understand. For years schools have taught me to memorise and pass [exams] but once you take courses like public speaking and others, memorising never works. You have got to understand what you are trying to say, then say it in your own words (S10).

The familiarity of previous learning methods were steadily replaced by confidence and receptiveness to new ideas when students realised older methods no longer served their needs. Unlike high school, university examinations required a change in thinking. The need for time management skills and greater accountability coincided with an interest in their subjects of study as an important correlation for progress and achievement.

#### 4.2.10 Impact of Private and Public Schools

In this study a larger proportion (75%) of participants had attended private schools with the remainder coming from government schools prior to entering university. Interestingly, the students who came from private schools chose to attend this particular government-funded institution even though there are many private universities in the Emirates (survey questions 9 and 35).

A common arrangement emerged from the data to illustrate many families had combined a non-segregated private primary schooling for their daughters until the age of ten with segregated government secondary schooling from which they graduated at year twelve. Participant 20 said of this arrangement “it was our choice”. It is evident from this trend that once girls reached a certain age government school was considered a better option for them as it provided a segregated environment and female teachers who conducted lessons in Arabic.

Some participants identified bias towards them in private schools with non-native English-speaking teachers, claiming they were the subjects of prejudice as Emirati students. One of the advantages of attending private English speaking schools in the UAE is the mainly English-medium curriculum. For individuals who entered university via the English-language program, the benefits included entry into a higher level program and quicker progress into undergraduate courses:

It (English) helped me pass the levels here which saved me a lot of time, which means that I’d be graduating on time. I don’t want to be wasting my time studying again English levels (S15).

The participants in this study had been through a range of schooling arrangements, from Arabic public primary and high school instruction to private English-medium primary and high school institutions with native English speaking teachers. Respondents commented on how instrumental their teachers were in shaping their attitudes towards learning in English-medium schools. Some had attended private English-speaking primary schools, followed by public Arabic speaking high schools. The reason for this was to provide a foundation of English language skills before moving to a government high school. The data also showed some participants had entered university from private English-medium schools with Arab teachers who were not native English language speakers.

Additional benefits gained by participants from private high schools were referred to as “key skills” which helped them to deal with challenges in the modern world, and were designed to assist high school students take responsibility for their own learning. According to the participants they developed the confidence to be leaders, solve problems and manage



projects. The curricula and input from Western-educated teachers in these institutions were considered to facilitate learning in ways that were aligned with university requirements.

The issue of private and public education was a major factor in the experiences participants brought with them to university. A distinction between styles of teaching in private and public schools was also evident in the curricula:

I think the subjects play a big role; like in private schools they study chemistry and physics from grade seven or eight but for us, [in government schools] only from tenth grade will you take physics and chemistry. We have labs and we just used them for exams but it wasn't really effective. They showed us but we didn't touch anything. We didn't do anything ourselves. We just watched and went to the exams (S19).

Comparisons between public and private high schools generated strong opinions. Participants believed active learning and classroom tasks better prepared them for learning at university. For those who were schooled in private, westernised high schools there was a reduced Arabic component in the curriculum. The influence of a Western educational ethos meant all their subject lessons were taught in English, except for Islamic studies and Arabic. This lack of contact with the Arabic language caused a rupture between these students and their first language and weakened their academic capacity, because there was generally more emphasis on English than Arabic.

Another common schooling arrangement for Emirati children is private primary school followed by government high school with female Arabic teachers. This combination appears to meet a need for children to achieve a basic level of English language skills in their early years. However, it proved problematic for participants who had transferred from private primary school to public high school because of the differences in English language ability. Nevertheless, the benefits of children attending private English-medium schools were considered important for the future education of their children. Despite the reduced significance of their native language and customs, participants still valued private English-medium education and its advantages were evident from their remarks. Comments from other family members also influenced participants' impressions of private English-medium schools. Conversations between participants and their extended families included

comparisons between their schooling experiences, and since the respondents came from large extended families, informal exchanges contributed to shaping their attitudes, as illustrated by the following quotation:

In public schools, like the one my cousin studied in, they read a book, the whole book and then they had an exam. In private schools, the teachers do presentations, they make us do presentations and it's not just the teacher saying read, sometimes [they] explained the lesson, then the supervisor of the course came and afterwards saw our presentation (S17).

Private schools, as described by participants, incorporated a broader range of school initiatives. One example of a private school project is a 30-hour community service program called Key Skills, which requires pupils to choose two projects – one large and one small – with a themed link. The program enables participants and their peers to take responsibility for planning and executing projects at both an individual and group level. Respondents in this study reported the skills learned were transferable to their higher education courses and proved invaluable for their progress at university. An overall assessment of the project and written account of activities were led by the students. The teacher provided examples of past work as clear examples of what was expected. Participants were of the view that greater benefits had been derived from such initiatives because of the knowledge, skills and training they had acquired from being exposed to Western educational influences.

### 4.3 Relationship with Teachers

The final data collection phase investigated how participants viewed their relationships with their teachers, and was focused on responses to questions 1-88 of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to consider how they felt about international teachers and interactions with male teachers, and to reflect on teachers who endeavour to understand Emirati culture. Three key themes were identified from this data: growing awareness and acceptance of working in an adult learning environment; issues of gender and working with male teachers; and students' growing maturity and tolerance in the university environment.

#### 4.3.1 Adult Learning Environment

Participants talked about their rapport with teachers in private high schools and noted although the teaching process was similar to university, their relationships with teachers at

school were based on the amount of time spent with them. They alluded to high school relationships having developed over a long period of time, enabling them to personalise their connections in a way that wasn't possible at university. Friendly relationships with their teachers meant a lot to these students and despite formal relationships with their high school teachers they found their university teachers more helpful. The data showed there was a mixture of informal, friendly, sociable and more formal, businesslike attitudes at university. They attributed these differences to the manner and personality of academics rather than the university environment:

It actually depends on the professor or the teacher himself, some of them are more businesslike while others are more friendly, they're more outgoing, you don't have to call them Sir or Doctor. You just call them by their name (S21).

Participants preferred this mix of friendliness and professionalism as they believed it allowed for more flexibility in their relationships with academics. They claimed university was conducive to building friendships where individuals could talk freely to their teachers with confidence. Formal relationships were not viewed by participants as either an advantage or disadvantage since they were more independent and had more responsibilities to focus on. According to respondents their relationships with teachers at primary school followed a simple process of formality, characterised by pupils following teachers' instructions. As they progressed to high school their relationships with their teachers grew into more of a friendship. They believed the formality of high school teaching, using a prescriptive approach, made it easier for teachers to grade their pupils, and viewed this as the starting point of the formal relationships which they brought with them to university. Participants viewed Western-educated teachers in the university as less formal, although attitudes differed amongst nationalities:

If the teacher was British, not American, there's a difference between a British teacher, they are more stubborn and Americans are more flexible. The students like the Americans because they think they're more flexible and the British are more stubborn, they criticise more (S19).

Participants regarded the faculty's attitude as important and appreciated teachers taking an interest in their culture. Students in group one gave their views on teachers who made an effort to understand the Emirati culture, and all of them viewed this as essential for forging successful relationships at university (survey question 55). They believed an empathetic manner helped, for example when they introduced themselves in class, especially in the early days at university when they were still familiarising themselves with their new environment. According to the respondents, teachers who understood the Arabic way of speaking softly and did not pressurise them, was helpful for adjusting. Those who entered the English-language program and had to face a new class recalled being embarrassed by their lack of language skills, and appreciated teachers who were sensitive to their feelings. The government-educated students raised the issue of shyness in certain circumstances, which was perceived to stem from a lack of English language proficiency:

As I told you when you come from a government school you don't have the language that you can interact with others. So you are shy because your language is weak, not because of your personality (S21).

Participants expressed the view that teachers who understood Emirati women would know it was important to teach them in a respectful way, even when they were academically weak. They regarded cultural understanding as essential for building good relationships. Students also articulated the benefits of being taught by teachers from different parts of the world because it changed their perspective of people from other cultures. Even when participants found themselves in confrontational situations due to differences in cultures, they still believed the cultural transactions experienced at university were valuable. Day-to-day formalities between students and academics were reinforced through their traditional dress code, which consisted of an *abaya* and *shayla* worn by all students in the university. Dress codes displayed different degrees of covering, from exposing only the eyes to total covering of the body with a plain black *abaya* and more stylised *abayas* with personalised "fashion" components. All of them covered the garments underneath. The Emirati dress code is closely linked to appropriateness and modesty, particularly in the vicinity of male teachers. While participants dressed in varying modes of attire, they were nevertheless mindful of the reasons for having to cover themselves. One respondent stated: "visiting New York and Delaware as

part of a course made me realise I had a duty towards my culture. I wore the traditional abaya for the White House visit because I believe it was expected from me” (S12).

Although formal relationships with teachers were instrumental in participants’ educational development the influence of the family was clearly evident. Family authority played a major role in their lives, and despite these students’ exposure to a range of individuals during their education, they felt no one particular teacher had affected their educational progress. One participant gave voice to a perspective held by the others:

Culturally and globally, a woman is expected to put her family before her career, which is a must in my opinion. However, in my experience I am encouraged to pursue my studies and my career but I am expected to be a stay-at-home mother and wife after a few years on the job. This is based on the experiences of working mothers who belong to an older generation, which is why working women who have a family are seen to be pioneers in their field because they managed to strike a balance between families and their careers. Also, because of the segregation and the problems that seem to ensue from it. I have found myself seeking opportunities to work in places where I can interact with males professionally. Within university walls I can be a leader in whatever field I put my mind to. As soon as you step out reality kicks in and you realise that your future plans may be just a mirage (S13).

Feedback related to aspects of family pressure emphasised the family’s role in not only setting the agenda outside the university, but also shaping attitudes within. The custom of enquiring about academics’ personal lives, showing an interest in their opinions about national and international issues, and desiring a sense of “caring” beyond most Westernised ideas of familiarity emanated from the family’s influence on relationships with significant people. Participants expressed the view that any influence on becoming an active learner or altering their perspectives of learning was more likely to stem from their families than an academic at university. The inherent cultural and domestic ties to their family had a stronger hold on them than the university in which they were studying. Formalities with teachers elicited comments which indicated peer-to-peer exchanges played a key role in changing their

attitudes towards active learning. Working with other students led to a sense of shared responsibility when tasks were organised as group work:

Working in a group work with a partner or partners helped me to understand that sometimes I don't have to do everything alone. Depending on the other partner to help me out when I need help is good (S4).

Participant 5 stated she had been encouraged to improve her motivation by the levels of engagement she had witnessed in her peers:

Observing and looking at how hard that person is working got me to do the same and work twice as much to prove my theory correct, which is "everyone is destined for greatness, so why aren't I working to get on that list too?"

The data showed that active learning had not only been affected by internal experiences, but also by encounters with external events and industry professionals, such as the TEDx conference in Dubai.

#### 4.3.2 Gender

This research uncovered important information about participants' attitudes towards male teachers. Eight questionnaire respondents stated that having male educators had changed their attitudes and opinions, whereas five claimed this experience had not affected them (survey question 69). In the interviews, a proper, professional relationship with a male teacher was viewed as appropriate because it was in the context of a teaching situation, especially by participants who came from private high schools. However, they were also sensitive to the opinions of their peers who felt such exchanges were beyond the boundaries of a teacher-student relationship: "they [students] might feel that they shouldn't be engaging in conversations, especially with male professors and teachers where it doesn't have anything to do with their academic journey" (S17).

The experience of being taught by male teachers altered participants' views about being in the company of unrelated males. Participant 10 expressed it as follows:

Working with men, culturally people will talk, but during a practicum we had to do it as university requirements, which was for the Dubai Film Festival. It's a

place where men and women worked together and we had to do so too. Religiously, it is acceptable to talk to men professionally and [if it's] business related, we did. Culturally they won't say don't talk to men full stop but of course religion is far more important than culture. I believe this cultural expectation needs to vanish.

Participants who attended private English-medium schools and were taught by male teachers indicated a reserved relationship. They believed circumstances in high school, although formal in nature, still afforded stronger interaction with men who taught them. However, participants whose dealings with male teachers were limited to university expressed an initial shyness. Shyness was also articulated by participants who only interacted with female teachers at high school.

Respondents who attended government high schools said they had adjusted quickly to dealing with male teachers once they entered university. They claimed to have gained insights into communicating with male teachers as they progressed through their courses and matured during their university education. Gender boundaries were honoured by male academics at university and respect was maintained during interactions between female students and male teachers due to the learning environment:

If you are in the same class and he [the teacher] wants something or an assignment from you, and he wants you to help him, it's okay but in a way that you are doing things in a limited way (S20).

The experience of being taught by male teachers at private high school and university did not indicate any significant differences in the way participants were treated. Those who came from public high schools without any interaction with male teachers viewed their engagement with male teachers as a positive aspect of university life.

The findings of this study revealed that 75% of participants agreed that interactions with international teachers at university had affected their attitudes and opinions (survey question 44). Three out of the 13 participants disagreed. Familiarity with international educators evidently had positive outcomes and brought about increased awareness of non-Emirati cultures. Participants perceived educators had contributed to their abilities as more

active learners. The qualities international teachers brought to the classroom were complimented by their enthusiasm to promote external experiences which benefitted their students. The opportunity to attend a conference initiated by an international educator facilitated a change in attitude for one student:

He introduced TEDx to Dubai. That is when my thoughts and ambitions changed to a much higher level. The speakers in that hall filled me up with so much enthusiasm that I felt like if I set my mind on flying I would have been able to (S10).

For participants schooled by female teachers and educated in all-female primary or high schools, university was the first time they encountered male teachers who were not only experts but who also introduced a new kind of professional interaction. Intensive female relationships at government high schools impacted students' communication and shaped their attitudes and abilities which they brought with them to university. Nevertheless, they acknowledged becoming more comfortable relating to both male and female teachers as time went by.

#### 4.3.3 Developing Maturity and Tolerance

The data showed a connection between moving from high school to university which not only included a change in physical space but also behavioural modifications for students. Participants commented on becoming more expressive in their engagement with teachers due to the style of teaching at university and their confidence increased. Unlike school, where they had nothing to say or contribute due to limited experience, they had a newfound respect for their teachers at university:

The respect, as I said is, you will say nothing, you don't have any logic or how to say things with the others. Maybe you don't have enough information in your mind because you're still a teenager and you didn't see enough of the world (S20).

The data were examined for evidence of university educators projecting their values onto participants. When asked to consider any significant academic influences on their



learning, the responses suggested this was not the case. Instead, participants attributed changes in their attitudes to the process, and acknowledged higher education was more than mere knowledge acquisition. Despite exposure to a variety of persuasions at university, participants also expressed the view that they were able to resist change as they developed their talents through professional encounters. Participant 13 stated:

No one in particular, I was never faced with a moment where I had to change my style of learning. It's been the same ever since kindergarten and I've mastered it. If anything, I always try to prove anyone who wanted me to change my style of learning wrong just for the sake of it. Those who defied me, especially one financial accounting instructor, just made me realise that I shouldn't change my style of learning but instead to adapt.

Participants noted differences in strictness or leniency between male and female private high school teachers' and university male and female professors. Male high school teachers were seemingly more flexible with homework and assignment deadlines, unlike female high school teachers who were more rigid. Female teachers were also stricter about accommodating pupils' requests for additional time for examinations, whereas males were more flexible. Strictness was viewed as a characteristic of university female teachers, however according to participants, both male and female university teachers were equally non-negotiable about deadlines. Some participants appreciated constructive criticism:

It's good because it shows me what's my mistake, what is my weak area that I have to develop. That's why I love someone to be honest with me to tell me what is wrong, what is right, it's not something personal but it's something just to develop myself (S19).

Not all participants agreed with critical evaluation of their work. They believed the strictness of male and female academics was due to a lack of sensitivity and found it problematic at times.

Some participants benefited from similar teaching styles in private high school and university. For others, high school teachers focused on examining a topic, expanding through explanation, and then had them sit an exam for which they simply memorised information.

Respondents clearly found university more challenging than school because their professors delivered a lecture while students took notes. The expectation was not to simply absorb information from the course handbook, but to conduct independent inquiry and synthesise the information to complete assignments. Students quickly realised they had to learn proactively, and when areas needed improvement, it was their responsibility to put in the required effort. This was in sharp contrast to high school where teachers were expected to drive them:

I don't think forcing students to do things will make them learn. They won't necessarily learn from this kind of strategy. If they did it from your own way, it is better (S21).

Participants who progressed from an English-language program to a general education course were unable to identify a specific moment when they changed in response to the style of teaching. They believed university teachers emphasised more student-centred approaches, and attributed their own progress to a personal focus from their teachers which ultimately benefitted the progress.

#### 4.4 Summary

This chapter reported on Emirati participants' perspectives of their educational environments, approaches to learning, and relationships with teachers, drawing on the data from the questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The demographic data provided an overview of the participants' ages, marital status, place of birth and current domicile, and highlighted details of their high school experiences and pathways into university. Their attitudes and opinions on the topics in this chapter were scrutinised in order to identify their frame of reference.

The interviews gave participants an opportunity to talk about their lifestyles and consider the experiences in their higher education journey. It was evident from the detailed conversations that participants found university a place where major personal change was possible and where they had every opportunity to find areas of learning that would facilitate their future careers. Academic achievements within the United Arab Emirates were seen as a pathway supported not only by family members but also by society in general. Although these women had to embrace, and in some cases confront, considerable change in their

interactions and relationships with diverse people across the university community, they considered the overall experience worthwhile and valuable.

The next chapter explores the cultural impact of education on these young women. It examines their cultural influences and encounters as school and university students within the wider context of their families and society.

## Chapter 5: Cultural Impact

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the opinions and perspectives of the female Emirati participants in regard to key issues about education and culture in the UAE. The analysis draws on the same sources of data outlined in the previous chapter, namely the students' educational experiences. The main focus in this chapter is the cultural impact on the education of these young women.

Participants' experiences of cultural issues encountered at school, university and within the wider context of their families and society are explored, under the headings of three key concepts: cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital. Participants explained how their culture is reflected through traditional dress, and talked about their roles in changing or maintaining their Emirati identity. They also discussed which media occupations were culturally acceptable, how media graduates might change cultural expectations, and government assistance for female Emiratis to enter the workplace.

### 5.2 Cultural Identity

#### 5.2.1 Family and Culture

The historical influence of the family combined with the influence of the country's rulers, both past and present, has created a cultural identity underpinned by a shared vision. These influences, outlined in previous sections, were confirmed in the interviews with participants. The community looked to its rulers for leadership and maintaining the character of the country. Although on the surface the UAE reflects a modern developing country, family is still at the centre of everyday life, and today young Emiratis are able to engage with the older generations because the family is an intrinsic part of their existence. The participants' parents and grandparents lived during very different times, when men and women had distinct roles within the home and different education and job opportunities. The respondents in this study were in contact with family members who had lived through times when the country consisted of very little else besides sand and small settlements. Tribal in nature and with limited expertise in the professions needed in modern society, they were mainly nomadic, or merchants or fishermen as little as 45 years ago. One participant described this change in the following way:

My grandfather is one who built the UAE. They did a great job because it was just sand, a desert, and Sheikh Hammed did a great job. Today [it is] a flourishing country. My parents told me he brought experts; Western experts asked them to make the desert green. So all of this happened from nothing and they just built the basics (S19).

Participants spoke of cultural expectations bound by marriage, children and what the community imagined for women. For some, cultural identity was a combination of personal and community values. It was clearly evident from the interviews that the respondents were deeply influenced by the community in which they lived, but particularly by their families who fostered traditional values and attitudes:

It's like some of them [students] may be affected by the environment but most of them are affected by the values of the parents. My cousin studied before in the US and he's raising his children exactly like ours. He's stricter on them (S20).

Participants discussed their views about the cultural expectations of marriage, children and their role within society. They described a cultural imperative to be married and have children, and as married women, taking responsibility for the care of their families. Marriage was considered a central prospect and conferred authority on the husband. Divorce was not a subject participants readily discussed, but it appeared to exist in Emirati society for reasons of marital infidelity, job loss and financial strain. In the UAE, divorce is governed by Islamic Sharia law, and it is difficult for estranged couples to separate because there must be incontrovertible evidence that the marriage is over. Divorce was clearly a sensitive issue for these participants to discuss during the interviews.

The custom in Emirati culture is for married women to be as participants stated "the boss". Marriage also confers financial responsibilities for the family on the husband. Participants attributed this expectation to religious beliefs, and not of primary social or economic necessity.

In view of the immense pressure exerted by Emirati families on women, the data collection was constructed to investigate the attitudes of participants' families towards their

ongoing education. Respondents claimed their families would prefer them to marry a graduate and acknowledged the belief that young women with a degree would attract more educated husbands.

Amongst the Indigenous population the desire to maintain purity in its people was focused on parents. The child of an Emirati mother and a non-Emirati father was not entitled to citizenship. The data highlighted the difficulties experienced by women who chose to marry a non-Emirati, since their children were not regarded as full-blooded Emirati and encountered prejudice. Participants considered this situation unfair. More recently however, the situation has been addressed by a directive from His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, whereby children born to a non-Emirati father and Emirati mother were eligible to become UAE citizens when they turned 18. Previously, women who chose to marry a non-Emirati would lose all societal rights for herself and her child, which in practical terms, created enormous difficulties. On the other hand, the children of Emirati men and non-Emirati women were not considered full Emirati, but were eligible for all societal privileges available to the group. Participants commented on the fact that some other Arab nationalities were able to benefit from Emirati nationality and in their opinion this was unfair because they embodied the country's spirit and were being treated unjustly:

The problem is our government gave the Palestinians citizenship but they are not local; the women, the Emirati women, she's from the UAE, she raised her children with the culture and everything that is related to the UAE, but for the Palestinians it's not (S19).

Participants were apprehensive about relying on men to be good husbands and consequently focused on education first, in preference to marriage. As they became more educated and financially more independent, their thoughts turned to the inequalities they faced if they married a non-Emirati man. Inextricably, the cultural traditions of marriage, education, women's rights and the desire to choose a partner came into consideration:

I don't trust men because I've heard many stories and many awful things, divorce, I don't like these things. I just want to continue my education and be independent, it is better. I think maybe the woman who married someone who's

foreign, she picked someone from outside the country and then they get married, why can't they just get their rights? (S19).

Participants were able to enjoy financial independence within the marriage and could keep their earnings as part of the religious traditions extolled by Islamic teaching. Respondents believed it was possible to meld cultural tradition with new ideas formulated from 21st century influences. The customs and traditions they had been brought up with, such as hospitality to others, were considered part of their cultural identity, and emphasis was placed on how to behave towards strangers. This was believed to be an early Bedouin tradition and an important part of their cultural identity. While they felt obliged to maintain the culture expected of them, they were nevertheless able to consider changing certain aspects of their lives to align with a more modern outlook. From the participants' perspectives, the present-day situation was still influenced by aspects of their cultural identity which some felt was increasingly difficult to maintain amidst all the external influences:

Cultural identity to some extent has been affected by the surrounding environment, I think we are living in a society with so many nationalities, so many people from different backgrounds with different religions and different beliefs, so it's been hard to maintain the cultural identity of Emirati women but they still have some part of their cultural identity (S15).

The impact of foreigners living in the community was noted by participants. Expatriates had arrived over many years to live and work in the Emirates and many of them had very little interaction with the local population. There was a strong view that becoming familiar with the ways of Emirati women was a prerequisite for understanding their culture, yet hindered by expatriates who predominantly formed ties with their own communities. Scenarios in which non-Emirati men engaged in conversation with Emirati women were only possible in a professional setting, and social interaction was potentially difficult, yet expatriate women were able to freely interact with Indigenous women and participants viewed this as a way to understand what the culture was about:

Remember some things: do not Google, do not watch movies about Emirati women, do not do those media things. Go to a coffee shop, sit with an Emirati woman or sit somewhere, let someone invite you and when you sit there among those women, you will know the true Emirati woman because the media portrays us in very different ways and you can't know a person unless you speak to them (S16).

In order to maintain their cultural identity, family relationships needed to be preserved, since according to respondents, culture was not only bound by tradition but also by the influence of the family. They understood instinctively the relationship between families and the community, and their family/tribal connections which caused underlying scrutiny from others:

I think the environment that you live in, the people surrounding you, it affects you. Who's your friends; it depends also for your parents. It's not about the culture; it's about the family that you came from, the environment that you live in (S19).

The prevailing attitudes underpinning the social construct of family also made it difficult for them to separate from family, since it provided a framework of expected values and behaviours which formed the basis of continuing relationships:

Culture in my opinion is from others, our family relationships are really tight so we need to gather every time, every year. If there are problems, we still love each other, connecting to each other. We like to help others even if they were friends or family (S19).

Core values which exemplified their traditions were identified. As parents, they wanted to raise their children in a traditional way, with respect of central importance. Politeness was also considered an essential characteristic, requiring women to behave in certain ways and maintain a sense of decorum. Respect and reputation were commonly held gender values for women in all families. In essence, participants claimed the obligation for women to maintain the societal imperative to be married was acceptable even though it might



affect their potential. These virtues were inculcated in women and there was an implicit requirement for them to be aware of their role in maintaining respect and reputation through appropriate behaviours:

Laughing or touching him or talking about private things should be totally away from your interactions with others. It will open problems for the girl and the boy. Maybe the boy will not be affected but the girl will be affected. It's kind of the girl's reputation, our culture; you have to be more respectful. If he told her about a thing that's private he should keep silent and not talk about it. These things the girl will automatically know if she is from the Emirati culture and anything that may affect her reputation and her family's reputation she should keep away from (S20).

Group identity is part of the tribal imperative for Emiratis. Pursuing education in an environment where women are relatively free to express themselves inevitably leads to some conflict. Participants wanted to be seen as individuals but not different from the group. Although they came from different parts of the country and had similar views about issues such as the country's development and the need to adhere to the group, they also articulated opinions reflective of a distinct outlook depending on which Emirate they came from:

Some people think that she is from Ajman, I'm from Dubai. There are differences. Some people think like that, and others are fine. They say that we are developing our country like that. We are all the same. We have the same rulers. We are all the same children (S20).

The historical influence of tribal society was still evident in participants' views of themselves and their neighbours. Family bonds were paramount in daily life and despite the paradox of wanting to be seen as individuals, a desire to identify with the group prevailed.

### 5.2.2 Culture and the Younger Generation

Participants believed the next generation would have even more influence on changing the identity of women because of their family's exposure to new attitudes, yet the finely balanced relationship between past and present would continue because of the strong traditions upheld by family and society. Traditions practised by young family members

helped to preserve ties, and the custom of spending time together as a family was especially prevalent on Fridays, the holy day for Muslims. In traditional Emirati culture, over and above the daily tradition, it is important to come together with the family and share food, especially on days of religious significance. However it was still a daily tradition, depending on individual preferences and family locations. People in the Northern Emirates are considered to have a more traditional lifestyle because of family dynamics and fewer social amenities.

Participants felt they played a significant role in promoting a changing Emirati identity to younger generations nationally and internationally. They saw it as their duty to inform the outside world of their understanding of global issues and instil in young people a capacity to comprehend serious problems. They understood the influence of the media in changing viewpoints, were able to access content, and expressed enthusiasm for providing material that represented them in a culturally acceptable way:

I can make a film for women to send a message for everyone and put it on YouTube, so people can know who we really are, that we don't do this to be famous, just to show people we're not closed minded, that we're open minded (S19).

Respondents acknowledged the influence of Western culture via film and television on the attitudes of younger women in the Emirates due to the images portrayed by the media. Along with music and fashion their world was being influenced by westernised trends. Access to technology, such as smart phones, laptops, iPads, social media and the internet also had a profound impact on changing participants' perspectives of their culture. One participant described this in the following way:

If a girl watches a series on her laptop, like Gossip Girl, and she likes the fashion and the way they wear clothes, the next day she is going to go to the shop and buy the same. When she comes to the university she's going to show her friends that she's more modern in fashion (S17).

### 5.2.3 Identity

Participants were asked about the style of dress they liked to wear underneath their traditional *abaya* (survey question 13). Ten participants (77%) acknowledged they enjoyed wearing fashionable clothes that reflected contemporary trends. Fifty four percent of

participants reported they did not like to wear a *gelabya*, and 46% said they did like to wear a *gelabya* (survey question 23).

Preferred clothing included both the *abaya* and participants' own personal favourites. The choice of traditional dress in preference to more conventional westernised clothing depended on whether they were in their own country or overseas. Participants reported travelling outside the "home" environment presented challenges for demonstrations of cultural identity, which often caused individuals to be "looked at" and judged in negative ways:

When we travelled, I travelled with my cousins and my uncle's wife. She's very religious and she wears her abaya and shayla. When she goes to London, in respect I wear my abaya and shayla. I was very conscious of everyone looking, I had bad treatment, and they were very rude (S18).

The data showed participants wanted to preserve their cultural heritage through their clothes, language, religion and way of living, as they felt these aspects maintained their uniqueness. One participant elaborated:

I think by showing what I wear and going by my beliefs and religion, my culture is well shown and gives people the idea that I want them to have. As long as I stick to my culture and teach my children how to be the person who their country wants them to be, I will be maintaining my cultural identity (S3).

Respondents explained there was a need to be seen as Emirati women, which meant wearing the *abaya* and *shayla*, because they represented the traditional clothing of the region. Images of young educated women were highly visible in the media and participants related to the messages that surrounded them. Recognising the Emirati culture was explained by participant 6, who said wearing an *abaya* illustrated to other people the nature of her culture. She felt: "the abaya shows me for who I am. It shows people where I am from and what my culture is about".

Amongst the remarks made by respondents was an explanation of the importance of their tradition and how the exterior covering defined a conservative attitude. For example, one participant described her reason for wearing an *abaya* as a means of differentiating

herself from the rest of society. Another highlighted the cultural significance which focused on the expectation to cover the body in demonstration of a respectable attitude.

Wearing an *abaya* was considered part of the religious tradition of covering the body. Controversy surrounded the issue of non-Muslim women wearing an *abaya*, and participants were divided over the appropriateness of the gesture. In terms of religious practice, female followers of Islam may choose to cover their head and/or their body. The participants in this research wore a black *abaya* and a black *shayla*. The *abaya* was not just worn to adhere to religious tradition, but also as an item of identity. Traditional dress, the clothes worn underneath the *abaya*, as well as the *abaya* and *shayla*, were considered proper by the participants in terms of their identity. Some stated that cultural dress was a way to consolidate their identity, while for others, the *abaya* represented their identity. The data uncovered an attitude which focused on identity through clothing which participants viewed as an embodiment of their culture:

We are a minority in our own country. It sucks (mind my language), therefore we owe it to our heritage, our culture and our traditions of the UAE to hold onto what identifies us as Emiratis. The Arabic language is in decline and we're sitting back watching it disappear into obscurity. Once that's gone, what else will we have left? The *abaya* is what's instilling this sense of pride amongst Emiratis in a sea of American, Brits, Asians and Europeans – a sense of pride that will then lead to the preservation of the Emirati culture (S13).

Globalisation was a major factor in the lives of the respondents, and even though some were extremely fashion conscious, they appeared to have a genuine desire to maintain their traditional dress as an expression of not just individual identity, but a demonstration of non-conformity to external influences. A clear sense of pride was articulated by all participants who did not view this practice as a mechanism for marginalising women, but rather as a positive expression of their individualism and means of identification:

I can't see myself walking around the UAE without an *abaya*, maybe it's because I'm used to it or maybe because everyone else wears it so I do too, but I know for sure that without it I won't be the same person. I take pride in wearing it, it's like walking around every day showing the world that yes globalisation

has hit us all but I'm still holding on to something you can never influence me in (S10).

Participants commented on the misperception of Muslim women by certain Western countries. They dismissed statements implying subjugation in their choice to cover their bodies, and described the *abaya* as a fashion statement with an embedded message of progressiveness about its wearer. One participant summarised this by saying:

We want to be with the fashion. We don't want people to see us as someone who's [dressed in] black, only black because there are people who said that Emirati women are close minded. They are not open to style, to the fashion world, so maybe the small generation which is our generation is the one who created the abayas with the styles and making it like dresses (S19).

The fashion aspect was motivated by individuals wanting to show their creativity. The traditional black *abaya* had been transformed into a fashion item of clothing around which a significant industry had grown:

Abayas are not only about covering up. It's like a new line of fashion that has been developed here. The reason for that is diversity. People have the potential to learn and develop their own creation. So Emirati women pay a lot of money and attention in order to get abayas that reflect their identity. You can see their individuality. There have been a lot of colours added to the abayas, a lot of designs, a lot of new cuts that make it more interesting, rather than just being black material covering the woman up (S21).

Modifications in appearance were evident in participants' clothing, and in some instances, their hair colour. For some, changing their clothing style and personal image was representative of their personality, while for others it was about imitating a modern style promoted by television programs. The fact that participants were comfortable about incorporating Westernised fashion and hair styles into their personal lives illustrated the melding of new influences into the established culture.

Participants also articulated that changing attitudes to traditional dress would have been frowned upon in the past. In more recent times however, people seemed less bothered. Despite a variety of Arab stereotypes portrayed in the international media, participants were keen to note the distinct differences between the dress of Emiratis and other Gulf Arabs:

It's really strange because in the Gulf, we don't like Kuwaiti people, women, they don't always wear shayla and abaya. It's rare for them. Emirati women are [the ones who wear] the shayla and abaya, we are very committed and cover ourselves (S19).

Negative media portrayal and perceived stereotypes were enthusiastically challenged and discouraged. Despite wanting to change opinion, participants also acknowledged that wearing traditional clothes led to antagonism and prejudice. Wearing an *abaya* and *shayla* outside the UAE posed difficulties and invited hostile attitudes, but for those who were determined not to allow prejudice to affect them there were significant changes in their attitudes:

I think my perspective started to change and I don't care. They judge me, they're the shallow ones. They judge me in how I dress, and they do not know me as a person. So then I started meeting new friends and meeting new people and I was wow, not everyone thinks the same, so then I started to feel more comfortable with who I am, what I'm wearing (S18).

During the time participants spent at university new attitudes emerged which made them choose not to cover their hair all the time. However, the *shayla* was still part of the dress code and visible around their neck/shoulders. As discussed in earlier sections, this was viewed as a freedom of choice as their confidence increased.

#### 5.2.4 Social Change

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, participants commented on the social changes they had witnessed within the Emirati community, for example, women were interacting more frequently with people from non-traditional groups. In the opinion of the respondents, the impact on their cultural identity was due to the growth and development of a fast-paced modern society with many new influences, brought about by their interactions,

communication and education. Consequently, issues such as female leadership in decision-making and personal advancement were seen as realistic options as expressed by the following quotation:

The Emirati woman's identity has been influenced by a lot of nationalities, the communication, people are getting more outgoing, people are getting exposed to new cultures and to new identities and we must say education has played a key role in modifying cultural identity. She plays a major role in developing the country and taking decisions (S21).

The social landscape of the Emirates includes a wide range of nationalities, including Asian, Western, African and other Arab ethnic groups. The Indigenous population in the UAE is in a minority, so participants had frequent opportunities to interact and communicate with the broader community. They commented on the sense of harmony and consensus amongst the various groups in this cosmopolitan society, which they claimed was beneficial for incorporating any relevant attitudes and behaviours into their own lives:

We're all human, even if we are a different mindset, we are different from colour, it doesn't matter, we have to be familiar with each other, live in harmony in one environment. We have to live with everyone, respect them, live with them, and understand them. As an Emirati because we're all a small race, we have to hold on, to be more tight, holding on to our identity (S19).

Participants considered women in contemporary times were expected to adhere to traditions and still have some freedom to change. The message of leadership was a departure from the traditional message for Emirati women, who were historically not permitted from studying and working at current levels of acceptability. They attributed this to globalisation and the influx of new attitudes making change possible. Furthermore, geographical separation from family brought about a more relaxed attitude towards development and sparked an upturn in participants' aspirations. Having the freedom to live further away from family in the same vicinity meant reduced scrutiny and greater autonomy.

Personal change occurred from the time participants left school and entered university. Distinct changes were apparent in their clothing styles and behaviour. Participants

reported moving from school to university enabled them to make personal choices about their appearance, partly because their families acknowledged this transition and relaxed their scrutiny. They believed university provided a place for change and agreed that change was brought about by experiences outside the home with lasting effect.

### 5.2.5 Employment Opportunities

The students in this study believed they would have an impact on society, and their influence, post-university, would bring benefits to others in terms of equality. Their friendly rivalry at university had served them well in understanding the value of education, and they acknowledged increased opportunities in recent times. Women in government positions were seen as a step forward for Emirati women who wanted to influence the future for society:

Girls have proved their abilities to not only to overcome barriers of language but also to overcome social barriers and beliefs. By breaking stereotypes against Arabs in general and women in particular as a lot of people think women here in Arab society are locked up in their houses, they are not allowed to work, they are not allowed to communicate and interact with the outside world but here the women take high positions in government (S21).

At the time of this research one condition of public-sector employment was Emirati citizenship, which guaranteed employment for the children of Emirati fathers. However, for Emirati women married to non-Emirati men, the consequences were significant, and meant their children were not entitled to equal employment opportunities. As previously mentioned, while matrimony between an Emirati man and non-Emirati woman conferred citizen status on their children, the reverse did not apply, and as a result, children born to an Emirati woman and non-Emirati man were disadvantaged in terms of national status. Fortunately this is no longer the case. However, during the interviews participants articulated a sense of unfairness and career limitation related to the rights and privileges denied to Emirati women's children:

The government they refuse to give your children the passport and citizenship. So they are in the UAE like foreigners. They will not get the treatment that locals get, but the mother is local. As a mindset it's not really allowed, its rare people can accept it. If the children went to the workforce it's hard for them to get a job because their father is not local and their mother is (S19).



Due to the vision promoted by high-ranking government officials, Emirati culture and identity in relation to employment was linked to ongoing influences from society. Participants expressed a desire to lead the community towards new goals and aspirations made possible by education and the ideas being espoused by their leaders:

As people get more educated, as they get exposed to different cultures, different ideas, beliefs, not only to religion but to different aspects of life that definitely changes their identity. I can see that it is changing, especially with the vision of His Highness (S21).

Ambition for positions of leadership were attributed to their national figureheads. Respondents viewed leadership positions in business, public or private enterprise as part of their collective responsibility to achieve the best for their country, as well as a personal triumph in their chosen profession. The vision for the country was outlined in a government document which had been circulated across the nation. It laid out development of the Emirates through personal inspirational leadership. Participants translated an understanding of their roles into potential careers with high expectations serving as a blueprint for their personal and national success:

When you read their vision for 2030, you will exactly know your role or how the country's going forward and when it's going to end in 2030. So they gave us a clear image, so each one of us, each individual should work to make the vision real. You can just feel safe because the leaders, they know what they are doing and they know what's going to happen tomorrow (S19).

An ongoing link between cultural identity and roles of leadership was acknowledged as an important aspect of participants' aspirations. They understood professional leadership roles would afford them opportunities to change perspectives about their culture on a continued basis, and at the same time, uphold standards everybody viewed as acceptable:

My role is not huge since I am less than one percent of the entire female body that makes up my culture. But no matter how small my role is I would keep my standards as is and keep presenting my culture in the best way possible

hopefully I would influence others to follow my lead and my role would eventually grow (S5).

Participants also identified a need for creating new ways of working in the community to include a healthy work/life balance:

First off, it is important in maintaining and holding onto our cultural identity as Emiratis. My role would be to probably open new doors within the private sector for other Emiratis. Also, the one role any Emirati woman wants is the one where she has finally found that balance between her career and her family. Most of us had ambitions the minute we entered university, and it would be a shocking waste for these ambitions to be overlooked and ignored (S13).

Visibility on television was considered a high-profile career by participants who viewed being in the public arena as a form of leadership. Emirati Arabic TV channels funded by government agencies employ a number of women presenters, and in this highly visual medium they are seen as promoting the nation's values as representatives of the culture. Participants were sensitive to the way women purporting to be Emirati presented on television, and discounted them if they did not reflect an authentic Emirati image by way of name, dress or manner of speaking. In this way, participants understood the need to set an example in a culturally acceptable way. The data indicated career and employment accomplishments were inherently bound to maintaining family traditions, and it was therefore important for participants to preserve their cultural identity in their work and family life. This was expressed by one respondent as follows:

My role is sticking to my culture and religion and proving others that as a female local we can accomplish anything including preserving and keeping our cultural identity. I wear my abaya when going out, wear the traditional galabeya at home and spend Fridays with the family is how I maintain my cultural identity (S4).

This sense of accomplishment and pride in representing the Emirati culture in a positive light was frequently expressed by participants. One summarised this by saying:

I won't say I'll be changing my cultural identity but I'll enhance it and make it flexible to world changes. I must reach the top of my field while still holding on to my traditional clothing, language, religion and pride and enlighten others about it (S10).

Participants considered it their responsibility to draw on their education and help build an economically sound country, while also recognising the benefits of becoming educated on a personal level. Higher education presented a pathway to an interesting career and financial success, and benefited the family's status within the community. It was also important for them to be engaged and respected at an international level. Respondents commented on the need for government to ensure changes would occur, and demonstrated a consistent focus on moving the country forward.

### 5.3 Cultural Sensitivity

Participants were asked about their perspectives and experiences of culturally sensitive matters. Family attitudes which underpinned the culture portrayed sensitivity to tradition, and participants were willing to maintain their traditions and wanted to promote their culture.

Four key themes emerged from the data related to cultural sensitivities: family attitudes; heritage and tradition; the cultural impact of career choices; and cultural expectations.

#### 5.3.1 Family Attitudes

Although all participants were from the Emirates, each had unique personal experiences and came from a variety of family situations. All of them had access to the internet, television, radio, international and national print media, and social media, so their liberal-mindedness depended on their personal experiences and family attitudes. The extent of participants' non-conservative attitudes was determined by their exposure to external influences and prevailing family viewpoints. Family attitudes were significant for all the respondents. Their fathers supported their education and it was essential to complete their

degrees. In families where several children had graduated there was strong encouragement for other family members to become educated:

They were supportive a lot because of my sister's study. She took business. She finished. Two of them finished. When I finished school the first thing they told me was to continue and they even recommended for me to take a Masters (S17).

Family attitudes towards education in response to changing global influences were evident. The data indicated the educational achievements of parents were relevant in offering their children support. Not only did parents provide first-hand accounts of their own experiences, they also had real insights into the benefits of pursuing higher education:

My parents were both very supportive and encouraging and they wanted me to get a higher degree. Maybe in the future I'll also be getting other degrees (S15).

Participants supported by their families to study said completing their Bachelor degree programs was enough for them, as they had spent too many years at university due to the added time in the English language program:

It has been too long, not from the studying, but from the exams, from the research. I failed TOEFL, only by one point; we had to take the exam again. I think I took TOEFL seven times, then I took IELTS, and then I passed (S20).

A number of family influences prevailed at home, ranging from the need for an appropriate study space to the amount of activity in the home or the number of offspring in higher education. Providing a supportive home environment for students to focus on their studies without distraction was difficult in busy Emirati households. However, family size was not considered a limitation to sons or daughters completing their studies. One participant explained:

My parents are very happy, they always encourage me. Their first mission is to help us complete our studies. We are six sisters and one brother. They've completed their studies and we are finishing ours also (S14).

Despite disparate gender/cultural roles within the Arab context there was no discrimination between men and women when it came to education. Families embraced the opportunities provided by both the public and private sectors, and also considered options from overseas tertiary providers. Sons and daughters were equally encouraged to access education programs that would lead to financial benefit and professional opportunities.

The issue of women driving unaccompanied was of concern, yet families were supportive in their quest for education. Large areas of the Emirates are remote and isolated and participants acknowledged being unaccompanied was worrying:

I come from Sharjah to Dubai, it's an hour to drive, and the distance is very long. This was a problem for me to drive. Alone in a car, if anything happened, we live in the middle of the desert, there is no petrol station, there is nothing, so if anything happened, there is no-one to help me (S14).

While remote regions of the Emirates rendered women vulnerable, driving was seen by participants as a means of independence and making a difference to their daily lives, particularly for those who travelled by bus from the northern Emirates:

My husband works, so I don't have anybody at home to go any place, shopping, or to take something for my baby, I can't go. I don't have a driver. My husband picks me up. I come by bus to the university (S20).

Parents, husbands and other family members were involved in monitoring their female relatives, evident from their attitudes to driving. While monitoring demonstrated to participants they were cared for, it was also viewed as exempting them from the freedom to behave in an unfettered way. Driving was seen as a form of independence and show of trust on the part of their families. Unlike students in Western countries who use road, rail and other forms of public transport to travel to university, transportation options for Emiratis are constrained by attitudes. Currently there are no rail links between towns and cities and the public bus system would not be used by females Emiratis because it is considered unacceptable, particularly for an unchaperoned single female. Participants therefore either drove themselves to university or were driven by a family member or driver (chauffeur). Alternatively, a small private bus would collect university students in the morning on a set route and return them home at the end of the day. It was a common sight to see a number of

buses arriving at this university at 8.00 am in the morning with several hundred students. This prescribed arrangement for travelling to and from university was endorsed by families as a way of ensuring their daughters' safety.

Another example of family monitoring was evident from participants' discussions about their options to study overseas. The cultural prerogative does not allow women to live alone in a foreign country although this has become less enforced. Female sisters and cousins who studied abroad were accompanied by a family member, and there was strong reluctance on the part of families to allowing women, whether single or married, to study abroad on their own. Familial support extended to Emirati women was clearly a lifelong commitment:

My sister wanted to have her Masters in the US and my mother didn't want her to go alone, she went there with my mother. My mother wanted to see her and take care of her. She wanted to know where she will stay, where she's studying and what she's doing, just for two months, then she will return there and go frequently (S20).

The need for the family to continue a close connection with their offspring outside the home environment was considered perfectly acceptable. Respondents argued it was a mixture of monitoring, care, and maintaining respectability to protect the reputation of female kin.

### 5.3.2 Heritage and Tradition

Marriage and children were part of some participants' lives. All had opinions on the subject of marriage, children and personal expectations of the future, which combined all these aspirations. They believed marriage and children would create a future for them, and those who were married spoke about their husbands who were also studying in order to improve their financial status: "He is completing his studying now. It will be better" (S14). The husbands of some married participants had left school at a young age and were completing their high school education in order to advance to tertiary education while working:

My husband he's studying in school. He didn't complete his study. Now he is completing. He left school when he was fourteen and then he went to work. He is in the army. He is working, he doesn't study in the morning, in the night (S20).

Most of the married students in this study needed permission from their husbands to leave campus, while single women needed the permission of a male family member, either a father or brother. Other married students had gained autonomy by arrangement and were free to leave as agreed with husbands or parents:

I have an ID card. I can go home. I talked with my husband and he lets me go without asking. He said he trusts me. It was not necessary he should sign. My friends they don't go out of university, they just call their parents, then they leave. They take their permission. Some girls go out without their parents' permission and they don't tell them they're going out. I think it's wrong because parents trust their children, so we should respect that (S20).

The interview data showed fathers in particular played an important role in their daughter's futures. This deference to a male authority underlies the traditional behaviour of Emirati women in the workplace, as expressed by participant 17: "He thinks studying is the way forward for women in the future, there are no limitations because my sisters studied business but I studied communications, it's very different". Support for business development is a tradition in Emirati culture and continues to be an area of involvement for fathers when it comes to their daughters.

Conversations and genuine interest in promoting education were commonplace in immediate and extended family groups. As the Emirati population is closely connected, opinions and attitudes towards education tend to merge into a collective consciousness. One participant stated:

I just knew that I had to do it because now it's a requirement. Everyone has to go to university. My family, they all have education and certificates from high school. My younger cousins they're all at universities (S20).

Parents' backgrounds were significant in promoting higher education to their children as illustrated by the following quote: "Actually they expected me to study at university because both my parents have a university degree. My mother graduated from Emirates University and my father has a degree from the US" (S15).

Participants reported their families were instrumental in studying in a gender-specific institution in order to protect them from mixing with males. Mixed universities were considered inappropriate for female Emiratis and friendships with unrelated males were forbidden in some cases, even in the university environment. However, participants indicated these attitudes were changing and becoming more acceptable:

It's part of religion and culture and blending those two together, Emirati women are not supposed to talk with males but I do because I don't take it a step further. It's just based on friendship and I'm not very keen on relationships and stuff (S18).

In reporting their perspectives participants claimed their personal preferences with regard to wearing traditional clothes stemmed from religion, not culture. Hair covering was viewed as important, even in informal environments:

For me, there're two types of girls: they don't cover their heads, there are girls who cover and I cover. This has nothing to do with culture, this is religion. So in our religion women are supposed to wear veils. People do not understand this. What I think is women should cover their heads, full stop, there are women who say it's more free choice. We're okay in front of our fathers, uncles and relations however, not cousins (S18).

The need to ask permission was viewed as respect, however issues of control were seen as an aspect of tradition that was beginning to change. Participants observed the younger generations becoming difficult to manage and more influenced by their peers than their family. This made them uncertain about their own influence on their children:

I will teach my kids what our parents did. We try, I don't know what will happen. The generation is becoming more difficult to control them. I see some of my friends, they do what their friends do, and copy their style, what they say, and they are copying their friend. Our clothes and everything we do are important. We can see before she was one person and afterwards she was another (S20).



Marriage was considered a vital aspect of maintaining heritage and tradition and participants acknowledged this would be a significant part of their lives. Respect and upholding cultural traditions by obtaining the necessary permissions and taking heed of parental advice featured prominently in the daily interactions of participants with their relatives.

### 5.3.3 Cultural Impact of Career Choice

The data showed participants valued relationships with teachers who understood what was culturally important to them. They believed cultural consideration and a professional approach to teaching were advantageous. In this context, cultural sensitivity was viewed as efforts made on the part of teachers to understand and find out more about students whose cultural background was different from their own.

The data illustrated participants' views on how they could change future cultural expectations for Emirati women and elicited enthusiastic responses. One participant outlined her desire to maintain traditional values and at the same time, be instrumental in opening up opportunities for other women:

By being attached to my cultural and traditional look and getting in the workforce with a strong knowledge and an excellent language in both Arabic and English I will be able to change the expectations for female Emiratis (S3).

A career in media was culturally sensitive because of conservative attitudes in traditional Emirati society, yet participants were confident about working in the industry and being seen as promoting their identity because they had their family's support. The data revealed students enrolled in the media course not only faced problems in society in general, but at university as well. Participants were hopeful of demonstrating their cultural sensitivity by adhering to expectations in ways the community would approve of. Equally, while respondents were prepared to make personal changes which acknowledged community sensitivities, they were intent on maintaining their cultural identity. Comments about being in the media highlighted the significance of being a working woman and having a career, as participants felt this gave them an opportunity to influence the community and consequently change existing stereotypes:

By working in the media industry and showing people that females can have a career other than being a housewife and if they are married it still shows the commitment they make to their career and family. In addition, making family and friends aware as a media student I can do more (S4).

One participant talked about prejudices she had encountered as a media student in college and the disapproval from other Emirati students towards her and others in the same course:

I think we will shatter all these stereotypes that revolve around us, not only from the expats who know nothing about the Emirati culture but from other Emiratis who have some pretenses against Emirati media students. The field of media is a shaky one – almost everyone I know received some sort of backlash for entering the college. Yet, it has been one of the best decisions I have made during my three years at this university. Being a media student enables you with the tools to communicate to people and we can put these tools and skills into action to change the stereotypes of Emirati women and media graduates and to make it one of the top career choices amongst women, alongside CEO and HR managers (clichés) (S13).

The data also highlighted a very detailed account from one participant who made reference to the differences between culture and religion and their impact on women:

Emirati women need to know that they are not any different from the other women around. They can do whatever their heart desires as long as it is religiously acceptable, notice how I said religiously not culturally because the truth must be said and culture can be a bit limiting. Culture might say women should not interact with men but religion says that talking to men and working with them is not wrong as long as the conversations are professional and business elated. So to be religiously correct, that is what is important (S10).

Despite the challenges posed by media-related professions, participants still believed it was possible to have satisfying careers since they had developed clear insights and strategies for managing cultural sensitivities.

### 5.3.4 Cultural Expectations of Higher Education

All participants agreed that a degree contributed to the sustainable success of the UAE and were conscious of a cultural obligation to undertake higher education according to the vision of the local community. As discussed in the overview of the literature, this extended to all regions of the Emirates and all socio-economic levels. Participants were able to choose an appropriate university for their studies, as articulated below:

I was planning to go to another university, it was my choice, I made the decision, my parents didn't have any type of voice or any effect on me choosing what university to apply to. I thought the other university was not the right place for me. I saw the environment and I wasn't comfortable with it (S15).

Their parents' permission was an integral part of their decision making and impacted them throughout their university journey. Conservative families considered segregated environments a necessity for their daughters:

I knew because throughout the years, you don't go out much with your friends, I'm not allowed to go out much with friends, I'm not allowed to talk with males, my mum doesn't know the friendship I have with males. I keep it that way because I know she won't be happy about it (S18).

Segregated universities were favoured by participants due to the influence of family members. Participants believed this type of environment provided a connection to other family members who had studied in the same place. Although many initially embraced all-female institutions, changes in their own and their family's attitudes led them to believe a non-segregated university may have advantages. Some participants assumed more Emirati women entering higher education would bring about attitudinal change.

The data also examined the financial rewards of a degree, reported as insignificant by participants. In choosing a university, parents not only took into account free education versus the cost of private education, but also the university's reputation and standing:

Free education will encourage people to pursue and go through with their academic education, but it's their choice, some families prefer to send their kids

to governmental universities or colleges or some of them are willing to pay for their kids to study abroad or even in private universities and colleges. It depends on how they perceive the governmental university compared to the private university where people have to pay for their education (S20).

Cultural expectations focused participants' attention on their career choices and exposed beliefs and opinions bound by cultural sensitivity. Participants were invited to identify suitable media jobs they believed were acceptable to their families. Considering the participants were undertaking a degree in media their aspirations were naturally aligned with careers in this profession, and according to them, most media careers would be considered culturally acceptable. However, one participant highlighted specific roles that would be problematic and stated that she wanted to stay out of the spotlight. Other participants articulated while most media occupations were acceptable, it was important to consider the family's opinion, and were mindful of showing respect and upholding their reputation:

It depends on each family. My family would not approve of me being in front of a camera on TV but won't mind me being backstage. And a job that would allow me to express my creativity and apply what I have learnt in the University would be acceptable to my family. I could be a PR person, work in an advertising agency, or run a magazine (S5).

One participant expressed her concerns in the following way:

Well, everything depends on your family and their thoughts on this subject. If I were to work, for example, I would consider jobs that aren't in front of the camera and has a good time schedule. I would always balance between family and work. In my case culturally acceptable jobs would be working as anything that involves PR for an acceptable company; cigarettes, or alcohol are unacceptable (S10).

Higher education exists in a unique cultural context in the Emirates. Participants were not only mindful of their role in nation building, but also understood the benefits of graduating for themselves and their families.

## 5.4 Gender Capital

In this thesis gender capital was considered a contemporary feminist theory to articulate the complex ways in which employment of Emirati women helps shape economic development. Participants were asked to identify issues they believed influenced their active engagement in the workforce. Three themes related to gender capital were uncovered in the data analysis. The first was family influence. The data showed a clear relationship between families' attitudes and the government's mission to improve Emirati society through education for all people. However, the government's message also reinforced maintaining the traditional way of life through family structures, segregated universities and marriage. Furthermore, family influence encouraged appropriate, respectable employment to avoid damaging the reputation of women.

The second theme to emerge from the data was society impressions. Participants' comments related to the government's creation of positively viewed opportunities for females to join the workforce, and details emerged about the importance of education in developing a beneficial economy for the entire community.

The final theme in this section was personal expectations. The data described participants' gradual awareness of the benefits of graduate status in bringing about new ways of thinking about their careers and potential future contribution.

## 5.5 Family Influence

As outlined in previous sections of this chapter, family had a strong influence on participants' choices throughout their schooling and higher education. Family influence also extended to participants' choices about their careers. Respondents reported their siblings, who were undertaking secondary or tertiary education courses, were under pressure to improve their grades and levels of attainment. Community facilities in government schools were commonly used after hours as centres of education for men and women to complete their high school matriculation in order to improve their academic abilities and gain entry into graduate programs. The motive for offering free education to the Indigenous population was partly to promote gender capital, with the government assisting mature women to get back into the workforce. External influences had a direct impact on families, and communities used all their resources to promote and encourage higher education:

Emirati culture is encouraging people to complete their studies. Their first mission is to complete their studies. On TV, all the shows also encourage us to complete our studies; our rulers are encouraging us and our families also (S14).

Participants also articulated pressure from their parents to develop themselves academically for the purpose of providing gender capital. Parents who had been through tertiary education understood the importance of their children achieving the same goals. The achievements of women were acknowledged by families, although pressure remained to adhere to industries, professions and careers that were considered acceptable. While the boundaries were moving, traditional views still held sway. This was captured by one participant who said: “You can see women are everywhere. They’re in the governmental sector, they’re in the public sector, they’re in the food industry, medicine” (S21). Respondents commented on influence and pressure which translated into encouragement to take advantage of opportunities:

[Pressure comes from] the surrounding environment and from my family. I mentioned that both my parents have got university degrees, so it was more of a encouragement to go further with my education (S15).

More detailed views were expressed in the interviews by participants who said families were listening to the messages circulating in the community and encouraged them to attend segregated universities, or at the very least to maintain the tradition of becoming married:

In family terms, we don’t have many girls who go to university. Recently more families were encouraging girls to go to non-mixed ones. If you don’t go to university they have another project for you and that’s marriage. I believe a girl who goes to university is more open-minded and she drifts away from marriage and the marriage idea and she has other projects in mind (S16).

There was a strong view that men’s conservative attitudes towards working women would change, and they would gradually come to accept women as part of the workforce. Despite this development, there was an overriding sense that the culture would remain unchanged:

The culture will never change, the way of thinking, the men are going to think in a very different way. They're going to see the woman working a lot, the thinking of women will change. In the past not a lot of women worked. They stayed at home and not many women worked. Before they think that women are just at home but now it's okay to see a woman working (S17).

Participants' responses highlighted the importance of women's employment reflecting the cultural norm, and mirrored a desire to work in environments which would give them a healthy work/family life balance. Office-based work was appealing because it was considered appropriate for women, and participants favoured working in government positions which offered greater flexibility:

A job behind a desk would be best. We are not cut out for hard labor. Any job that does not require a desk would be debatable. Desk jobs would be more appropriate and most families prefer government jobs for women because their duration is shorter and therefore women can have time for her husband, children and family (S11).

Participants provided an extensive list of occupations considered appropriate for women in their age range and acceptable to their families. The expectation to contribute to society and set an example to others by taking on positions of responsibility translated into a range of occupations such as teaching, medicine and the sciences:

We can be teachers, administrators, business leaders, doctors, engineers and architects. It is what suits the woman and her capabilities. I don't think a woman should be doing hard labour, but I see her as a person in her office or someone like a leader (S12).

Employment which was previously considered inappropriate was starting to open up for women due to a shift in public approval. Participants from more liberal families appeared to have more options available to them and reported greater acceptance of women in different industries. To some extent the changes reflected a growing approval of creative occupations

once frowned upon. As society changed, a more liberal attitude was starting to emerge, allowing greater freedom in the workplace and expanded employment options to include media, media services, and other contemporary careers:

A manager, PR professional, doctor, nutritionist, dentist, artist, writer, photographer – these are all jobs that cater to what women want. Society's expectations have somewhat loosened (albeit not completely) and women are now in control of their future without external influences (S13).

Respect in reference to dress, family, traditions and culture was consistently raised as an important aspect of work and careers. The underlying premise was that acceptable work would consider the opinions and attitudes of women's families and friends, for example, deference to the family was expressed as: "Any job that gives respect for her and her family" (S2). The issue of respect was interwoven throughout responses to the questionnaire around subjects of occupation, culture and tradition, as illustrated by the following statement: "Any job that follows our traditions and cultures and does not interfere with it and respects it at the same time are acceptable" (S3). Some participants believed employment was acceptable in any sector provided the environment was compliant and there was a respectful attitude. This viewpoint emanated from opinions about the differences between working in public and private organisations:

I personally think that the case of the Emirati woman is not different than any woman in the world, what I mean is that she can work anywhere, where the place respects her culture and her nature as a woman (S9).

The differences in perspectives of suitable employment were also related to gender equality. Participants were keen to bring their traditional values to the modern working environment and create a harmonic balance between the two. They acknowledged their newfound entitlement to work in industries which were previously deemed men's work. Opportunities for careers in less conventional roles have encouraged and inspired females to make more unconventional work choices:

Anything! It's what she chooses to do and knows what is right for her, because like males we are able to do whatever they can so it does not limit us from any



job out there. I could be a plumber if I wanted to but I would choose something that matches my level of education and interests (S4).

One participant (S6) pointed out: “I think an Emirati woman has the right to work in any aspect she wants to work because culture does not differentiate between men and women now”. Even though gender equality had been established as a woman’s right, identity, reputation and family considerations were still integral to participants’ career aspirations. This was deeply rooted in needing to achieve as an individual, and at the same time, incorporate aspects of culture they held dear. As one participant stated: “Any job that will keep hold of her identity” (S8). The importance of family influence was accepted alongside a desire to establish individual identity:

Each family differs from the other, each mentality is different, so you would find a family who completely approve of their sister or daughter working in front of the camera or with men, yet you will also find families asking their daughter or sisters to work in a place that requires less interaction with men. As for me, I believe my family is fine with any environment as long as it does not harm my reputation (S10).

Perspectives of gender equality related to opportunities for incorporating traditional values into a modern working environment. Participants wanted to balance work and family commitments and have access to careers that interested them, including some less conventional roles.

## 5.6 Emirati Society Impressions

Participants considered the UAE government had created positive opportunities to assist female Emiratis become part of the workforce. They viewed education as a key catalyst in changing the career potential of female Emiratis, and described how the government had provided free education through primary, secondary and tertiary education, developed campaigns promoting women in leadership positions, and encouraged gender equality. The following quote illustrates: “The government helped by giving women free education and making them aware on how they can be a leader in the future and they showed compassion between a man and a woman” (S9). One participant explained how women had not only

benefited from education, but also a number of government initiatives designed to promote business development and assist women to enter the workforce:

They established a university and the colleges of technology for instance. They also encouraged the act of volunteering and internships. Also they developed an Emiratisation program, they have given women priority in the work force. In addition, Mohammed Bin Rashid's Young Entrepreneur competition, where more than 200 students started their own business (S10).

The initiatives referred to by these participants encompassed strategies and interventions of relevance to women. One participant stated in her opinion it was the government's inventiveness in promoting universal education and career opportunities which were impacting favourably on women: "They have provided our country with jobs and education" (S12).

Social legislation in the Emirates also had a positive effect on the empowerment of women and was identified by participants as an important aspect of gender liberation. One participant stated: "It has given women rights and privileges such as maternity leaves and other special offers to help her juggle her career and family" (S5). Women's empowerment has gradually increased across Emirati society through a broad range of government directives, with a specific emphasis on assisting women, particularly with regard to maternity provision. In all areas of the community, government decisions have advanced opportunities for women. The data showed the benefits of these programs are widely understood and valued by the community. One participant expressed the shift in gender equality in the following way: "The government has supported women financially and offered job opportunities where and whenever possible" (S4). Other participants also acknowledged new opportunities for women had been instrumental in improving their participation in work-related activities in conjunction with their education. One respondent described these advancements as achievements which were now accepted as part of women's futures:

The government helped us since we were babies by providing us with healthcare, education, houses, universities and they are responsible to provide us with jobs through the career fair that is being held every year for all companies in the UAE. They built higher institutions which are all dedicated to providing

free women's education. Step by step, areas which have been previously male dominated are now penetrated by Emirati women. Because of this more Emirati women now have a sense of hope that they too are capable of reaching high positions in the government sector and that what was not possible 5 years ago is now reality (S13).

Participants articulated adverse outcomes for non-educated individuals who fail to contribute to the economic development of the Emirates. They alluded to disapproval of those who were seen not to be upskilling themselves. Since the UAE was viewed as a Gulf country participants made comparisons with their neighbours. They considered the link between educational upliftment and economic development as pivotal to the country's success: "In our neighbouring countries, like Kuwait, females are getting more involved with the country and with the government and with all sectors available in the country itself" (S20). Having a degree was an important first step in contributing to the economic prosperity of their country:

It definitely does make a difference. The UAE is a growing country and it needs generations to progress with the development that's taking place here in the Emirates. It definitely will help me as an individual by getting a degree and having your own degree makes you more independent than others (S15).

The government's offer of inducements to promote and support business creation formed part of its efforts to encourage economic growth and development. Participants spoke about the importance of graduates working in small and medium enterprises (SME's) to advance economic expansion as reinforced by government incentives. Across the university and throughout the wider community the message was to take advantage of publicly-funded initiatives.

This country is building through business, so for business they are going to progress, they're going to make the country more known, famous. We have a corporation, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Foundation, for supporting people who want to make a business. They study the business proposal and see if it's going to progress or not, then you can have money and plan the business (S17).

Strong political attitudes in the UAE provided the impetus for women to become educated and join the workforce. All participants viewed their contribution to the country with a sense of pride, and this same patriotism was evident in conversations with all sectors of Emirati society. Participants did not only undertake higher education for personal reasons, they also held an innate view of their contribution to the growth and success of their country. As one participant remarked, national pride was on display to other nationalities to show they were a creative force to be reckoned with:

It's important. Many people are doing business like private business and even if they are financially okay, they want to support the UAE, to show people that we are creative, we are different. You're going to make a contribution (S14).

The prerogative to become educated was a central topic in the lives of the people who were constantly encouraged by their families and the government to avail themselves of the opportunities on offer. Participants understood they were able to continue their higher education overseas with costs borne by the government, and in public departments throughout the Emirates further training and development was common:

It's occurring everywhere, you can see it in newspapers, you can see it on TV, you can hear it from people, employees or relatives of the family. The country has made several efforts to help students carry on with their education, they've sent students abroad to get education and to get experience, also to hold high positions in the country. They also afford students free education at the university (S15).

Education and economic development were closely promoted to the community. Participants felt recognised by the community for their role in building the country into a successful nation. They carried this responsibility with pride and without resentment, and were enthusiastic about participating in a shared vision with the country's leaders. They saw their people becoming more educated and adding to the progress and success of their nation: "People are more educated, they realize that women have got their own role and their own right to participate in building the community and the society and the country itself" (S20).

One of the benefits of a high proportion of educated women has been increased aspirations of leadership. Respondents recognised the possibility of becoming leaders and achieving high positions in careers that could potentially impact others. They understood the need to demonstrate leadership abilities and took a proactive approach in their pursuit of leadership positions as illustrated by this quote:

By taking decisions related to their careers, also within their social life, being able to prove yourself and your ability and your skills definitely moves you forward. First of all you have to start as a follower in order to get to a leading position. It's only those who are able to become leaders and show their leadership skills who can become leaders (S21).

Initiatives promoted by federal and local government created a positive force for female empowerment. Developments in higher education and business, as well as community incentives have provided opportunities for participants to access all sectors. Moreover their ambitions to become leaders have been supported by all levels of society.

## 5.7 Personal Expectations

Participants had their own expectations of job prospects based on the value of their education. They agreed a degree was necessary for future career success, and that a career was beneficial in the UAE. These young women were comfortable with their career choices and believed they were enrolled in programs that would be helpful for their future careers. Simply graduating from high school did not provide sufficient opportunities to engage in the kind of career development they hoped for, and they recognised the value of higher education:

To graduate from high school my degree would be just high school. When I enter the workforce I can't change my position at all, my salary will remain the same and the world's changing and I'm stuck. This will affect me the way of learning and also my country really needs us to build the economy (S14).

The result of studying at tertiary level was a change in perspectives around women and their careers, which participants felt would positively impact them at work. Although their education was partly driven by personal achievement, they anticipated the new ways of

thinking they would bring to the workplace to affect their culture as a whole. This was elaborated on by participant 17:

Studying at university will change many things, experiences and I think it's going to affect the culture a lot because women study more than men. More women will work; they will think in a different way, they have positive thinking about work, the environment.

One of the outcomes of higher education was the difference participants believed women could make in modern-day industries and professions. They saw their careers as enablers for impacting their colleagues and society in general. As graduates they were confident of achieving high-level positions in the workforce and demonstrating their success and achievements:

There are significant changes, you see more locals, especially Emirati women are fluent in English language and other languages. They are doctors, executive managers and they are ambassadors, and their career is not only restricted on the governmental side of their job but there are people who go out determined to make a change. They will get people to know more about the UAE and women in the UAE. People are now acknowledging the abilities of women and their achievements (S21).

Participants' were aware of the power they had to change the perspectives of people outside the Emirates. They appreciated opportunities to work in the media and express themselves in a beneficial way for changing attitudes:

A lot of people attend the DIFF and I don't care about the money I will get from them, it's just about many people are going to see it [her film], many people around the world, the different cultures with different mindsets. They will all get one message from me (S19).

Respondents identified differences in opportunities available to them in public and private enterprises and this impacted their work choices. They believed career progression would be swifter in the private sector, but there was general consensus that the government

sector offered a more secure, empathetic environment, as expressed by participant 17: “The offers in the private sector are a lot of work but you can get to be a manager in a short time, in the government, no”. Participants commented on the advantages of family connections in securing jobs and careers in various industries. Many said they would graduate, gain work experience, and then with the help of the family, set up their own companies. Family assistance was readily available to daughters who wanted to establish their own business interests: “for now I’m thinking to work for a private PR company. I want to get experience in PR and [see] how it works” (S17). As previously mentioned, despite personal preferences, career opportunities and appropriate jobs for these media students were intrinsically bound by respect, culture and family considerations:

You can be a journalist but at the same time, you can’t do everything, things that relate to the female but at the same time you have to respect your culture, you have to respect your family, your family’s values (S20).

Personal expectations were finely balanced between individual aspirations, a desire to change attitudes and to show respect and consideration for family values. Participants had a clear vision of their future potential and were keen to find a fulfilling career.

## 5.8 Summary

This chapter captured details from participants’ responses to the questionnaire, the short questions and face-to-face interviews. The data provided rich insights into their perspectives and opinions, as well as in-depth accounts of their perspectives on cultural identity, cultural sensitivity and gender capital.

The political and ideological landscape of the United Arab Emirates is a key element in understanding the tensions and expectations Emirati women have to negotiate. The country was built on oil wealth and has undergone significant economic development to transform the lives of its citizens in the 45 years since independence. Culture, religion, heritage and tradition are at the centre of a nationalistic patriotism, reflective of a society committed to education for the benefit of its people and to establish links with an international community.

Issues which became apparent in the data related to family and culture, and emphasised the expectations of participants and their views on marriage and children.

Participants wanted financial independence within the marriage, as well as to preserve strong family relationships in order to perpetuate the core values they identified with. They had a desire to remain committed to a group identity reflective of family rights and expectations. The respondents expected the finely balanced relationship between past and present to continue due to strong traditions upheld by families and society in general. They recognised their role in helping the younger generations, both nationally and internationally, see the changing Emirati identity.

The decision to choose traditional dress, an *abaya* and *shayla*, in preference to more external conventional Westernised clothing was an issue of identity for participants, who viewed their clothing as a positive expression of individualism and means of identifying them and their country. The young women involved in this study wanted to preserve their cultural heritage through honouring their clothes, language, religion and ways of living. The unfolding social change was seen as an outcome of influences on the interactions, communication and education engaged in by women in the Emirates. Despite them being a minority Indigenous population in the UAE, participants accepted the benefits of their cosmopolitan society and viewed it as valuable and relevant to their lives. Nevertheless, even in contemporary times they were still expected to adhere to their traditions.

The extent to which participants were able to explore free thinking and challenge conservative attitudes was linked to their exposure to external influences and prevailing family viewpoints. The data showed the educational achievements of their parents were relevant to them offering first-hand support to their children. Within the Arab context of men and women's perceived gender/cultural roles, families embraced the educational opportunities provided by both the public and private sectors. The data showed attitudes were changing to a more liberal understanding of associations with males in an educational context. Great emphasis was placed on participants obtaining a degree, considered vital for progress in the UAE. Permission was required from parents and impacted on their choice of university – this influence was often ongoing throughout their educational years. Choices were partly dictated by the university's reputation, its perceived standing and likely careers. Although many participants initially embraced an all-female institution, changes in their own and their family's attitudes led them to reconsider the advantages of non-segregated universities.



Participants felt family expectations were strongly centred on their children's potential contribution to society and guidance of others by taking on positions of responsibility, provided it was in a compliant and respectful environment. More liberal families gave their daughters greater freedom to work in different industries after graduating. Participants accepted the impact of society on their job and career choices, and had a strong sense of responsibility to draw on their education to build their country. In their professional lives, leadership was perceived as enabling changed perspectives about their culture and helping to move the country forward in its social and economic development.

Participants considered the government of the UAE had created positive opportunities to help female Emiratis become part of the workforce. Education had not only benefited women, but also helped them into the work environment through several initiatives designed by the government to promote business development. A degree was seen as necessary for their future success and essential for a career in the UAE, as graduating from high school did not provide sufficient opportunities to engage in the kind of career progression participants hoped for.

The next chapter presents a discussion of the findings of the themes uncovered in this research.

## Chapter 6: The Findings

The findings from the data presented in Chapters 4 and 5 indicated a blend of personal perspectives amongst the two groups of Emirati women enrolled in an undergraduate media course in a government-funded university in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. Both chapters purposely concentrated on issues which emerged from students' combined educational and cultural experiences, and captured their views on aspects of their lives affected by traditional and contemporary factors. The two previous chapters presented details of the students' educational encounters and their feelings towards these events, together with the cultural impact of those experiences on their past, present and futures.

This chapter endeavours to develop a range of concluding findings to highlight a deeper, more detailed account of the themes in answer to the research questions. These themes are:

- The educational factors which influence young Emirati undergraduates;
- The impact of Indigenous and Western culture on young Emirati undergraduates; and
- The perspectives of personal change in a traditional society

In this chapter the facts are presented and a hypothesis advanced about their significance. Suggestions are provided to enhance future educational and social initiatives. The focus of the investigation was on how systems operate and encourage individuals to believe that achievements and success are possible (Greene, 2003). Interconnected themes and sentiments emerged from the data as evidence of the multifaceted perspectives on topics that formed part of their life experiences.

Even though participants presented with individual differences based on their educational experiences, their family and community environments, their beliefs were significantly similar in reflecting a Muslim-based authority. Prevailing socio-cultural and educational prerogatives in the UAE play a key role in the perspectives of Indigenous women in higher education. By acknowledging these factors a backdrop began to emerge against which participants' opinions were interpreted to form an understanding of the changes these women underwent in an academic environment. According to Giddens (2006), attitudes and

behaviours are impacted by societal pressure and external influences, and consequently people's decisions, so this influence had to be considered in evaluating the data.

Five main areas were examined and elaborated on to provide deeper insights and understanding of these women's feelings and outlooks. As identified in the overview of the literature, key influences were captured and further scrutinised in the survey and interviews:

- Teaching and Learning
- Change through Education
- Western Influences
- Cultural Identity
- Career Expectations

Detailed accounts of these issues are presented in the following sections.

## 6.1 Teaching and Learning

Three key issues emerged as topics for discussion under the theme of Teaching and Learning: 1) adjustment from school to university; 2) challenges in the transition from school to university; and 3) the notion of change.

Six subthemes surfaced with regard to the first key issue *adjustment from school to university*, namely: a) beneficial engagement with teachers; b) growth in participants' confidence; c) personal responsibility for their own academic success; d) the transformative nature of higher education; e) reasons for choosing a particular university; and f) the influence of English-medium schools on higher education.

The second key issue, *challenges in the transition from school to university*, generated two subthemes: a) key challenges in higher education; and b) new administrative processes and procedures.

The third key issue, *the notion of change*, raised three subthemes associated with participants' insights into their education: a) critical thinking; b) making meaning of higher education experiences; and c) re-evaluating assumptions in both personal and wider contexts.

### 6.1.1 Adjustment from School to University

According to participants the adjustment from school to university was not merely about a change in physical space. This research was consistent with the study of Reason et al. (2006) which showed how the culture of an organisation provides a harmonised structure. Participants felt the university environment created a shift in their personality which facilitated beneficial engagement with teachers. This was because the university provided an integrated, harmonised framework for their experiences and motivated positive learning engagement. This was consistent with Bumbuc and Pasca's (2011) research, which identified the importance of the teacher-learner relationship in moving beyond the confines of simply dispensing information, administering tests and allocating grades. The data revealed participants were able to be more expressive and develop academic relationships with their peers and professors. Moreover, their growing confidence led to an increased willingness to contribute to their studies, confirming Leung's (2005) hypothesis that institutions shape cultural patterns and instil particular values.

Participants commented that the subjects they studied at high school were limited and did not really reflect their interests. They talked about teaching strategies that were familiar to some and not others. In both public and private high schools, styles of teaching and gender influences produced a wide range of experiences for participants which they brought with them to university.

It was evident from the data that the media students appreciated being able to study a subject they were enthusiastic about. The issue of personal preference was a departure from rigorously enforced school curricula, and they derived a lot of satisfaction from studying topics of interest to them. Participants alluded to certain programs at school which were advantageous for their university studies, for example art, where portfolios of work could be viewed to establish their eligibility for university entry. These students appreciated the opportunity to use previously completed work to demonstrate their competency.

Active participation generated a sense of personal responsibility which impacted directly on participants' academic progress. Many experienced a shift from being motivated by external forces to a place of personal responsibility. Their eagerness to learn and be engaged in the process developed throughout their studies, as did a growing understanding of

the importance of synthesising experience and content. This was consistent with the findings of Madsen and Cook (2010), who highlighted the significance of transformative learning for UAE women.

Some participants noted differences between the rules and styles of teaching at school and university. These findings aligned with the work of Kezar and Kinzie (2006) in supporting the theory that suitable academic challenges, active shared learning, sympathetic teachers and learning support in higher education enriched the educational process.

Transformative learning was not merely confined to critical scrutiny of students' own personal assumptions, but also appeared to extend to an awareness of global issues. Previously external concerns provoked little interest, but as their general knowledge increased through exposure to external people and events, their perspectives began to shift. This transformation at university was consistent with the findings of Madsen (2009a) and Daloz (1990). All participants who entered the media faculty as undergraduates seemed to have progressed to a state of altered understanding, and consistent with Madsen and Cook's (2010) research, this reinforced the notion that a college environment increases the potential for students to be transformed through experience. Although the university was a federally-funded government institution designed to cater for Emirati women, the vast majority of participants came from private English-medium schools. It was interesting to note that participants made a conscious choice to enrol in a government institution, despite the option of other English-medium private universities.

Consistent with the findings of this study, Hu and Kuh's (2003) research showed that unlike a school environment, university provided participants with an opportunity for increased levels of engagement. From the viewpoint of students university offered a lecture-based mode of teaching focusing on courses rather than subjects and required greater personal organisation and effort. Participants' comments provided evidence of attitudinal changes, also identified by Kennedy (2002), indicating they became receptive to new modes of learning and adopted different learning styles from those they had used at school.

In choosing a university several factors were deemed important, namely family, friends and an all-female Emirati environment. The data showed participants did not believe it was important to study on a segregated campus, but when asked about the acceptability of

attending a mixed campus their comments indicated it was not considered suitable. This implied they were comfortable with a mixed environment on a personal level, yet others viewed this differently. Gender segregation was viewed by many as a barrier to communication skills with males in the work environment, but regarded by some as potentially beneficial. Respect was referenced in the context of women dealing with men in a comfortable way.

Participants believed university provided a unique opportunity to facilitate a smooth transition from school for newcomers, due to the presence of individuals who provided personal guidance. This personalised approach aligned with the expectation of treating women with respect.

The benefits of English-medium schools in terms of language skills contributed to the progress of the majority of participants' at university. In many cases it helped students complete their degree courses within the prescribed timeframe, while those who needed to acquire additional English skills had to undertake many years of additional study. Respondents who entered the English foundation program as a precursor to their undergraduate degrees commented on the value of reading for improving vocabulary, which otherwise constrained their abilities in an English academic environment. Several participants were disappointed and frustrated by having to enrol in an English foundation program, particularly when they were unable to complete because they had fallen short of the required grade. The policy of the university required all who enrolled in the English foundation program to pass an IELTS and equivalency test, and for some participants this was exasperating because it delayed their entry into undergraduate studies.

Participants educated at private English-medium high schools were optimistic about the benefits of a high school education which more closely mirrored that of higher education. However, for those who came from public Arabic-speaking high schools there was a greater disparity between the methodologies employed at school and university. Consistent with Madsen and Cook's (2010) findings, many university students faced a lack of familiarity with the strategies they needed to succeed in their fields of study. They were unable to use their initiative, could not apply techniques of discovery in their learning, and did not have the ability to utilise their creative and critical faculties. There was consensus amongst private school participants that exposure to native English speakers and an English language

curriculum had assisted them to complete their English language and undergraduate programs quickly. On the other hand, schooling in English-medium institutions with non-native speakers was considered both advantageous and difficult because of the Arabic influence. The use of Arabic by teachers to clarify was not always helpful as it led to a reliance on understanding in one language but unable to explain in the other. The data also indicated the existence of bias in favour of English-speaking non-indigenous pupils in some private schools, and there was a perspective that Emirati scholars' grades suffered due to this prejudice.

Some participants regarded their English-medium school experiences as similar to university because their classes were subject-based and pupils were allowed to move around from class to class. In this way they could interact with different groups and in several different spaces during the course of a day. Some were also taught many of the academic skills they required at university so, for example, conducting research and writing reports were not entirely unfamiliar when they transitioned to university.

### 6.1.2 Challenges of Transitioning from School to University

University was viewed as considerably more challenging than school. One challenge concerned methodologies of instruction at university, which concurs with the work of Dart, Burnett, Boulton-Lewis, Campbell, Smith and McCrindle (1999), who observed higher levels of achievement in classrooms perceived by students as having order and organisation, cohesion and goal direction. In the opinion of most participants, school was focused on working passively, solely with text books, questions and answers, quizzes and examinations; whereas university fostered active tasks and activities in the form of presentations, projects and research. Research projects at school were limited and did not offer opportunities for evaluation or critical examination, while project work at university involved collaboration and discussion with others in addition to comprehensive writing tasks.

There was general consensus amongst the respondents that the tasks and activities at university were considerably more difficult than anything they had experienced at school. However, participants who came from private schools found the mechanics of the teaching had promoted independent research, similar to the style of teaching at university.

Additional challenges, such as poor attitudes to learning, patience, persistence, and misconceptions about their English language competency emerged as issues. The English language issue was prompted by having to enter the foundation program at an intermediate level due to an English-language deficiency. This lack of academic competency was not commensurate with academic proficiency, a topic raised at the Accessing Higher Education Language Debate Forum, 2012, where the publication *Majority of Emirati Students are Unprepared for University* (2012) reported that secondary school students were ill-prepared to enter university because of a shortfall in their English-language skills. Participants commented on the need to adjust various levels of language skills development where previous methods had been supplanted by a different approach.

Progression from foundation to pre-undergraduate courses in the graduate program also posed challenges for students due to a change of focus on language skills. Several claimed that evaluation, writing, and expressing ideas and opinions were core expectations.

Participants raised the issue of having to change their previous learning style of memorising, as also outlined by Kember (2000) and Waardenburg and cited in Williamson (1987). Kember (2000) argued that memorisation can occur in conjunction with the intention to understand, and concluded students choose this way of learning because they perceive this to be the requirements of the course and assessment. He further suggested students can and do adjust to active forms of learning when they are encouraged to do so by teachers and provided with opportunities to develop these abilities.

There was a widely-held belief amongst respondents that courses, teaching styles, and intercultural communication made a significant impact on day-to-day class-work. This finding aligned with the study of De Voss, Jasken, and Hayden (2002), who articulated the need for students to become creative, not cheat, be different and identify their own ideas. Moreover, the work of Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Varner (2000) emphasised communication occurs between individuals not cultures.

Taking responsibility for administrative issues was a new experience for the majority of participants, and required a greater level of conscientiousness and attentiveness to check timing, schedules, correspondence and timetables. At school, participants were used to being reminded of deadlines, while at university they were personally accountable for managing



their obligations and responsibilities. As endorsed by Mezirow (1991) and Clark (1993), this behavioural change was part of the students' transformation. These authors suggested the mode of learning in a university environment leads students to deeper reflection and critical consciousness of their educational experience.

### 6.1.3 The Notion of Change

Regardless of previous school experiences, change was evident in the responses of all participants. University life brought with it a sense of responsibility which necessitated altered reactions. The need to adjust and change the way they communicated led participants to confront their shyness. They found the university environment more relaxed and the teachers more flexible, and consistent with the findings of Goby (2004), Jameson (2007), and Goby (2009), they realised the different experiences of their teachers had changed their own perspectives. These researchers observed students' preferences for interacting with interlocutors perceived as having positive traits.

Activities like the university's career carnival gave participants insights into entrepreneurship, professional career and leadership development. They saw the new possibilities which emerged from education as beneficial to themselves and other women and concurs with the findings of Merriam and Caffarella (1995) and Mezirow (1991), which identified adjustments when individuals are embedded in a transformational process.

The ability to think critically was confirmed by many participants as an outcome of their undergraduate programs. The research of Haidet, Morgan, O'Malley, Moran, and Richards (2004) showed the same results for active and passive student learners. While participants felt they had brought suitable skills from school to university, they were nevertheless aware of an obligation to think rather than just provide the right answers. This was echoed in the sentiments of participants when comparing their foundation and undergraduate courses. Their comments reinforced the view that focusing on language alone had prevented them from analysing problems and limited their ability to apply information in a practical way. Once they were able to analyse material for projects and assignments they could understand the value of testing assumptions in the light of new knowledge. Consistent with Hestor's research (1994) which found cognition fundamental to all learning, respondents also developed an appreciation for the diligence and adaption required for academic practice. Hestor's findings identified the need for perception and recognition, organisation, storage,

retrieval and transformation of data, as well as reasoning, in order to operate in a learning environment.

As in Mezirow's (1991) research, participants reported making meaning of their higher education experiences and gaining independence. Some claimed they had still not gained full independence despite having achieved undergraduate status. Different views were expressed by respondents, ranging from reluctance to comment to vocal criticism of the control exerted by the university which constrained their behaviour. Many considered the rules at university mirrored the workplace, including carrying an identity card, being unable to leave campus freely, needing permission to go home sick, and facing grade penalties for breaches of these conditions.

Nonetheless, many participants considered the experience of studying at university beneficial. As concluded by Merriam and Caffarella (1995), Cranton (2006), King (1997), Mezirow (2000) and Perry (2000), they believed higher education led them to review previous assumptions about themselves and the wider context. University allowed them to develop their intellectual abilities and had a positive effect on their cultural perspectives by being able to articulate their views about real-world situations. These findings agreed with the research of Heath, Street and Mills (2008).

In reviewing the data it was important to discover whether participants had experienced any incidents during the course of their higher education which caused them to re-evaluate their perspectives of the role of women in traditional Emirati society. Their comments highlighted a number of observations as their university journeys unfolded. In a tertiary environment they were exposed to business, leadership, traditional expectations, careers, emancipation and empowerment. Some acknowledged limitations. As endorsed by the research of Madsen (2009a; b), a clear link emerged between reflecting and reviewing their perceptions and their capacity for success in the workplace.

Empowerment was allied to independence and regarded as a direct consequence of higher education. Madsen and Cook (2010), Cranton (2006), King (1997), Mezirow (1991), (2000) and Perry (2000) conducted research into higher education and found it to be a vehicle for change. Participants considered their personal and families' attitudes in comparison to other students' circumstances and learned that limitations existed for some. Although

education and careers were actively supported by family members there was an implicit expectation that certain restrictions would apply to some participants' choices. Those participants who had greater personal freedom voiced an intention to pursue careers in preference to marriage.

Much of the commentary from participants underscored the value of higher education, not just as a pathway to careers but also in terms of acquiring greater insights about their world. They acknowledged a change of opinion, yet were clear about the cultural expectations they would have to consider and the limitations imposed by other factors.

## 6.2 Change through Education

This section examines the views of participants on cultural traditions in relation to their higher education experiences. It was necessary to examine the expectations and attitudes these women would uphold after their higher education, and whether their perspectives and opinions were influenced by the changes they experienced at university.

Two key issues emerged as topics for discussion in this section. They were: 1) personal growth; and 2) changing personal approaches to learning. Within these a number of subthemes of relevance surfaced.

In the *personal growth* section six subthemes came to light: a) future possibilities provided by education; b) gender segregation; c) career development and its impact on traditional roles; d) constructive criticism; e) confidence from active learning; and f) enthusiasm for subjects of study.

The second key issue, *changing personal approaches to learning*, generated nine subthemes: a) changes in personal learning styles; b) attitudes to learning; c) high school learning regimes; d) incremental change in attitudes to learning; e) repetitive style of teaching in government high schools; f) understanding skills and weaknesses; g) exposure to new tasks at university; h) education after graduation; and i) competition.

### 6.2.1 Personal Growth

Participants believed their education would provide them with numerous career possibilities and the means to achieve anything they hoped for. Gender segregation was not anticipated to be a concern for Emirati people in the future as it was considered

counterproductive in modern-day universities. The views expressed by participants were contrary to official policy, which enforced gender segregation in public secondary schools and in government colleges and universities in general. Strict rules enforce Islamic religious studies in government high schools (*International Bureau of Studies*, 2005). Many participants were used to a more liberal lifestyle, so separating them from males in their learning environment made them want to rebel against the system. Enforced segregation was viewed as a threat to their traditional culture.

The issue of gender segregation prompted participants to examine other cultures, and challenge the views and cultural perspectives presented by national advocates of their own culture. Their involvement in external programs and field trips to other parts of the globe had resulted in personal change and a shift in perceptions of national and international societies. This was consistent with Heath, Street and Mills' (2008) findings that universities sustain the needs of society by performing the necessary standardisation to reassure the public of their perpetuity.

Although participants understood the value of becoming educated, the impact of higher education on the traditional roles of wife and mother generated mixed opinions. For many this meant contact with a range of internal and external influences, and initially some opted for career development prior to marriage. Others retained a traditional outlook and chose to follow the customary role of women in Emirati society, which was to marry, start a family and develop their careers alongside their domestic responsibilities.

Attitudes and abilities underwent positive changes as participants advanced through university. Constructive criticism became essential for participants to apply their own thinking, and concurred with Mezirow's (1991) research, which found teachers were instrumental in enabling their students to make meaning from knowledge. Participants concluded their ability to think more critically had improved since school and **was/were** a direct consequence of higher education. Also consistent with the research of Madsen and Cook (2010), is that critical thinking was absent from most participants' skill sets when they entered university in the UAE. This form of enquiry was the method most employed when they were asked to synthesise theory and produce projects and assignments as part of their coursework at university. In Mezirow's (1991) research, educators were also instrumental in changing individuals' viewpoints. The overriding perspective of participants was the

requirement for critical thinking at university was far removed from the restricted modes of learning they had employed at high school.

Constructive criticism from professors was appreciated by most participants, who understood the comments were not personal but intended to improve and develop their skills. There was not however universal approval of criticism, as some students believed the negative comments which professors made were because they were Muslim.

A newfound enthusiasm was described by participants who took personal responsibility for their educational success. They accepted the need to develop skills and language proficiency essential for successful progress in their courses. Part of this inspiration came not only from a change in approaches to learning, but also a deeper realisation of the necessity to identify priorities and be more accountable. This outcome was also evident in the findings of Madsen and Cook's (2010) research, which confirmed students reconceptualised their future during their higher education. Included in this process was students' own analysis of their academic development, irrespective of the area of study they first entered into at university. In turn, this ignited their confidence to become active learners rather than relying on someone else to endorse their work, as reflected in the study by King (2003), which found assignments and activities were instrumental in transformational change in a higher educational setting. Not only were participants' learning strategies altered, but also a greater awareness instilled about their responsibility for time management, administration and proactive engagement. They realised university was a diverse organisation and required them to review old behaviours in order to be organised and successful.

Passion and enthusiasm for their subjects also fuelled a change in approaches to learning. Taking personal responsibility for their learning connected with participants' change in attitude towards their studies. Communicating with others brought about confidence and independence which led them to act responsibly. Their growing confidence altered the way they spoke, and their confidence increased as their language skills improved. For many participants, handing in assignments without reminders and intervention initiated a change in behaviour. The previous involvement of school teachers to comply with deadlines had been replaced with personal accountability at university and led to an understanding of the changes they needed to make.

### 6.2.2 Changing Personal Approaches to Learning

A change in personal approaches to learning once participants entered university was evident in the data, particularly in the way they engaged with their courses and studies. Becoming involved in group work, researching unfamiliar topics, and organising projects are some examples of the new activities they encountered. They were able to identify the kinds of activities which facilitated greater collaboration, some of which took place in the classroom, while others came from a changed perspective of what was needed. This was consistent with Cruz and Duff's (1997) findings, where academic opportunities experienced by individuals at university facilitated engagement with academic literacy. Participants accepted the demands were greater and made increased effort, shared experiences, and applied new knowledge in practical and applied formats. While not all participants identified changes in their personal approaches to learning, the majority believed many changes had occurred.

The few participants who did not believe their perspective to learning had changed insisted they only used strategies which were familiar from school and had been used successfully in the past. These students were reluctant to accept that learning at university was different, and continued to memorise information or listen to music when studying. Some were candid in their remarks about not having changed their approach to learning and expressed the view that university had allowed them to become idle. They attributed this to the types of assignments and lack of examinations which in their opinion reduced the pressure. Nevertheless, many recognised the transition from school to university had made familiar subjects considerably more difficult.

For most, discussions at university had altered assumptions about their subjects because it prompted questions and critical examination. This was consistent with the findings of Bruer (1996) and Blumenfield et al. (1997), which showed students became characterised by the communities they were part of. Personal analysis developed as a result of becoming educated at university, and was intertwined with positive change through deeper engagement with the subject matter.

School regimes were reflected upon by participants, but in the case of media students there was no specific connection to the subject itself. There was, however, an indirect association for some with a background in art, and for others, to business. For many, an organic unfolding had occurred in their thought processes along the way.

The data showed participants' attitudes towards their studying strategies had changed since they commenced higher education. They concurred the programs undertaken had made them different learners and appreciated the changes that had transpired. They acknowledged change had been incremental and would have occurred regardless of the discipline they were enrolled in. Participants considered the curriculum was one catalyst for change, as well as the different modes of teaching which provided a range of interactions to stimulate a new approach.

Participants educated in government institutions claimed they found the daily teaching repetitive, in marked contrast to the teaching they experienced at university. The academic culture within the university enabled them to connect in ways that brought about successful outcomes, and they were able to relate to new rules and processes. This insight was consistent with the research of Cruz and Duff (1997) who found learners from both public and private high schools able to progress in a new academic environment and achieve their goals. Respondents commented on their experiences in high school where the process of learning involved listening passively to their teachers and simply passing examinations, as also observed by Bleakley, Brice and Bligh (2008). They concluded more complex learning skills, such as conducting research and investigating topics, would have been useful for developing their learning potential and giving them transferable skills.

Most participants were able to identify their weaknesses and found ways to improve the skills and applications they needed. Rather than continuing with old learning habits, they regarded an awareness of their shortcomings as an opportunity to address them. Upon reflection, many recognised the skills they previously disliked (e.g. reading and writing) empowered them to express their thoughts. This phenomenon of how understanding emerges within a new context was also observed by Knain (2006). A sense of self determination arose once they were drawn into research activities and became more comfortable using their own initiative in locating information, and as a result, developed their reading and writing competence. The opportunity to contribute to discussions at university also assisted participants' understanding of the subject matter, consistent with Wortham's (2001) and Palinscar's (1998) research, which recommended discussion as a key method for forming a social cognitive perspective.

Evaluating data and information required more comprehensive reading abilities and consequently, significant improvements in the reading aptitude of many participants. They realised reading not only involved scrutinising more intricate detail, but also an ability to incorporate knowledge into their frame of reference while articulating and comprehending the concepts. Higher education placed a spotlight on the power of knowledge and the ability to find, understand and extrapolate meaning, requiring high levels of English language skills.

Participants who entered university from government high schools described their inability to deal with the required level of reading. They considered this skill one of the most critical for their new learning, as it developed their vocabulary, broadened their insights into different subject areas and provided understanding about the relevance of style, audience and purpose. Participants' perspective towards reading underwent a significant change and they began to appreciate its relevance, which had historically been of lesser value in their highly oral society.

English language skills featured as a topic for participants who believed their abilities had improved over time due to modes of teaching at university. They acknowledged university teachers' encouragement for them to take responsibility for their own learning as a significant change from what they were used to. Their comments related to high school teachers who predominantly forced them to learn, as compared with university teachers who enabled incremental changes in their attitudes, and they recognised that a gradual, subtle change had occurred.

Participants expressed different views on the perceived benefits of international English speaking teachers in high school. Those who attended government high schools had no direct contact with native English-speaking teachers until they entered university, but quickly became familiar with this situation once they enrolled in higher education programs. As discussed in the overview of the literature chapter, English (2003) observed the same trend. While this influence appeared to have varying effects on participants, they nevertheless reported favourable outcomes on their learning experiences due to the intervention of university teachers, particularly when tutors identified problems or deficits which were subsequently addressed.



Memorisation was commented on by participants with a view that it was more valuable to understand and have a deeper perspective than being able to regurgitate rote answers. Memorising all types of information had been a longstanding learning strategy for Emirati students, which in many ways fitted with an established tradition promoted by some high schools. Consistent with the findings of Bumbuc and Pasca (2011), university education provided participants with opportunities to look beyond “being right” to an outcome-based approach (Madsen, 2009b). Memorisation soon became obsolete once participants were presented with more creative and resourceful options for learning, since they promoted connecting with various sources as a means of uncovering information to complete projects and assignments. Participants admitted they became more comfortable to ask questions, consult with friends and teachers, and more actively pursue knowledge.

The data showed a significant shift in participants’ perspectives from high school to university. The tasks they engaged in at university encouraged them to share ideas and collaborate in ways they had not done before. Consistent with the research of Bumbuc and Pasca (2011), the influence of university teachers came from their own personal experiences of teaching, and related to seeking information, applying new knowledge and conducting critical analyses. For the students, these skills surfaced as changed ways of learning. Furthermore, participants claimed the type of teaching they encountered at school was determined to some extent by the ability of the group they were placed in. Some saw their peers acquire academic skills they themselves did not have the opportunity to learn, for example essay writing, and this proved to be difficult for them at university.

Significantly, a large number of participants planned to continue their education after graduating, consistent with the research of Nashif (2000), Salloum (2003), and Whiteoak et al. (2006). They believed further education would be beneficial for their futures, as also established by Whiteoak, Crawford and Mapstone (2006), who noted the active promotion of higher education for women in the UAE.

Competition was an unexpected issue to emerge from the data. Some participants felt individuals became overtly competitive, seemingly because students across a wide range of ages, education, life experience and subject background were enrolled in the same classes.

### 6.2.3 Western Influences

The influence of Western educational philosophies has been steadily growing in the Emirates since 1963, possibly driven by a desire of the expatriate population for an equivalent standard of education for their children. After the advent of Western schools, universities followed the trend and currently provide a wide range of Western and local options. Even though the university in this study was a federally-funded establishment with one of the highest reputations for its English speaking, Western educated academics, the student population was comprised of Arabic speaking women.

Four key issues emerged from discussions about Western influences. These were: 1) Western education approaches; 2) dress code; 3) relational learning; and 4) dynamic learning environment. Within these a number of subthemes surfaced with particular relevance to participants' perspectives.

In the *Western education approaches* section eight subthemes were evident: a) key Western foundation skills; b) English grounding in early education; c) native English-language teachers; d) public Arabic-speaking high schools; e) private schools and active teaching styles; f) variations in private and public schools; g) cultural understanding; and h) cultural transactions between educators and students.

The second key issue, *dress code*, generated three subthemes: a) Emirati dress code; b) covering and veiling; and c) Emirati dress and fashion.

The third key issue, *relational learning*, highlighted four subthemes: a) insights into critical thinking; b) creating meaning of higher education; c) the effect of a) and b) on perspectives of independence; and d) re-evaluating assumptions.

The final key issue, *dynamic learning environment*, identified four subthemes: a) influence of international academics; b) involvement with professionals and external events; c) identifying weaknesses; and d) holistic change.

### 6.2.4 Western Education Approaches

Participants regarded certain key skills underpinned by a Western educational philosophy, like problem solving, leadership strategies and project management, also provided skills of personal value. Exposure to educational skills training at school based on a

Western approach gave some participants an advantage when they transitioned to university. This view was supported by Bumbuc and Pasca (2011) who found students brought with them their own personal histories as learners. Their research highlighted the roles and responsibilities of teachers in changing students' perspectives on learning.

Some parents chose a partial grounding in English for their children by sending them to an English-medium school for a portion of their early education. They favoured an arrangement whereby girls educated at primary school were later transferred to government high school with an Arabic curriculum. As young children, their instruction was thought to develop their English language skills before moving on to a conservative, segregated environment as they matured. The added benefit of this arrangement was to have some experience of Western educational influences.

This schooling arrangement unearthed two findings. The first was that high school with all-female staff was easier for participants because they were shy. According to the cultural norm, communicating with female teachers is less difficult and culturally more appropriate as they mature. The second finding was that parents believed they were providing a good foundation for their children's future education, yet the benefits of having good English language skills proved problematic when participants entered Arabic schools. They found their English-language competency was more advanced than other students in their class and declined over time, as no real effort was made to consolidate the skills they had brought with them.

Participants understood the value of an English-medium school education. Specifically, native English speaking teachers were influential in their attitudes to education due to the way they presented information and designed activities to promote critical thinking. Participants went on to say they appreciated other language educators, for instance French, who brought a vibrancy to their teaching. It was clear that native (mainly English-speaking) teachers at all stages of their education influenced perspectives and framed students' attitudes. As contended by Morris (2005) who noted teachers from Western countries embedded their culture into learning situations, teachers transferred external influences through their teaching methodologies. Participants recognised that engagement with Western teachers and the manner in which they taught were enablers for reassessing their own attitudes about education.

On the other hand, the experiences of participants educated in government Arabic-speaking institutions were characterised by curriculum subjects (History, Sciences and Mathematics) delivered in their native Arabic language. Their exposure to English was limited to English lessons. Meanwhile, women who had been schooled in private institutions were only exposed to Arabic in Islamic and Arabic language studies, and these participants perceived the status of Arabic language in the curriculum as less important than other subjects. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of undergraduate participants at the university under study came from a private education. For them the advantage of having all curriculum subjects taught in English was further enhanced by the benefits of the style of teaching they were exposed to, the broader range of subjects offered, and development of their own personal approaches to study. The work of Madsen and Cook (2010) is consistent with this finding in supporting the theory that teachers with previous educational experiences provide their students with an understanding of their outlook on education.

It was apparent from the data that participants who came from private schools had experienced more active styles of teaching through hands-on engagement with subjects such as physics and chemistry in laboratories. They concluded this was a far superior way of learning than simply observing and memorising information in advance of examinations. Likewise, private schools offered an assortment of subjects, in addition to community and external activities. Such diverse forums for learning gave participants opportunities to develop initiative, leadership and enquiring attitudes. Respondents felt student-led initiatives, supported and guided by teachers as mentors, were of particular benefit at university.

Participants believed strong Emirati representation in private schools was necessary to counteract the influence of other nationalities. The benefits of Western education were clearly understood, provided appropriate and acceptable Emirati cultural imperatives were also present.

Insights into participants' perspectives of the differences between private and public schools were evident from their conversations with and observations of family members. Since Emirati culture is based on extended family connections it was unsurprising to hear references to other relatives' education. Sisters, cousins and aunts were vocal about their experiences and judgements of their schooling. Perceived differences included private schools' enablement of active learning, their encouragement to participate with confidence,

and the opportunities they offered for accessing information largely censored in public schools. These insights increased awareness of a closer alignment between private school education and higher education.

The value of the human element in promoting cultural understanding cannot be underestimated. Intricate bonds had clearly developed between the participants and their teachers at university, leading them to believe their educators understood the cultural nuances of their lives. This was also noted by Saafin (2008) who found students responded to a rapport with their teachers that mirrored a warm family atmosphere. They appreciated teachers who went above and beyond mere instruction and made an effort to understand the culture, heritage and traditions of the Emirati people.

The circumstances outlined by Jameson (2007) illustrate how transaction culture is beneficial for both international educators and students, particularly when teachers draw on the host country's culture as an educational resource. Interactions between students and their instructors straddle formalised education practice and personal relationships and cross cultural, religious and political boundaries. The outcome from these cultural transactions is extremely positive for participants who find it useful for changing perspectives. Even when students and teachers opinions differed in this study, the result was a surprising change in perspectives. This concurred with Reinsch and Turner's research (2006) which reported on interpersonal communication between one person and another as an active phenomenon for creating messages in a multicultural setting.

#### 6.2.5 Dress Code

Considerable details have been provided in earlier chapters about the dress code of Arabic women, regarded by many as a sign of female subjugation and lack of personal freedom. It would be fair to say that in some countries this may well be the case. However, participants' opinions were somewhat different. According to them it is an outward reflection of patriotism and a visible demonstration of their religious beliefs.

Wearing an *abaya* and *shayla* comes down to a conscious individual choice. However, a key reason for wearing these garments is also concerned with modesty and upholding the reputation of the family, appropriate in such a closely knit society. This was supported by the findings of Harik and Marston (2003) which showed the veiling of Muslim

women to be a personal decision. Participants adhered to a conservative dress code both on and off campus. They presented in a range of coverings, from totally covered faces with only the eyes exposed, to a tightly arranged *shayla* covering the whole head and hair, and a lighter *shayla* which exposed some hair. Traditionally an *abaya* is a black garment covering the body from neck to feet, generally closed (fastened), so that any clothing underneath is invisible. In more recent times an open *abaya* covers the body but has a small open portion at the lower end of the garment. For uninitiated Westerners these subtle differences may seem insignificant, but they are important for Emirati women, and a teacher's interest in traditional dress was interpreted as a demonstration of respect for their culture.

Traditional female Emirati dress comprises two components. First, there is the outer garment, the *abaya*, which is a floor-length, black (coat like) covering, and then there is the *galabeya*, which is a long-sleeved, floor-length loose-fitting dress worn underneath the *abaya*. The data indicated participants had moved away from wearing the *galabeya*. Some of them preferred to wear contemporary fashionable clothing under the *abaya*, and given the array of international shops and retail outlets in the Emirates, it was not surprising that they considered being fashionable an important part of their lifestyle. Furthermore, the influence of travel, television and film and social media, as well as high disposable incomes has affected young Emirati women's style of dress beneath their black *abaya*. For Westerners, the day-to-day familiarity of such iconic clothes became normalised within the university setting.

Over the past few years the black *abaya* has been adapted into a fashionable outer garment with colour, embellishments and trimmings, personalised to the wearer and reflective of their individual style. On visits to other countries as part of their university courses the women believed it was important to wear an *abaya* in order to represent their culture and pride in being a modern Emirati woman. Bartkowski and Read's (2003) research argued this behaviour was helpful for Muslim women to adjust to social situations.

### 6.2.6 Relational Learning

Participants were asked to reflect on how teaching at university had impacted them to become successful learners. The data showed the majority of participants valued interactions with certain professors and they were prepared to adjust their thinking to succeed at university, claiming their educators had altered their perspectives. This was consistent with Shulman's (2000) research, which concluded Western teachers used contemporary strategies

of dialogue, conversation and verbal exchanges to stimulate a change in mindset. However, this Westernised style of debate did not challenge the family's authority or participants' core values.

Coursework tasks, whereby students negotiated differences of opinion and sought consensus, were devised by university lecturers to stimulate group discussions. This concurred with Tobin, Tippins and Gallard's (1994) research, which confirmed the importance of peer-to-peer interactions for students to reconsider their views. Whether activities were organised around groups or pairs, participants felt a shared sense of responsibility for their combined endeavours which allowed them to access peer support and depend on other individuals for completing assignments. Increased levels of engagement were also referred to as a result of working with other women on course tasks. Interacting with others who demonstrated effort and commitment helped them to engage in a similar fashion and promoted a change in their attitude to education.

Levels of formality with teachers were determined by the personalities of teachers, regardless of whether they were male or female or in a particular institutional setting. Personal relationships between students and educators were part of daily transactions and had the potential to be friendly and informal or impersonal and functional. Wang's (2007) research supported the notion that teachers could provide settings for personal transactions where students were likely to discover oppositional forces, new ideologies or alternative thought processes. Given that Emirati students appreciated relationships built on a sense of caring, the participants in this study appeared to welcome professors who focused on their interests and welfare, rather than simply dispensing their professional services.

Professional, formal relationships with male teachers were considered acceptable because it was in the context of an academic setting. In the early school years when young pupils merely followed instructions, relationships were considered to be formal, and as time went by a more relaxed attitude developed. Participants concluded school teachers were able to grade them more easily because teaching at school was clear, formal and prescriptive.

Participants who came from private English-language schools appreciated formal relationships with male teachers. They claimed their interactions with male and female teachers at school included more in-depth communication than at university. Nevertheless,

participants felt the same level of formality existed between themselves and their professors. Professional, businesslike interactions with males were acceptable at university, where discussions and conversations of an academic nature were seen as part of their journey.

Respondents from private English-medium high schools viewed the links they formed with male teachers no differently from their dealings with male teachers at university. Those who had been schooled in a private school environment claimed the interactions with male and female teachers had more in-depth communication. In a general sense, these previous interactions were viewed as positive preparation for university life because of the professional relationships that developed. When they enrolled at university their relationships with male teachers were different because of the new academic environment. Participants taught by male school teachers felt formal dealings at school and university was familiar and did not cause them any disquiet. They were able to draw on the experience of previous encounters and consequently had less difficulty interacting with males. Given the differentiated attitudes towards men and women in the Emirates, for participants who came from public high school the experience of having a male teacher was a new occurrence. The findings suggest those participants for whom this was a new experience underwent a change of attitude, while for others, being taught by males was of no consequence. Students educated in private schools did not notice any difference in the way they were treated by male professors.

Another aspect participants commented on concerned variances between their relationships with teachers at high school and university. The data indicated their high school teachers were more welcoming and willing to help navigate problems for their pupils. These attributes were far less evident at university and more likely to be dependent on individual faculty members, and participants confirmed relationships were reliant on individual academic traits. They considered positive characteristics displayed by faculty as helpful for encouraging flexibility in their relationships with academics.

Participants from private English-medium schools explained although teaching processes were similar at school and university, the relationships with their school and university teachers were different. One reason for this was the amount of continuous time spent with their school teachers as compared with class participation at university. A major topic of discussion was the different attitudes of Western educated teachers at university, who



for example, gave students greater freedom to express themselves and contribute to the group. Participants found their university professors encouraged them to be more vocal, express their own opinions and put forward new ideas with confidence. As a result of their newfound freedom they began to change their perspectives through lively, yet respectful debate and involvement. This concurred with the work of Means, Myers and Bharadwaj (2007) and Bryson and Hand (2007) who found teachers' responsiveness to their students facilitated their willingness to articulate their opinions.

Participants talked about an expectation of respect towards their teachers in public high school, demonstrated by not speaking out or challenging teachers in any way. As a result students remained passive and accepted whatever they were told – very different conditions from those they encountered at university. Respondents even observed differences between nationalities, for example Americans were viewed as less formal than British teachers.

Gender socialisation was evident where female students and male teachers engaged in a professional teaching relationship. The ability for female students to interact with male teachers was considered beneficial for their future educational development, and was supported by Bouhidiba (1977) who anticipated these interactions would close the male/female divide. Gender boundaries were maintained because it was the expected norm in this particular higher education institution.

For participants who were schooled in institutions with a male presence, familiarity with male educators was normal and therefore did not change their opinions and perspectives. However, other participants commented on exchanges with unrelated males which changed their feelings about dealing with men who were not family members. They began to recognise the implications of interacting with men in workplace situations and pointed out the religious acceptability of talking to men in professional, business settings. In their opinion, religion prevailed over culture and this cultural expectation would fade away in time.

University educators were considered extremely strict, especially female teachers, while their male counterparts were viewed as serious but more likely to be “fun” when appropriate. Participants were expected to adhere to strict deadlines for assignments and were not permitted any leeway. Respondents who had attended private high schools reported male teachers were more flexible about homework and assignment deadlines than female teachers.

For shy participants communication with male academics appeared to normalise once interactions became part of their daily routine and they became more comfortable. Those who were unfamiliar with male teachers gradually gained confidence and relaxed as they engaged in conversations with their male professors and glimpsed a fun attitude over time. They began to see an entwined personal and professional connection, and as a result it became easier for these women to engage with unrelated males at university. The interviews confirmed a shift in interactions with male tutors happened very quickly once participants realised this was part of their educational experience.

Being shy in the classroom was raised in discussion with the respondents. They felt it was not necessarily due to a personality issue, but rather a lack of English language skills to express themselves. Some participants associated shyness with unpleasant memories, when being unable to introduce themselves in English as a new member of their university class caused them huge embarrassment.

Respondents articulated independence and accepting responsibility at university as neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to formal relationships with their teachers. They recognised and took responsibility for their own personal, individual study achievements.

#### 6.2.7 Dynamic Learning Environment

One influence of particular significance at university was teachers from other parts of the world who radically affected students' perspectives and outlooks. Umbach and Wawrzynski's (2005) research endorsed this international influence on changing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours for enabling students to view situations and information from a more open-minded viewpoint. Transferring knowledge was not the only aspect of participants' higher education to undergo a transformation. The implicit cultural nuances embedded in the teaching styles they encountered also conveyed subtle details, aspirations and possibilities for their futures. Participants agreed they had been persuaded to evaluate their opinions as a result of contact with people from other cultures and this led to new ways of thinking. Being with international educators from all over the world, particularly Westernised countries, inspired participants to learn more about other cultures and fostered an interest in new places and traditions.

Exposure to external stimuli while studying also enabled dynamic learning developments through participants' involvement with other professionals and events. A number of them reflected on their attendance at conferences and humanitarian programs, and were able to identify certain academics who had effected a change in their perspectives. This was not simply about the professors themselves, but also about the participants' enthusiasm for their subject and learning because of interaction with their teachers. Teaching in an interesting way and introducing new activities, for example blogging and active discussions, appeared to provide the mechanism for change. Participants commented on these methods helping to generate thought-provoking insights, while conference attendance, either as volunteers or contributors, added a new dimension to their experience through interactions with external parties.

Educators who were prepared to work with their students to identify weaknesses were instrumental in changing modes of learning, as students began to recognise this was leading to successful outcomes. Reason, Terenzi and Domingo's (2006) research endorsed educators' support of their students' academic performance as a significant factor in improving their abilities. Isolating an academic problem in this way contributed to a change in students' perspectives and fostered positive relationships between students and teachers. Regardless of the positive comments, it is important to acknowledge that participants viewed their total university experience as the catalyst for change, rather than just one particular event or person.

In essence, the university's adoption of Westernised educational strategies gave participants opportunities to form many different associations and facilitated their growth and development through interactions with professionals on and off campus.

### 6.3 Cultural Identity

A broad range of cultural influences culminated in changed perspectives and opinions for the Emirati students in this study. The power and authority exerted by their families was a significant factor, and coupled with the vision of UAE rulers (past and present), strongly influenced their views on cultural identity. A great sense of pride was articulated by participants about the physical transformation that has occurred in the UAE, and their knowledge of events was obtained from first-hand conversations with immediate family members who had witnessed the changes.

Nevertheless, the underlying position was that certain characteristics, such as wearing traditional clothes, speaking their mother tongue, retaining their style of living and practising their religion, presented their cultural identity to others.

Five key issues emerged as topics of discussion in the *Cultural Identity* section: 1) family and education; 2) women in society; 3) family influences; 4) workforce; and 5) society. Within these a number of subthemes of particular relevance surfaced.

In the *family and education* section four points were evident: a) selecting a university; b) the significance of graduate status; c) intergenerational education; and d) family influence.

The second key issue, *women in society*, generated two points: a) leadership aspirations; and b) negative stereotypes.

The third key issue, *family issues*, raised six points: a) the influence of fathers; b) achieving a degree as essential to the family; c) preservation of the family; d) not continuing higher education; e) freedom of movement; and f) permission from families.

The next key issue, *workforce*, identified nine points: a) working in the media industry; b) Emirati nationality for access to jobs; c) preserving Emirati customs; d) cultural identity; e) connections with international businesses; f) job options in the media; g) influencing policy makers; h) business opportunities; and i) competition with males.

The final key issue, *society*, brought four points to light: a) group identity; b) liberalising Emirati views; c) potential for female liberation; and d) financial benefits of a degree.

### 6.3.1 Family and Education

Selecting a suitable university was paramount for maximising higher education. Participants were able to choose from public or private higher education providers, some of which followed a profit-making model, several were affiliated to parent institutions in other countries, others were comprised of mixed-gender campuses with a multinational population, and many delivered courses in English. The influence of parents and husbands led participants to choose a comfortable environment which resembled their home settings. Nevertheless, they needed permission from their family to endorse their choice of university and were careful about factoring consent into their decision making.

Segregation was a significant consideration for many conservative families, and in order to maintain respectfulness, women were mindful of this when making decisions about their choice of university. Selecting a segregated university was favoured because there was immediate support for this choice from other relatives. Shared insights and informal conversations between family members reassured participants of the convenience of studying at segregated universities which was familiar territory in terms of administrative processes and procedures.

Many participants acknowledged their families were instrumental in persuading them to attend a segregated university due to tradition, and protected them from coming into contact with unrelated males. A mixed university was unsuitable and inappropriate for many families, as evidenced by Crabtree's (2007) research, which found families upheld strict codes of gendered conduct befitting the family honour. Potential friendships with males in a place of learning were frowned upon. Nevertheless, participants expressed a willingness to talk to males and were clear about the parameters of such encounters, concluding that they could maintain a friendship but a relationship could be problematic. In reflecting on their time spent at university, respondents believed it was not necessarily a good idea to be in a gender-specific environment because it did not prepare them for professional relationships with men in the workplace.

Financial implications were also relevant to decisions about university selection. The women were not averse to considering private institutions for higher learning, and were inclined to compare a variety of options before making a final choice.

Today many more Emirati women have completed higher education, and it was interesting to examine whether graduate status had any significant impact on familial attitudes to marriage. The students in this research wanted to marry educated men. Equally, comments about their family's wishes indicated an educated husband was the preferred choice. However, as far as graduate women were concerned, having a degree was viewed as neither an advantage nor disadvantage for marital success.

Issues of marriage, children and roles in society were critical elements of this research, with the underlying purpose of examining whether modern educational curricula could influence widespread social change. The data showed participants believed they would

maintain their traditional culture. They planned to marry, have children and become caretakers for their families, which was consistent with Harfoush-Strickland's research (1966) in which higher education was bound by the religious and cultural beliefs of the society within which the females lived. This prospect was no different from previous generations of Emirati women. Being an educated modern-day female with career potential and the ability to become financially independent seemed to have little impact on changing the traditional aspirations of participants in this research. The influences identified by Crabtree (2007) in the overview of the literature chapter were consistent with parents' considerable attachment to the marriage of their children and having children of their own, considered a vital part of their futures and a common role for women. However, despite being desirable for the single participants in this study, the research of Mohammed (2014) noted that having children had been delayed for some graduates who wanted to pursue a career.

In Emirati marriages, the husband takes on the authoritative role, however women exert significant power within the home. The respondents confirmed this type of arrangement aligned with their own experiences and expectations based on their religious upbringing, and recognised their husbands would provide for the family financially. This concurred with Joseph's (1996) study which highlighted the role of men in providing financial support in traditional Arab families. Participants stated their financial independence meant they were permitted to keep their earnings for themselves, as referenced in their religious teachings. At the other end of the spectrum divorce raised concerns for respondents, and their opinions reflected those of the community. Some intended to focus more on their career and less on marriage because of the potential difficulties posed by divorce.

Family expectations can be construed as intergenerational and dynamic depending on the education and experiences of the family group. Heritage and tradition however, are far more consistent with cultural ideology. Even though the participants in this research comprised single and married women from different parts of the Emirates and of varying ages, their opinions indicated very similar sensitivities to marriage and children. Married participants articulated the benefits of higher education and reported receiving encouragement from their husbands. They were inherently thoughtful towards their husbands who were also completing school and higher education courses, and it was evident that they appreciated their husbands' efforts to improve their financial standing.

Despite university providing a forum for personal development, being a mother was an ever-present consideration for participants. They understood their duty to fulfil this role, not just for individual and familial reasons, but also to raise children who would perpetuate their culture. Passing on their traditions and values to the next generation was echoed by all participants, who realised the potential to achieve their own personal goals, and at the same time, preserve their cultural traditions by honouring the expected customs of becoming a wife and mother. This was also present in the work of Madsen and Cook (2010), who found the women in UAE society had more options than ever before to redefine their philosophical limitations.

In addition to achieving a degree, being a wife and mother was viewed as living in a respectful manner, as it allowed women to simultaneously exemplify their cultural identity and fulfil their educational promise. Respect and reputation are regarded as universal values and the essence of acceptable behaviour is intrinsically woven into the fabric of this society. Consistent with these findings, Salama's (2004) research showed being an educated woman is a finely balanced arrangement between patriarchal structures and strong family allegiances on one hand, and self-development on the other, referred to by Arab leaders as meritocracy and individualism. Attending university and becoming educated was an external validation of these women's respectability in the widest sense.

Politeness was another highly valued attribute considered by participants as an essential trait. It was not only extended to family members, but particularly to strangers, and was said to be part of Emirati culture. Therefore, participants worked hard at university to find the right balance between being actively engaged as a student and remaining polite in their conduct.

Family influence also extended to students' option of pursuing higher education overseas, particularly with regard to the constraints of living alone in a foreign country. As reflected in the research of Mahdi (2003), conservative Muslim families often imposed female chaperones on unmarried women in order to protect their reputations. Many families want to maintain a presence while their daughters study in a non-Muslim environment, although depending on family attitudes, some may be allowed to leave the Emirates, provided ongoing links are in place for effective support.

### 6.3.2 Women in Society

Leadership was a major theme in this study and generated positive comments from participants who looked forward to contributing to society by taking up decision-making roles. Throughout the Emirates promotion of women as leaders has been embraced with enthusiasm, and the notion of women in leadership positions across various sectors is now widely accepted. The image of female leaders in traditional clothing is as much a symbol of their Indigenous culture as it is a part of their identity, and participants felt strongly that a woman's external dress represented their distinctiveness. This was not just viewed as a personal expression of identity, but also a visible sign to the wider world of who they are. Their identity could be maintained by wearing the traditional outer dress as leaders in a globalised world where interactions with others from different ethnic backgrounds is part of working life. It was viewed as their way of combining expressions of individuality and non-conformity, and while wearing an *abaya* set them apart from non-nationals wearing traditional clothes, it also allowed them to preserve the traditional identity of their people. Despite comments from others who claimed covering was a form of subjugation, they believed it was fundamental to maintaining a respectful, conservative image. Setting themselves apart from others was not seen in a negative light, but rather as a noble and honourable custom. Participants' views did not include any remarks indicating that their coverings were an outward sign of subjugation or limitation. In fact, in relation to leadership they felt wearing an *abaya* would facilitate greater achievements by demonstrating a sense of pride and preservation of their Emirati culture.

Finding new ways to balance personal and community responsibilities with career ambitions in a positive way was a common theme raised by participants. They understood the magnitude of taking on leadership roles in both the public and private sectors, with the goal of creating new prospects, while at the same time maintaining and preserving their cultural identity. They felt confident about their capacity to grow as individuals and concluded young women in the Emirates had become increasingly outgoing and predisposed to socialising with other ethnic groups.

Participants challenged negative media hype and were eager to share their contemporary ideas to change conventional stereotypes. Adjustments to their clothing underscored a flexible attitude in adopting non-traditional styles of dress. When on vacation



or attending overseas conferences they adjusted their clothing to suit the environment and presented a carefully blended image of themselves that was both appropriate for the setting and reflected their Emirati traditions. Participants believed despite their small role in representing Emirati culture, it was nevertheless possible to exemplify their country, uphold standards and not compromise too much when balancing all these demands.

The stereotype of Muslim women portrayed in the media was of significant concern. Harik and Marston's (2003) research endorsed the fear of criticism from others and potential family dishonour, leading individuals to make less contentious career choices. It was hoped that as media professionals participants would gain approval from society, and they were optimistic about choosing professional roles which conformed to their religious, rather than cultural imperatives. Perspectives about the kinds of work deemed acceptable by conservative society were more closely aligned with traditional sensitivities. However, many participants saw their career specialism in media as an opportunity to change unfavourable cultural stereotypes.

Covering their hair generated discussion because of the complex issues around traditional clothing. The consensus was that covering their hair was a religious, not a cultural tradition, and they explained it was permissible to uncover their hair in the family home around fathers, brothers and uncles, but not male cousins. The reason for this was related to the custom of marrying a cousin, a valid, traditional practice amongst Emirati families. Other remarks about covering or not covering the hair related to travelling outside the Emirates and was considered a personal decision for some but not for others.

### 6.3.3 Family Influences

In a patriarchal society such as the UAE, it is not surprising for fathers to exert a strong influence over their daughters when it comes to their education. This was consistent with the research of Williams et al. (2013) who reported the influence of fathers on their daughters' choices of careers, thereby consolidating the traditional patriarchal relationship. Participants confirmed their fathers considered it important to be educated.

The authority of fathers over their daughters was supported by Hale's (2001) research which endorsed historical patriarchy and caused difficulties for women to challenge. The family background of participants in this study revealed a correlation between the academic

achievements of their parents, and where one or both parents had graduated there was a noteworthy endorsement of higher education. Fathers also played a prominent role in guiding their daughters' choice of subject specialism by actively monitoring the changes occurring in society so they could advise of new, future developments. Familial and societal expectations in the UAE fused into a collective consciousness which cast a clear message about the importance of graduating. Emphasis was not only placed on the personal benefits of attaining a degree but also on the need for citizens to show commitment to the development of the country.

Participants stated achieving a degree was essential to the family. They all commented on the support and encouragement they received and there was a pervasive attitude that higher education was available to all in the family. Of particular interest was the value placed on graduation and the perceived benefits beyond career opportunities. A number of participants felt having a degree would assist them in attracting a more educated husband, and for families who wanted their daughter to marry well, education enhanced this likelihood.

Preservation of the family is a mainstay of Emirati life, and in this sense education for women was strongly supported and encouraged by the family. All participants confirmed this was aligned with their own experience. Higher education was encouraged for all children and it was evident from the data that older siblings who had graduated strengthened perspectives towards higher education for younger children. Family size was not seen as a limitation for sons or daughters, and regardless of how many individuals lived in the family home there was an implicit understanding that higher education would be supported equally for everyone. Despite the often large, busy, noisy households, quiet spaces were made available for children to study without distraction, and financial constraints or scarce resources were never barriers to young women committing themselves to a university education. Moreover, the family actively promoted postgraduate studies in acknowledgement of the power of knowledge, viewed as a key component in developing the nation's people and economic growth. The educational achievements of the participants' parents served as a blueprint for future success and provided first-hand endorsement of the value of higher education. Respondents acknowledged the considerable influence of educated parents on their own choices around education. Traditionally fathers were better educated than mothers, as

endorsed by Madsen and Cook's (2010) research, which showed men in the Emirates historically had greater access to education and a wider range of employment opportunities.

Some participants had decided to conclude their higher education once they graduated because of the length of time it had taken them to complete their studies. One reason for this was having to spend many years improving their English-language skills in foundation courses before entering college, which made them reluctant to further their education.

As participants progressed through their education at university, several commented on the personal changes they encountered, specifically in relation to their freedom of movement. Cultural sensitivity towards adolescent girls manifested in increased protection and careful monitoring of their whereabouts. Levels of constraint varied from family to family, but young women were rarely permitted to behave freely within their homes and communities. For many parents the university campus was considered an extension of their homes, and so scrutiny of their children aligned with their views and those of the community. The positive changes which occurred as a result of higher education included a shift in personal freedom, even though they required permission from husbands and family. None of the details in the data identified any controversial or problematic issues for participants, who accepted these conditions as standard. Some however felt changes were necessary at university to allow more freedom.

Travel was a factor for women who attended the campus in Dubai, the venue which accommodated students from the city of Dubai, and all other Emirates except for Abu Dhabi. Participants who lived in Dubai had a relatively short bus journey, while for those in the Northern Emirates a long bus journey was involved with pick-ups from homes early in the morning and drop-offs late in the evening. Respondents who did not drive had combined travel and study time for an average of twelve hours a day. Public transport was confined to bus services which was not a consideration, partly because of familial attitudes and also because participants did not use public buses. A fleet of private, small-capacity buses was therefore deployed in areas to collect and return participants on a daily basis. On a practical level this arrangement allowed participants to engage in their studies, and from a family perspective it ensured their safe passage to and from university without any diversions. Arrival at 8 am brought all students together who either did not drive or did not have a driver or family member to bring them to the campus, and created a queue for registering at

security. The same process occurred at 4 pm in the form of a mass exodus of individuals from campus. These regimented, prescriptive movements from home to university and back enabled students to be monitored, and maintained control over the student population, who were being encouraged to become independent and free thinking on the one hand, yet did not have the freedom to go where they pleased on the other. Some participants regarded this as oppressive while others viewed it as a normal part of their lives. The ability to drive was seen by participants as a measure of independence and meant their studies could be adapted into a more flexible daily regime. The downside of driving was that the long, well-constructed desert highways could involve lonely journeys through isolated parts of the country. This was of concern to families as the women were vulnerable in remote regions, and the participants themselves acknowledged potential issues associated with driving alone. In general though, the Emirates is a safe environment, particularly for Indigenous women, and the chance of anything untoward happening is unlikely. Nevertheless, there is an inherent need to protect women from travelling unaccompanied, which traditionally is not an acceptable option.

Male presence played an overarching role in the lives of both married and single women at university and was inextricably linked to permission to leave campus. Students carried an identity card, used for registration, and there was a system in place requiring them to gain consent to leave. This arrangement incorporated a number of individual agreements between single women and male family members, and was discussed in Sakr's (2002) research, which reported on the legal authority of male guardians to decide whether a woman may work, travel or marry. Participants with permission to leave the university could do so, but others would leave without approval and behave in a manner that was regarded as disrespectful. These attitudes of permission and respect are significant in Emirati culture and many participants were of the opinion that the younger generation was challenging these norms.

#### 6.3.4 Workforce

The need to build an educated workforce in the UAE has been part of the government's drive since the formation of the federation 45 years ago. Very early on, higher education was only available overseas, in Western countries or other institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but in 1976 the United Arab Emirates University was established in Al Ain, followed by several regional technology colleges in

1988. Initially and today, the colleges catered for both segregated male and female students on separate campuses, and finally in 1998, an all-female university was established in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. It was important to understand the impact of these students' educational experiences on their future employment perspectives, and given that they would be working in the media industry, their views on these issues were crucial. The findings were consistent with those of Omair (2010) and O'Neil et al. (2008), which showed that careers were both multifaceted and multidimensional for women in the UAE. Higher education was not considered by participants to have a detrimental effect on their Indigenous culture, although some conceded that it might, so although education was deemed important for future employment, the overall expectation was their skills would be synthesised and incorporated into existing structures.

At the time this research was conducted employment in the public sector in the Emirates required both parents to have Emirati nationality. The father's Emirati nationality could be conferred upon a non-national mother, thereby granting Emirati standing to the couple's children. In this way non-Emirati mothers were able to benefit from government inducements and were placed in a privileged category as full-blooded Emirati families. In a nation with such a small Indigenous population these complexities were significant in allowing Emirati graduates to make work choices that were unavailable to non-nationals. For some of the participants' mothers, marriage not only changed their own lives by allowing them access to Emirati nationality, but also provided future opportunities for their children. During the data collection phase it was not possible for an Emirati woman married to a non-national to bestow Emirati status on her husband or her children, and she was therefore not able to pass on favourable work prospects to her offspring. However, in 2011 the President, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, issued a decree enabling children born to an Emirati woman and non-Emirati man to apply for citizenship once they reached the age of 18. This was significant as it opened up employment opportunities for many who had previously been denied.

Participants had high employment goals yet at the same time they recognised the need to balance this with the traditions they held dear. They anticipated their cultural identity would not be changed but rather enhanced in the face of the changes occurring around them. Respondents wanted to hold onto their customs related to traditional clothing, language and

religion, and present Emirati culture in a positive way while simultaneously enlightening others about it.

As cultural sensitivity and identity were inextricably linked with the heritage and traditions that underpin the Indigenous population, it was necessary to explore participants' views about future changes to the expectations of Emirati women. They articulated strong support for maintaining traditional values and simultaneously changing the prospects for other women. Participants wanted to transform the expectations of Emirati women, as discussed in the overview of the literature chapter in reference to the work of Bristol-Rhys (2007), and many expected their personal work ethic to be a means for achieving this objective. Equally, some did not have a clear idea of how transformation would occur, but wanted to be part of change to certain aspects in their lives. On a more personal level, their opinions about the role of women and the impact of education on their culture were not conclusive. Of more importance to them was recognising their university experiences were likely to bring about changes to their way of life, and personal aspects of themselves would mature and develop throughout their careers. Without exception all participants were committed to remaining loyal to their culture.

As media graduates, participants' realised their work would bring them into contact with international businesses and professionals from around the world. They hoped this connection would allow them to inform a wider audience about Emirati identity and change existing negative perceptions about women in the UAE. There was awareness that in the course of their media work they would be in a position to portray a positive image of a female Emirati, and believed it was their responsibility to change negative attitudes and inform the wider community. Participants commented on developments in television whereby Emirati women could appear publicly in traditional outer clothing, thereby exemplifying the nation's attitudes and values. Not only were they enthusiastic about being involved in the industry, but also comfortable this type of work would not harm their family's reputation.

The data showed participants considered a wide range of employment opportunities. Working in media was not necessarily an easy option, given the inherent resistance to certain roles from some in the community. Most participants believed they would be able to work in a job of their choice provided they respected their family's feelings and consent, but some said any job would be permissible. It seems unlikely that this freedom would be tolerated, as

observed by Evetts (2000), who noted the cultural dimensions of the family's ideology and the structural dimensions of the division of labour impacting on women's choice of work. According to the participants there is still an aversion to women in public occupations such as being in front of television cameras, even if they are wearing an *abaya* and a *shayla*. Despite favourable job prospects and the interest of participants, some families would find it completely unacceptable for their daughters to be visibly on display.

In discussing how women could influence societal decisions, participants articulated they were more and more able to affect government policy around issues of national importance. Women in government positions were seen as a positive development and as opportunities for participants to alter the direction of community thinking. The government vision promoted through employment prospects for its people was strongly supported by the UAE ruler's ideas. Open discussion was available to citizens to engage with those who set the framework for economic development within a cultural structure that preserved the national identity. Even so, participants observed a shift in the vision of the ruling elite which had always been in the public arena and available to the local population. The details in circulation at the time of this research were connected to UAE Vision 2021, a long-term strategy and national agenda document. Participants were familiar with the details which clearly articulated their participation in the development of their country, and engendered a sense of commitment and involvement in the future through employment. This was evident from their comments, together with a heartfelt belief in the ability of their leaders to direct their energies into positive, meaningful engagement with industries and projects of value to themselves and their people.

Large number of businesses in the private sector sparked a spirit of enterprise in the UAE, and new business ideas were common amongst the Indigenous population. Fathers, mothers and other relatives were all prospective business partners for the participants, and it was therefore not surprising to hear them planning future business ventures.

The respondents were ambitious and wanted to prove themselves to their male counterparts. They did not talk about bringing similar abilities to the workplace, but about contributing an added dimension to business and society in a particularly female way.

### 6.3.5 Society

Group identity was a common thread in conversations with participants and conformed to a tribal culture characteristic of nomadic, desert people. The work of Ting-Toomey (2005) reported the existence of a cultural reality that wished for harmony within the group, yet was also concerned with individual self-image. For participants in this study the desire to belong to the group needed to also accommodate individuals who, encouraged by their higher education, wanted to express their differences and individuality. Participants acknowledged this desire to belong and also clung fiercely to their traditional Emirati culture which focused on the family.

The importance of liberalised views on the UAEs socio-economic, legal, and political progress should be seen within the context of existing structures and prevailing attitudes. Other nations adopted equal rights for women at different points in time and used different measures, but in the UAE employment has been emphasised in an Arab, Muslim framework. The students in this study had a clear understanding of their potential contribution to the workforce for the future success of their country.

Female liberation was given a strong voice by participants in this research. They believed that change would occur because of their influence, and lead to a transformation in thinking.

The financial benefits of completing a degree and joining the workforce divided the opinions of respondents. Some did not consider remuneration important for their family, while others placed greater value on the money they would earn despite being well provided for by government initiatives. There remains a disparity between families and the spread of affluence between individual Emiratis, so in many ways the opinions expressed reflected their personal circumstances.

### 6.4 Career Expectations

Four key issues emerged in the *career expectations* section: 1) family expectations; 2) expectations of privilege; 3) cultural and community expectations; and 4) personal ambition. Within these a number of points of particular relevance surfaced.



The first key issue, *family expectations*, highlighted six points: a) earning money in the a career; b) capacity for a career; c) differences in family mindsets regarding careers; d) acceptable occupations; e) pressure to continue higher education; and f) male attitudes to working women.

The second key issue, *expectations of privilege*, identified two points: a) work/life balance; and b) public and private career paths.

The third key issue, *cultural and community expectations*, raised six points: a) economic development; b) connection between family, business and community partnerships; c) national employment; d) potential leadership roles; e) participating in economic development; and f) pressure from society regarding higher education.

The final key issue, *personal ambition*, highlighted three points: a) advantage of a degree; b) the positive impact of higher education; and c) shaping future views.

#### 6.4.1 Family Expectations

It was necessary to probe participants' sentiments about the potential to earn more money than their husbands after they graduated. The emerging views showed contemporary women were generally comfortable with this scenario. It was customary for women who earned money to keep it for themselves, since husbands were responsible for taking care of their wives and children. There appeared to be consensus amongst the women about pursuing a career irrespective of whether they were single, married or divorced.

The strength of family influences revealed in the data showed participants were aware that different mindsets existed in families, consistent with Moghadam's (2006) research, which described the social pressure on men in regard to their wives and daughters working outside the home. Participants acknowledged specific occupations were acceptable for some families but not for others, and stated employment should not harm their reputation as a wife or daughter. Family pressure also existed around the types of work available to women, and despite many exciting prospects across a range of industries there was still an underlying expectation to be conscious of what was considered acceptable. This concurred with the research of Elaas (2009) where female modesty, integrity and honour were maintained within families.

Influences on women's attitudes were examined within the context of pressure imposed by the family and society. It was apparent that participants received high levels of encouragement from the government, their families and peers to avail themselves of opportunities to study. The many pathways to tertiary education for both genders in the Emirates were readily available to everyone, irrespective of their level of education. Continued education was seen as a duty as well as a personal choice, and for participants whose parents had graduated, demands to maintain their studies came from both inside and outside the home. Conservative families preferred segregated universities for their daughters, supported by Harik and Marston (2003) who noted segregation in Arab universities as the custom. Some participants stated they had a choice of either marriage or attending a segregated university after they completed high school.

Men's attitudes towards working women were expected to change, since the traditional custom of women staying home had been replaced by increasing numbers of women entering the workforce.

#### 6.4.2 Expectations of Privilege

Participants stated they wanted careers that provided a suitable, healthy work/life balance, and an office setting within the government sector was a preferred choice of many. Omair's (2010) research highlighted although this was a more acceptable option for women, some men felt shame in having a working wife because it could be construed as an inability to provide for their family. Government employment offered shorter work hours and was more amenable to maintaining the kinds of lives women anticipated as wives and mothers. There was consensus that women would not be inclined to accept jobs involving hard labour. Participants articulated a range of suitable occupations for women, and many mentioned respect as vital to their choice of employment. Respect was an all-encompassing feature which included attitudes to dress, family, culture and traditions. There were those who felt Emirati women were no different from women in other parts of the world, and that it was possible to work in any professions where the work environment was respectful of their culture and needs.

Respondents believed discrepancies between public and private employers would affect their career choices. They considered career development far more likely in the private sector and better opportunities for promotion, provided they worked hard.

### 6.4.3 Cultural and Community Expectations

As the UAE is still undergoing economic growth, it was pertinent to uncover the cultural expectations of women entering the workforce. Participants in the media college had aspirations to seek careers in media and reiterated their belief that society supported them in their quest.

When asked to reflect on the government's assistance to become part of the workforce, education was a key component. Through education women could appraise their abilities in order to participate in the economic development of their country. This was consistent with Al-Khateeb, Darrat and Elkhail's (2007) research, which found the need for Indigenous human capital changed Indigenous thinking with regard to education. Government initiatives, such as free federally-funded instruction, support in leadership schemes and ongoing education programs were all seen as mechanisms to promote women's employment, as discussed in the Political and Ideological Environment section in chapter 5. Other examples of UAE leaders' proposals for business expansion and workplace experience through volunteering and internships were equally valuable. Participants felt competition and small and medium enterprise (SME) programs, funded by the ruler of Dubai, provided opportunities to establish themselves as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the nation's Emiratisation program was deemed a positive move in improving women's job prospects, as found in Williams, Wallis and William's (2013) research, where Emiratisation policies had been successfully implemented by the government for years.

The connection between family, business development and their own educational achievements provided the impetus for increased confidence. Participants believed once they graduated and gained work experience they would progress to creating their own business interests. However, as highlighted in the research of Preiss and McCrohan (2006), there were challenges to women's success in business outside the family's perceived cultural norms. Preiss and McCrohan suggested conservative sections of society continued to place limitations on women who wanted to display their talents. Nevertheless, considering the amount of community support for prospective business owners, participants felt it was well within their reach to become CEOs of their own companies.

Steps were taken by the government to showcase employment through career fairs, with a directive that only nationals attend. The National Career Exhibition February 2016 was

the 18<sup>th</sup> of its kind in the UAE to offer the best training and employment opportunities for Emirati graduates. Public and private sector employers were invited to exhibit their future human resources plans, and used this forum to interact with undergraduates who showed an interest in their companies. From the participants' point of view, these events allowed them to investigate possible career pathways in organisations looking to hire Emiratis.

Benefits for all participants stemmed from initiatives which were bringing social change to the workforce with, for example, favourable loans, financial assistance and other rights and privileges, such as maternity leave. This kind of employer support was endorsed in the research of Erogul and McCroham (2008), who noted that a collectivist group attitude ranged from ongoing education and healthcare to housing. In the Emirates it underpinned the empowerment of women and their capacity to flourish at work.

Participants became aware of how education and economic development were rapidly altering the role of women in their communities, and as their education progressed, opportunities arose for greater participation. The high percentage of women graduates in the workforce inspired them to take on leadership roles, as highlighted in the Political and Ideological section in Chapter 5. Decisions related to careers and their social connections became means for enhancing leadership opportunities, and participants became self-assured and committed to taking up such positions. This was aligned with the research of Morris (2005) who noted university study gave women opportunities to redefine themselves and consider new definitions of their role in society.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the people of the UAE were heavily invested in contributing to the economic development of their country. Participants felt they were enhancing not only the future prospects of the country, but also benefitting themselves by attaining a degree which was helpful for their own independence. This was endorsed by Madsen and Cook (2010) who highlighted the future role of women as not just wife and mother, but as individuals capable of making a societal contribution.

Together with education, business incentives comprised an additional strand of UAE economic strategies. A variety of business foundations and inducements were developed by the government to promote SME entrepreneurship through the Department of Economic Development. As highlighted in *The State of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Dubai*

(2013) there was a concerted effort to generate commerce specifically aimed at women. Pride in the incentives local rulers were advancing created a sense of confidence in the expertise achieved by participants through their higher education. The Dubai Women's Establishment promoted policies which assisted women to reach their potential. The blueprint was to provide all Emiratis with opportunities for accomplishment and financial recompense, as well as supporting the country, described in Erogul's (2009) research as inventive tradition and heritage which appealed to women.

It was clear participants felt societal pressure to make use of the higher education incentives the government was providing for females. Erogul and McCrohan's (2008) research also noted the issue of contributing to society by female Emirati participants in their study. The option of taking up learning was a life-changing choice made available by the regime to all its citizens, irrespective of age and educational history.

#### 6.4.4 Personal Ambition

Participants assumed they would personally benefit from completing their degrees and were genuinely enthusiastic about their potential contribution to community and society. They agreed with the view that a degree was essential for a career, and a career was imperative. There was a strong commitment to making changes in society through the gender capital they could provide, which concurred with Martin's (2003) recommendations to generate large numbers of females who wanted to become employed. For participants whose career interests were focused on the media industry, it was uncertain whether their subject interest would translate into a career choice.

The consensus of participants in this research was that higher education would impact positively on the people they worked with and their culture. They were determined to maintain their Indigenous Emirati culture, yet acknowledged it would change. More women in the workforce had brought about enhanced status, and women in professional roles increased their visibility for high-level positions. Respondents appreciated the growing recognition of women's abilities and achievements in the workplace, and realised that not graduating would considerably reduce their work and career opportunities.

Participants considered media graduates had the power to affect views about women and their culture. Many were enthusiastic about portraying a different image of Emirati

women and their way of life to the outside world. They appeared less concerned about earnings and more committed to spreading a positive message about who they were and what they stood for.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This research into the impact of higher education on Emirati women revealed the tensions that contemporary university students are grappling with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The participants in this study were pursuing an education, looking forward to interesting careers, and at the same time, balancing the pressures imposed upon them by their families, the wider community and the influences of a globalised world.

Although they faced similar adjustments and challenges to many other students in other parts of the world when transferring from high school to university, they also had unique issues to deal with stemming from their private and public high school experiences. Although private education is regulated by the Ministry of Education, high schools vary significantly from profit-oriented to less profit-driven institutions. Private high schools also adopt different administrative processes and teach in several languages, such as English, French and Arabic. Consequently teaching and learning encompassed a variety of influences depending on the educational ethos of the school. Participants who entered university from the public school system were required to make greater adjustments in terms of their perspectives due to a lack of familiarity with an English-medium environment.

Participants identified many positive developments on a personal level as a result of their higher education. They acknowledged the changes that flowed from scrutinising their learning, opinions and beliefs, which gave them an opportunity to examine areas of their lives heavily influenced by cultural tradition yet undergoing a process of dynamic change. This is not necessarily the case for undergraduates in other parts of the world. These Emirati participants gradually became aware that their prospects were significantly intertwined with their families' and communities' expectations.

Being exposed to Western influences at university was significant for these participants. Tensions between the Indigenous community and the influx of Western ideologies meant these particular participants were not just engaged in higher education, they

also had to constantly reassess their beliefs, ideas and traditions. There were very clear non-negotiable boundaries, mainly related to their Emirati social order.

A strong cultural identity was at the core of participants' attitudes and opinions. Family, religion, careers, traditional roles, and the demands of making a contribution to the country's economic development were ever-present considerations in their lives. Changes in their points of view were triggered by their experiences at university and contact with educators and non-Emirati professionals in their fields of study. These encounters shaped them and society. It was evident from discussions that these participants were keen to bring about change for their personal, professional and social benefit, but not at the expense of their culture. Their objective was to meld selective external influences with their traditional culture for a sustainable outcome that would be acceptable to society.

Although students around the world attend university to further their careers, these participants were particularly driven to complete their higher education. They were encouraged in this pursuit by their families, the privileges at their disposal, and cultural and community pressure. Monetary gain was not a high priority for this cohort as it may be for students in other countries, but rather attaining careers that would be acceptable to their families and society. These Emirati undergraduates were not just invested in their own futures, but wanted to participate in the continuing development of their country, an altruistic approach which was fervently accepted and enthusiastically acknowledged.

In Chapter 7 the implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations put forward to enhance students' experiences that will benefit young Emirati women in higher education. Unlike other universities, the potential for shaping and defining individuals and their society is not limited by funding issues, but more by the unique synthesis of a Westernised model of higher education and a nation that has every intention of remaining true to its culture and way of life.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

This final chapter comprises an overview of the research and presents the conclusions, in addition to highlighting the contribution to knowledge in this area. It presents the limitations of the research and discusses implications for further investigation of the perspectives and opinions of a larger group of media students, looking at career success and English language capabilities for students entering higher education.

The research used a qualitative, interpretative approach. The questionnaire comprised both closed questions designed to extract demographic information and attitudinal views, and open-ended questions for deeper responses to the short answers. Additional interview questions were asked to further develop the information gathered and provide richer data in answer to the three research questions.

At the core of this research was a Western educated teacher who had witnessed significant educational developments in an Indigenous community. The objective was to identify the changes observed in the relationship between educational progress and cultural traditions in the UAE. Given that the researcher had spent many years in the Emirates and had significant social and educational contact with Emiratis, it was relevant to capture her observations.

The purpose of the research was to present an understanding of the experiences, perspectives and opinions of a group of young, female, Emirati media undergraduates in the context of their changing society. It was also intended to examine the educational journeys these women had experienced, from their pre-university to undergraduate years, and scrutinised the impact of studying in a higher education environment. The hope was for the research to identify the intrinsic influences on achieving their goals and enabling them to participate as members of an educated, knowledge-based workforce in a traditional community. The research questions at the centre of this study were:

1. What factors influence the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?
2. What is the role of culture in the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?



### 3. What are the perspectives of personal change that take place for female Emirati undergraduates in a traditional society?

A total of 43 participants were involved in this research, comprised of female undergraduate students enrolled in a media course at a university in the UAE, in two different academic classes studying in a non-fee-paying government higher education institution. The first group included 22 participants and the second group, 21. All were based at the same campus.

The first group of students completed a questionnaire to provide data about their demographics and establish their perspectives to certain educational and cultural specifics. This group was also given the opportunity to respond to more detailed questions related to the inquiry. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with the second group, where each participant was asked the same questions. The interviews were designed to develop potential ideas following on from the research questions and background information obtained, and gathered qualitative data by providing opportunities for participants to articulate more details about their educational experiences and cultural perspectives.

## 7.1 Conclusions

Conclusions are based on the data gathered from the questionnaire, short answers and interviews. The data were examined to identify key findings which were interpreted in relation to the literature and then synthesised to inform the conclusions. These are offered as replies to each of the research questions.

### **Research Question One:**

#### **What factors influence the higher education experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?**

Although transferring from high school to university is a universal experience for university students in all parts of the world, the experiences of Emirati girls present some unique challenges. As with other students, a growing confidence coincided with a need for assertiveness in dealing with administrative processes and tasks in a more proactive way.

The levels of independence of these Emirati students should be seen in the context in which they lived. Traditional Gulf Arab states generally impose a restrictive code of

behaviour on females, however as higher education has become a feature of life for more and more Emirati women there are signs that restrictions are beginning to loosen. This research unearthed the following important factors:

1. Participants' choice of university matched the prevailing ethos of a conservative religious society. It was important for Muslim females to attend a segregated university in order to satisfy family and community expectations, although as articulated by the respondents, the benefits of being in a mixed student university environment would facilitate professional interaction with their male peers at a later date.
2. Participants identified cultivating an ability to accept and provide constructive criticism as necessary to progress at university. It was an aspect lacking in their high school experiences. As they began to understand the value of constructive criticism in academic and social situations, they realised they had grown and matured in unexpected ways.
3. The influence of English-medium schools and native English-language teachers were acknowledged as beneficial for their progress at university. Participants who attended English-medium schools believed the active learning style helped them to integrate quickly into university life. Poor English-language skills as a result of high school education caused difficulties, and participants appreciated the intervention of university teachers to identify and improve weaknesses.
4. Participants agreed there had been a re-evaluation of their personal assumptions, both on an individual level and in a wider context, as well as a change in their views on the traditional roles of wife and mother.
5. The personal choice of dress code encapsulated an Emirati identity. Being covered was not viewed as subjugation, but as an expression of distinctiveness and leadership.

6. Participants acknowledged they were exposed to many professional influences at university which brought about incremental changes in their opinions leading to transformation of their ideas and viewpoints.

#### **Research Question Two:**

#### **What is the role of culture in the higher educational experiences of indigenous female Emirati undergraduates?**

The following points are presented in answer to the role of culture in participants' higher educational experiences, critical to understanding their points of view.

1. Family expectations had a powerful influence on participants' educational choices pre-university and at university. Graduating was considered essential by the family and carried immense authority, whether participants were educated in their own country or overseas. Deference and respect towards the family underpinned participants' decisions about their educational preferences.
2. Asking permission was an innate Emirati custom stemming from family tradition and the need for participants to show respect. At university there was a softening of parental control which led to greater freedom for the participants around travelling unaccompanied to and from the university. Also being able to take part in external events deemed to be of educational value were new experiences that became possible for the participants during their higher education.
3. Participants' talked about negative media portrayal which influenced attitudes within their communities and globally. Some community members were against women in the media, and students even encountered resistance from their peers at university to become involved in this area. Participants were aware of the negative attitudes of Western countries towards the social and religious beliefs of Muslim women, and were eager to change stereotypical views and foster new insights about Emirati women.

4. Emirati nationality and society were important aspects of participants' lives. They constantly referred to preserving customs and traditions, and maintaining their cultural identity. Nevertheless, participants anticipated change would inevitably affect them and believed this would be driven by external influences. At the same time, connections with international business and professionals were seen as opportunities to change perceptions about Emirati women in a positive way.
5. There was a tension between connecting with a tribal group that supported a strict identity and the realisation that higher education was liberalising views. Participants believed this dichotomy would have a demonstrable effect on females in the future and had already begun to change perspectives.

### **Research Question Three:**

#### **What are the perspectives of personal change that take place for female Emirati undergraduates in a traditional society?**

The following points are provided in answer to the personal changes in the perspectives of participants:

1. Participants desired careers as a result of their higher education. Although earning an income was not a priority because male family members were responsible for providing for them, they understood occupations and careers needed to conform to familial expectations as well as providing fulfillment on a personal level.
2. Careers formed part of a work/life balance in order to sustain a traditional lifestyle. Many favoured professions in the public sector as it offered a more flexible routine and understanding of the Emirati way of life. Employment in the private sector offered advantages for quicker promotion but imposed more difficult circumstances for blending with a traditional lifestyle.
3. Participants accepted pressure for females to be educated and participate in the economic development of their country. They felt it was important to avail themselves of the incentives offered by the government and understood the advantages of family businesses to support them in their career.

4. Participants were unanimous about the value of a degree and agreed that higher education had a positive effect on Emirati society and culture. As media graduates, they believed in their ability to shape other people's views about Emirati women and culture.

## 7.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This research has added to existing knowledge in the field of higher education, by identifying the changes which have emanated from females' access to higher education in the UAE. It attempted to understand the factors which influenced these changes, including the role of culture, gender, family, education, and individuals' perspectives of their experiences. In time this new knowledge will provide data about issues which have affected female Emirati students' adaptation to the influences of Westernised education models within a rapidly changing traditional society.

Through investigating young Emirati women's perspectives the research examined the relationship between culture, education and gender in a Gulf Arab context. Individual action is widely believed to be the result of socialisation, while identity is implicitly fashioned by the experiences accrued by individuals in their lifetime related to culture, religious convictions, family and traditions in their society (Giddens, 2006).

The distinctiveness of this group of participants exists within a social and educational setting where views and opinions are constantly shifting, so this study was aimed at examining the changes that had taken place. The respondents came from a wide range of schooling and family situations, which in contemporary UAE society, forges connections with a variety of external influences, predominantly made up of Western residents working and living in the Emirates, but also the many other nationalities present in the social landscape.

Students' pre-university and university experiences, as well as their future goals were explored and analysed in this research. Although they were all members of the same higher educational institution and the same Indigenous population, their collective accounts, as Davies (2000) suggested, connect them to a larger context.

This research was aimed at highlighting the swift societal changes which have been taking place in the UAE in recent times, stemming from economic development and the

government's vision to educate and upskill the local population. The primary focus was scrutinising how young women transition through their higher education towards achieving personal goals and becoming effective members of the workforce in the context of a traditional Muslim country. However, the UAE is still a place where family influence is considerable, and as found by Green and Smith (2006) a decade earlier, there was no evidence in this study to suggest this has changed.

New knowledge unearthed in this study relates to the aspirations and complexities of young Indigenous women becoming educated in a traditional environment where international influences hold sway. The in-depth views of these young women shed light on an alternative view of Emirati women, unlike the media stereotypes of Arab women presented in the media. In doing so, the research provides educators and researchers with deeper knowledge which may challenge preconceptions about educated women in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Gulf Arab nation.

This study will help educators expand their knowledge about aspects of culture and higher education in traditional Emirati society, and addresses the paucity of information and general misunderstanding about the circumstances of Arab women. It also presents an alternative explanation to promote better cultural understanding. According to Willis and Nagel (2014) quality student-teacher relationships and inspiring teachers are critical for positive change. Their study indicated educated, discerning teachers can be a catalyst for sparking students' interest and promoting deeper engagement. These authors also observed teachers delivering a broad range of complex structures related to knowledge, experience and language to enable communication with students.

This research also captured and examined the contemporary perspectives of young Indigenous women and their views on issues relevant to their lives. Since they are representative of a new paradigm in higher education still in development in a traditional society, this was of particular value. It was equally important to understand how change occurred for them as a result of being in a higher educational environment, and whether this had any effect on their views of society, gender and employment, as evidenced in the research of Willis and Nagel (2014) which found "through the construction of knowledge schemes, students were better positioned to develop a capacity to view situations more circumspectly".

Most notably, the women provided detailed insights into their experiences which authenticated the transitions they encountered in their learning environment, such as adaption, growth and maturity. Commonalities across the findings may foster further interest and inquiry, since according to Willis and Nagel (2014, p. 50), “experience is key to the social, psychological and neurological development of learners”. Although these authors focused on children in conflict situations in Northern Uganda, they found teachers played an important role in providing new experiences related to cultural heritage and family structure.

Kabir (2005) suggested that Islam is significant for 1.4 billion people around the world who follow the faith. In the context of the Muslim women who participated in this study, it needs to be considered for the influence it brings to their lives. An appreciation of the nuances is required to identify the potential persuasion of religion, as applied to decisions about university choices and courses, employment, relationships with males and traditional female roles. In addition, this research uncovered the depth of family beliefs and customs, and their ongoing influence in a Gulf Arab setting.

### 7.3 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study stem largely from the choice to engage in an in-depth study using principally qualitative data, rather than a broader study employing more quantitative data. The participant selection in this study was limited to one publicly-funded university in one city in the UAE, and the research focused on one of three publicly-funded tertiary institutions in order to conduct an in-depth investigation of young female Emirati students enrolled in a media program. The data reflected the views of undergraduates who were from Dubai and the Northern Emirates, as opposed to all the Emirates of the UAE. Since the study placed a particular group of participants in the spotlight in a particular context, it is not representative of the general population and limitations apply to the generalisability of the findings. However, given this is a qualitative study (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) it is dependent on the researcher’s objectives and the ability to apply critical thinking to the experiences of others in order to deduce salient factors.

## 7.4 Implications and Recommendations

### 7.4.1 Implications for Further Research

This research can potentially be extended to a larger study of other groups of media students in the same university on both campuses, to investigate new cohorts of students who commence media courses, given that several years have passed since this research was conducted.

Moreover, the study can be expanded to include a broader, and then perhaps, more representative participant selection of young Emirati women at university in the UAE. There would also be value in researching alumni who have moved on to employment in the media industry, in order to track their career outcomes. Additional research could also further explore their work/life balance which has different implications from Western perspectives. Finally, research could include an exploration of students' English-language capabilities and whether this has increased for those entering university.

## 7.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight areas which will benefit future female Emirati undergraduates in higher education. The recommendations provide additional assistance to facilitate support through technology, as higher education in the Emirates has already embraced widespread connectivity between students and their learning environments.

### **1. Design specific online English-language programs for students entering university.**

This recommendation addresses the comments of participants regarding exposure to native English speakers impacting significantly on their progress at university, while others who were schooled in non-native English-language institutions believed they were disadvantaged by a lack of English-language competency.

### **2. Develop an online pre-university academic orientation course.**

Evidence emerged from participants' feedback that their high school experiences were not conducive to their academic progress at university. There was enormous disparity in their exposure to academic skills at high school which were essential for their university curricula.



Although some students had access to an orientation program depending on the department they were enrolled in, there was no pre-university academic orientation course.

### **3. Construct online mentoring partnerships with university instructors for individual academic support.**

The findings indicated participants valued interaction from their educators and this strengthened their relationships and provided greater academic support. Formalised education practice and personal relationships are greatly appreciated in Emirati society. Online mentoring partnerships would increase academic interaction and create opportunities to engage in cultural conversations, important for changing attitudes. Equally, such interactions would be beneficial to academics and allow them to interact and connect with the student population.

The UAE has highly developed IT connectivity, and paperless academic environments are widely promoted. Students' IT abilities across many platforms are well advanced and access to databases and software systems are part of daily life. Developing a suite of online support services would work well in this setting.

### **4. Organise a university fellowship program for visiting academics to teach short courses on topics that add breadth of knowledge for students.**

Participants' comments indicated they valued involvement in projects which extended and deepened their knowledge and experiences. They were keen to participate in events designed to intensify and expand their understanding of the world in which they lived. Short-term visiting academics would bring new perspectives and more importantly, will provide an opportunity for academics to come into contact with students in different environments for their own review of educational and cultural perceptions.

### **5. Expand a range of frameworks with policymakers and developers of leadership programs to provide direction for higher education, government and business organizations.**

The research is of potential value in all educational contexts. From K-12 institutions, to higher education administrators, educators and student affairs staff who wish to identify initiatives which will develop, evaluate and promote programs for female education.

## **6. Extend face to face support programs within university environments.**

In universities which have a language and learning support department, collaborative development could be made with lecturers to facilitate building capacity for undergraduates through units of study. This focus on professional growth would assist academics to teach beyond their subject specialism. In order to develop intercultural competency especially for foreign English speaking teachers operating in an Emirati culture there would be opportunities to explore and open up dialogue around teaching approaches which are inclusive and celebrate diversity.

## **7. Promote public and visible career networks, clubs and student groups.**

Universities could actively promote an engagement with their students to become involved in new ways of education through sharing knowledge and consequently generate learning and social communities. By encouraging undergraduates to seek alternative ways of adding depth to their scholarly experiences a broader understanding of the value of interacting with others in different settings becomes advantageous.

### **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter concludes the research which examined young, female Emirati undergraduates on the threshold of joining the workforce. They were enthusiastic and optimistic about their higher education and the prospects of enhancing their lives for the benefit of their society.

“By being connected with my culture and traditional look and participating in the workforce, I will be able to change the cultural expectations for female Emiratis. I think we will shatter all these stereotypes that revolve around us, not only from expats who know nothing about the Emirati culture but from other Emiratis who have some prejudices against Emirati media students. By working in the media industry we will show people that females can have a career other than being a housewife and we will make it one of the top career choices for women”.

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## Appendix A

### Conceptual Framework

#### ***Existing Literature***

Indigenous Emirati women in a higher education and cultural setting:

**Educational Environments** (Bumbuc and Pasca, 2011; Solas and Wilson, 2015; Madsen and Cook, 2010)

**Students' Learning Styles** (Cruz & Duff, 1997; Bleakley, Brice & Bligh, 2008; McLaughlin and Durrant, 2016)

**Relationships with Teachers** (Saafin, 2008; Riel, 2011; Goby, 2009)

**Cultural Identity** (Al Oraimi, 2011; Mohammed, 2014; Bristol-Rhys, 2007)

**Cultural Sensitivity** (Crabtree, 2007; Williams, Wallis & Williams, 2013; Simpson, 2012)

**Gender Capital** (Harik & Marston, 2003; Al-Khateeb, Darrat & Elkhail, 2007; Whitman, 2003)

#### ***Unearthing Educational and Cultural Changes in Contemporary Emirati Society:***

*What influences the higher educational experiences of Emirati women? Particularly the role played by the family, heritage and tradition, the impact of career choices and societal expectations and impressions. Also how do Emirati women view their progress, perceptions and attitudinal, and behavioural changes as a consequence of higher education.*

#### ***Research Approach and Impetus via Questionnaires, Short Answer Responses and Interviews:***

An approach which applies a sensitive lens to a traditional society in order to understand issues which are relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century undergraduate media students.

**Teaching and Learning:** Perceptions and experiences around the adjustment from moving from school to university, the challenges involved in the transition from school to university, the notion of change,

**Change through Education:** Attitudinal and behavioural opinions on personal growth and changing personal approaches to learning.

**Western Influences:** Stimulus from Western education approaches, dress code, relational learning and dynamic learning environment.

**Cultural Identity:** Changing expectations about family and education, women in society, family influences, workforce and society.

**Career Expectations:** Integration of contemporary and traditional attitudes around family expectations, expectations of privilege, cultural and community expectations and personal ambition

## Appendix B

### Open-ended Questions

- 89 I believe that media graduates can only choose to work in certain jobs that are culturally acceptable. These would be (please write what you feel they are).
- 90 Can you tell me about any incident or experience in the university that made you change your attitude to a cultural expectation?
- 91 How has your education at University altered any of your opinions of any traditional roles in your culture?
- 92 Could you explain the differences that you feel have changed your ideas on education between school and university?
- 93 Describe what has happened in your experiences at university to change how you think of yourself as a woman in Emirati society.
- 94 How does wearing the traditional abaya identify you or your culture?
- 95 Can you tell me about a significant moment when you realized that you had changed your style of learning?
- 96 Which jobs or careers would be acceptable for an Emirati woman to work in? Why do you think this is the case?
- 97 How has the government helped female Emiratis to enter the workforce?
- 98 What do you see your role is in changing or maintaining your cultural identity?
- 99 Describe how one person in the university changed your understanding of how to become an active learner.
- 100 How as a graduate media student do you see you will change the cultural expectations for female Emiratis?

## Appendix C

### Survey for Data Collection

#### A1. Survey Questions

**Please respond: Write Yes (Y) or No (N) to those statements which best describe your experience and thinking at this time.**

	Yes/No
1 I am a student - 1 <sup>st</sup> year.	
2 The programs I am studying reflect my interests.	
3 It is possible for a married woman to have a career.	
4 The programs have changed my attitudes to learning.	
5 Having a degree is important for myself.	
6 I am single.	
7 It is important to study on a segregated campus.	
8 I am a student - 3 <sup>rd</sup> year.	
9 My mother thinks it is important to be educated.	
10 My attitude to studying has changed very quickly since I came to university.	
11 I am a student - capstone project.	
12 My family would like me to marry someone who has been educated to graduate level.	
13 I like to wear modern fashion items under my abaya.	
14 I am a student – 2nd year.	
15 I think it is important to have a career.	
16 My family believe that having a degree is important for attracting a more educated husband.	



17	I like my studies at university.	
18	I am a student - majors program.	
19	I was born in _____ (please write the name of the city/place).	
20	I was a student in the English Language Program.	
21	I am a student - 1st semester.	
22	I was a direct entry student into the General Education program.	
23	I like to wear the traditional gelabya under my abaya.	
24	I am a student - 4th year.	
25	I am married.	
26	I live in _____ (please write the name of the Emirate).	
27	My attitude to studying has changed little by little since entering university.	
28	Studying at school is different from studying at university.	
29	My culture expects me to marry.	
30	My husband has a degree.	
31	In the future I plan to study in another country (please write the name of the country you plan to study in.) _____	
32	The programs I am studying reflect my career interests only.	
33	My date of birth is _____.	
34	Having a degree is important for the UAE.	
35	I went to a government school.	
36	My family would like my future husband to have a degree.	
37	I went to a private school which taught subject lessons in English.	
38	It is possible for a single woman to have a career.	

39	I am a student - 6th year.	
40	I do not think it is important to have a career.	
41	I have only studied in the UAE.	
42	I do not believe my traditional culture will change because of the education female Emiratis receive at university.	
43	I have _____ child/children (please write the number)	
44	Having teachers from international countries has changed my attitude and opinions.	
45	I am a student – General Education program.	
46	My husband does not have a degree.	
47	I plan to continue my education to Masters/PhD level.	
48	I am a student - 5th year.	
49	I came to university after being married.	
50	I am divorced.	
51	The money I earn will be more important to my family or husband.	
52	I am a student – both General Education and Majors program.	
53	My attitude to studying is the same as it was when I was at school.	
54	My father thinks it is important to be educated.	
55	I like teachers who understand my culture.	
56	I am a Student - 3rd semester.	
57	My culture expects me to have children.	
58	Having teachers from international countries has changed some of my attitudes and opinions.	
59	I went to a private school which taught subject lessons in Arabic.	
60	I am a student - 5th semester.	
61	I believe a woman can work in media related industries.	

62	The programs I am studying reflect my career interests.	
63	I came to university before being married.	
64	A degree is unimportant for attracting a more educated husband.	
65	My attitude to studying has not changed at all since I graduated from high school.	
66	I am a student - 2nd semester.	
67	My culture expects me to have a career.	
68	When I graduate I will work in a job that I choose to do.	
69	Having male teachers has changed my attitude and opinions.	
70	I came to university from Year 12.	
71	Having a degree is important for my family.	
72	It is possible for a divorced woman to have a career.	
73	I believe that my traditional culture will change because of the education female Emiratis receive at university.	
74	My attitude to studying is different from when I was at school.	
75	Women who are married and have careers must also act as caretaker of their family.	
76	Having teachers from international countries has changed my attitude towards how I study.	
77	Having a degree is important for my career.	
78	I am a student - 4th semester.	
79	Studying at school is different from studying at university.	
80	Having male teachers has not changed my attitude and opinions.	
81	My traditional culture will change because of the experiences female Emiratis receive at university.	
82	I would rather have a teacher that understands what is important to me than one who is just interested in teaching a course.	

83	It would be acceptable to study on a non-segregated campus.	
84	When I graduate I will work in job that my husband or family approves of.	
85	My mother is Emirati by marriage to my father.	
86	I am a student - 2nd year.	
87	The money I earn will be unimportant to my family or husband.	
88	I believe that it is acceptable to have a degree and earn more money than my husband.	

## Appendix D

### Coded themes identified in the data relating to Cultural Impact

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Cultural Identity	Family	Traditional Dress. Cultural expectations of marriage, children, women's roles. Family's expectations of marriage. Influence of younger generation.
	Leadership	Clothing as national dress. Recognition of importance of beliefs, attitudes, speech. More outgoing change.
	Employment	Impact of education on culture. Mother's nationality. Role of cultural identity. Influence of government decisions and initiatives.
Cultural Sensitivity	Family Attitudes	Patriarchal attitudes. Importance of a degree. Support and encouragement.
	Heritage and Tradition	Teachers and cultural sensitivity. Changes to cultural expectations. Family expectations.
	Empowerment	Education and the UAE. Financial contribution. Career attitudes. University selection.
Gender Capital	Family Influence	Family attitude to education. Marital status and career. Women's employment. Pressure to become educated.
	Society Impressions	Cultural expectations. Career in media. Government assistance and the workforce. Societal pressure to avail of educational opportunities. Requirement to participate in economic development.
	Personal Expectations	Personal attitude to education. Personal attitude to career. Career interests. Reduced career/work opportunities.

## Appendix E

### Coded themes identified in the data relating to Educational Experiences

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Educational Environments	School	Challenges. Private schools. English in schools. Teaching process different between school and university.
	University	Courses studied. Segregated campus. Experience at university leading to re-evaluate identity as a woman. New experiences. Adjustment to the environment. Adaption to university.
	Community	Ability to develop critical thinking.
Learning Styles	Thinking	Changed opinions on traditional roles. Think more critically. More analysis.
	Learning	Studying with international teachers. Changes in learning style. Changes in ways of learning.
	Western Influences	English medium schools. Private/public schools.
Relationship with Teachers	Human Element	Cultural understanding. Cultural transactions. Dress code. Peer/Family influence. Formality with teachers.
	Interactions	International teachers. Male/Female teachers. External influences.
	Styles of Teaching	Environment. Strictness. Similarity of private school to university.

## Appendix F

### Information Letter for Deans



Edith Cowan University  
2 Bradford Street  
Mount Lawley WA, 6050  
Telephone: (+61 8) 9370 6220  
Facsimile: (+61 8) 9370 6664  
Mobile: (+61 4) 02369 952

Beverley McClusky

Dear Dean

#### **Investigating the Relationship between Culture and Education for Female Students in Tertiary Settings in the UAE**

My name is Beverley McClusky and I am writing to you to inform you about my research. This project will investigate the practices and processes through which students' transition from incoming high school students to tertiary undergraduates and how this experience is regarded, given the cultural background students bring to the university. The project will begin in the academic year 2009-2010 with data being collected through quantitative and qualitative methods. It is hoped this knowledge will assist understanding of the changes that are occurring within the indigenous community regarding higher education for females, the strategies that students find beneficial in their learning process and how westernized models of higher education adapt to reflect local requirements. Fundamentally, it is hoped that a greater understanding of the cultural identity of those students who are now participants in a new and developing environment will be achieved.

#### **What does participation in the research project involve?**

I seek to invite students from a variety of colleges, to participate in the completing of an online survey and to be part of interviews, both of which will ask about students' knowledge, experience and attitudes to their learning process. The survey should take about 20 minutes to complete and the interviews will not take longer than 45 minutes.

In line with ethics clearance from the University I will approach, students who agree to participate and ask them to complete an online survey about their demographic data and knowledge and attitudes towards their tertiary education as well as their culture perspectives at the university. Students will then be invited to an interview to discuss their understanding and experience of these areas.

Consent forms for students will also be distributed. Interviews will be digitally recorded as they occur. No video tapes will be made.

#### **To what extent is participation voluntary, and what are the implications of withdrawing that participation?**

Participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. All potential participants that are approached for their participation and do not wish to take part in the project are not compelled to in any way. If any member of a participant group decides to participate and then later changes their mind, they are able to withdraw their participation. All contributions they have made to the research will be destroyed unless explicitly agreed to after the intent to withdraw has been indicated.

If the project has already been published at the time a participant decides to withdraw, their contribution that was used in reporting the project cannot be removed from the publication.

There will be no consequences relating to a decision by an individual to participate or not, or to participate and then withdraw, other than those already described in this letter. These decisions will not affect the relationship with the research individual or the university.

**What will happen to the information collected, and is privacy and confidentiality assured?**

Information that identifies anyone will be removed from the data collected. The data is then stored securely in a locked cabinet in the researchers office at Edith Cowan University and can only be accessed by the researcher. The data will be stored for a minimum period of 5 years, after which it will be destroyed. This will be achieved by shredding documents and removing all digital data from files. The data is maintained in a way that enables us to de-identify and re-identify an individual's data and destroy it if participation is withdrawn. This is done by coding the names of students.

The identity of participants will not be disclosed at any time. Participant privacy, and the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants, is assured at all other times. The data will be used only for this project, and will not be used in any extended or future research without first obtaining explicit written consent from participants. The research will be reported in a document for my PhD. A summary of the research findings will be made available to the participating site(s). You can expect this to be available July, 2012. A summary of the research findings will also be made available upon completion of the project. This can be accessed by contacting the researcher and expect it to become available in July 2012.

**What are the education benefits of this research for the university?**

All students will have the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their experiences as part of this research. This will provide opportunities for faculty to consider changes in practice and improvements in the way they interact with students and work with the university for improved outcomes for the students.

**Are there any risks associated with participation?**

Yes:

It is possible that in discussing their experience of educational change and their participation in research material some participants may feel discomfort, emotions about the issues raised and they may not feel comfortable speaking about their experiences in front of peers.

All participants will be informed ahead of the interviews that they may feel discomfort and will be able to withdraw at any time. They may also withdraw their data from the study.

**Is this research approved?**



The research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Who do I contact if I wish to discuss the project further?**

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with a member of the research team, please contact me. If you wish to speak with an independent person about the conduct of the project, please contact Ms Kim Gifkins, Research Ethics Officer, Edith Cowan University, Tel: (+61 8) 6304 2170, Fax: (+61 8) 6304 2661 or [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au).

This information letter is for you to keep.

## Appendix G

### Information Letter for Students



Edith Cowan University  
2 Bradford Street  
Mount Lawley WA, 6050  
Telephone: (+61 8) 9370 6220  
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Mobile: (+61 4) 0236 9952

Beverley McClusky

Dear University Student,

#### **Investigating the Relationship between Culture and Education for Female Students in Tertiary Settings in the UAE**

My name is Beverley McClusky and I am writing to you to invite you to become involved in this research.

This project investigates the practices and processes through which students' transition from incoming high school students to tertiary undergraduates and how this experience is regarded, given the cultural background students bring to the university.

It is hoped this knowledge will better understand the changes that are occurring within the indigenous community regarding higher education for females, the strategies that students find beneficial in their learning process and how westernized models of higher education adapt to reflect local requirements. Fundamentally it is hoped that a greater understanding of the cultural identity of those students who are now participants in a new and developing environment is achieved.

I would like to invite you to take part in the project.

#### **What does participating in the research involve?**

You are invited to participate in completing an online survey the link will be sent to you via the university's e-mail system. You will be asked to participate in an interview. Both the survey and the interview will ask about your knowledge, experience and attitudes to your learning experiences and process. The survey should take about 20 minutes to complete and the discussion group will not take longer than 45 minutes.

There is no other requirement of you.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No. Participating in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you do not want to take part in the project, then simply do not complete the consent form. This decision should always be

made completely freely, and any and all decisions are respected by members of the research team without question.

### **What if I wanted to change my initial decision?**

If you wish to participate, the decision will need to be made by **1<sup>st</sup> January 2010** for you to be included in the project. Once a decision is made to participate, you can change your mind at any time within the minimum 5-year storage period of the research data (see below). All contributions made to the project will be destroyed after 5 years unless explicitly agreed to by you. If the project has already been published at the time you decide to withdraw, your contribution that was used in reporting the project cannot be removed from the publication. There will be no consequences relating to a decision by you to participate or not, or to participate and then withdraw, other than those already described in this letter. These decisions will not affect your relationship with your professors or the university.

### **What will happen to the information I give, and is privacy and confidentiality assured?**

Information that identifies anyone will be removed from the data collected. All data will be de-identified using pseudonyms and coding and changes to other identifying features before the work is reported. The data is then stored securely in a locked cabinet or digitally in the researchers office at Edith Cowan University. The data will be stored for a minimum period of 5 years, after which it will be destroyed. This will be achieved by shredding all documents and removing all digital data from files. The data is maintained in a way that enables us to re-identify an individual's data and destroy it if participation is withdrawn. This is done by coding the names of students.

Your identity will not be disclosed at any time. Participant privacy, and the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants, is assured at all other times. The data will be used only for this project, and will not be used in any extended or future research without first obtaining explicit written consent from you. You can expect this to be available July, 2012. A summary of the research findings will also be made available upon completion of the project. You can access this by contacting the researcher and expect it to become available in July 2012.

### **Are there any risks associated with participation?**

Yes:

It is possible that in discussing your experience of educational change and your participation in research material some participants may feel discomfort, emotions about the issues raised and they may not feel comfortable speaking about their experiences in front of peers.

All participants will be informed ahead of the interviews that they may feel discomfort and will be able to withdraw at any time. Should participants need counselling this will be arranged through student services. They may also withdraw their data from the study.

### **Is this research approved?**

The research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### **Who do I contact if I wish to discuss the project further?**

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with a member of the research team, please contact me. Or speak with my supervisors Professor Brenda Cherednichenko

[b.cherednichenko@ecu.edu.au](mailto:b.cherednichenko@ecu.edu.au) and Professor Jan Gray [jan.gray@ecu.edu.au](mailto:jan.gray@ecu.edu.au). If you wish to speak with an independent person about the conduct of the project, please contact Ms Kim Gifkins, Research Ethics Officer, Edith Cowan University, Tel: (+61 8) 6304 2170, Fax: (+61 8) 6304 2661 or [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au).

### **How do I become involved?**

If you have had all questions about the project answered to your satisfaction, and are willing to become involved, please complete the **Consent Form** on the next page.

This information letter is for you to keep.

## Appendix H

### Research Questions, Interview Details and Interview Questions

Participants will be invited for a face to face interview on themes identified from the survey. The participants will be contacted via their e-mail addresses and given the choice of two dates to attend. Sessions will be recorded via digital means without anyone being identified.

The two dates are: Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010 at 12-12.30pm and Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2010 at 12.30-1pm.

#### Research Overarching Focus Questions:

1. What factors influence the tertiary education experience of Emirati women?
2. What is the role of culture in the tertiary education experience of Emirati women?
3. What are the subtle, dynamic personal and professional changes that take place with students as they progress through their tertiary education?

The Interview sessions will begin with an Introduction, explaining the overall purpose of the interview.

Questions will start with easy ones, moving from general to specific.

#### Beginning Questions

How did feel about studying in a university? (Educational Environment)

What kind of pre-university schooling did you experience?

#### Transition Question

Think back. What was your relationship like with teachers before you came to university and how has it changed, if at all? (Relationship with Teachers)

#### Key Questions

What was your family's attitude to you studying at university? (Cultural Sensitivity)

How has your attitude to studying changed while at University? In what ways, please describe them. (Learning Styles)

If you did not have the opportunity to study in a university how would that affect you if at all?

What are your professional aspirations for your future? (Gender Capital)

**Ending Questions**

Imagine that I needed to know more about what Emirati women believe their cultural identity is. What would you tell me?

What, if any have been the changes in your traditional roles? (Cultural Identity)

I would like assistance in knowing more in order to help students and faculty understand how you feel your education has altered your opinions? Is there anything we didn't cover in today's interview? Is there anything you would like to add to the interview?