

Making Higher Education Choices in Dubai

By Hanan Al Fardan and Fatma Belrehif

ABSTRACT

The transition from school to higher education is full of excitement and anticipation for many students. Leaving school is often considered to be one of the main steps to greater individual responsibility and the path to adulthood. One of the most difficult challenges in this transition period is determining a student's preferred course of study. Making such a high-stakes decision is often confusing and troubling for many young people, but can often be helped by using a variety of information sources, such as support from family, friends and peers, or through using career days and prospectuses to identify the programs which best fit the individual's needs. This policy brief reflects on higher education choices for secondary school leavers who choose to study in Dubai and discusses the impact of key influencers in such a decision. It also discusses the challenges and opportunities in Dubai's private higher education landscape before identifying some policy recommendations.

Introduction

Students will consider various factors in making their higher education choice, including their own personal interests, their parents' desires and those of their friends, their natural talent towards particular areas and whether they wish to select a more general course or one which includes professional training.

The graduates from secondary schools have many factors to consider before embarking upon further studies in Dubai, with its multicultural student population and wide variety of higher education offerings. The objective of this policy brief is to discuss factors which determine choices for higher education applicants in Dubai.

In addition, this paper looks at the key influencers in making the decision to continue to a higher education institution in Dubai. These include family, friends and peers, teachers, career counselors and mentors. Finally, this paper aims to put forward recommendations for students and parents, schools, higher education institutions and the Government of Dubai.

Key Influencers

A variety of information sources are frequently used by university applicants. The importance lies in making informed decisions in an environment where the right judgement is required to make the most effective decisions. Below are listed key influencers:

Family

University students and young adults cite parents as an important influence on their choice of career. Studies find that the family appears to play a critical role in a child's career development.¹ These studies also reveal that parental education, occupation and income influence career aspirations. When adolescents perceive their parents to have high educational expectations for them, they are likely to have higher aspirations for themselves.

Parents convey their influence to children through interactions such as conversations and through their reactions (both verbal and nonverbal). This then affects what children think, say and perceive about various careers.

Friends and peers

Friends and peers play an equally significant role in the decisions surrounding university/college choices. Students feel comfortable in discussing feelings and emotions more openly with friends and can expect honest feedback. Friendship provides a safety network. Amongst certain communities, the influence of peers in higher education choices is significant.² To have friends at the same higher education institution can be a major factor in deciding university location.

Faculty members and school staff

The influence of faculty members and school staff within the school is also important. Teachers and school staff have usually gained the trust of the students of a school over a number of years and are, therefore, seen as reliable and trustworthy



¹ Taylor et al. (2004)

² Focus Adolescent Services (2011)

in making a judgement. Teachers are also aware of the student's academic strengths and weaknesses.

Career Counselor

One of the key factors influencing a student's choice is the skills and training of a career counselor. A good career counselor also needs to ensure that he/she works with all staff and teachers at the school to ensure that subject choices in school are appropriate for a student's ultimate study destination.

A career counselor also often organises work placement programmes and invites people from a variety of work backgrounds to a school. Career counselors also organise university fairs in schools, where they welcome a number of universities onto their premises to brief students on their offerings. Cultural expectations of career counselors vary extensively around the world dependent upon particular groups in society.³

Mentors

A mentorship, peer mentor or a mentor-mentee relationship, has shown through research to greatly influence a student's career aspirations.⁴ Peer mentoring in education is popular in the US, usually between students of similar backgrounds, interests and life experiences. Due to a general lack of role models for many students, having an older relative or a friend of the family who provides help with time management, study skills, organisational skills, etc. can be greatly beneficial and seen as key essentials when growing up. As it becomes time to choose a higher education, a mentor who has been part of the student's life for a longer period can provide valuable help.

Higher Education in Dubai

The most important decision a secondary school graduate has to make is the choice of a higher education course. One of the most common reasons for students dropping out of university or college is that they have chosen the wrong course or that they have not done enough research into the content of their course before applying.

Another important factor that also needs to be taken into account is the entry requirements for a particular course and the likely grades the student will be required to achieve. In making these choices, it is important to be realistic.⁵

If a student decides to continue his/her education in Dubai, the higher education landscape consists

of 52 institutions with a variety of programmes on offer. These institutions fall into different categories - namely, federal institutions, branch campuses of international universities which are located in the Free Zones and private UAE universities. Federal institutions cater mainly to Emiratis, whilst the others cater mainly to the expatriate population. There is also an increasing trend for international students from the region and beyond to come to Dubai to enroll in higher education institutions.⁶

More than 43,000 students in Dubai are enrolled in a wide array of programmes, ranging from diploma to doctoral level studies. The number of higher education programmes has grown rapidly over the years; and in 2011, school leavers had a choice of 281 programmes, with a further 151 programmes available for postgraduate study. Data from the Higher Education Landscape Report of 2011, produced by KHDA, reveals that 69% of students in Dubai are taking Bachelor's programmes and 19% enrolled in Master's degrees.⁷ The most popular fields of study are Business (40% of students) and Society, Law and Religion (19% of students). Many of Dubai's secondary students pursue further education opportunities outside of the UAE upon graduation for a variety of reasons.

Dubai's demography, with its vast expatriate population, makes for a fascinating cultural mix of different nationalities and religions with different needs, preferences and goals. Looking into demographic data, the Emirati population in Dubai is about 168,000, out of a total Emirate population of around 2 million⁸, a rather small number compared to the vast numbers of expatriates.

In Dubai, considerations which go into the choice of university vary according to nationality and background and, with such a culturally diverse population, this means that factors affecting university selection are often different from those in a more culturally homogenous city.

Study in Dubai

Private universities have seen a considerable increase in their Emirati enrolment in recent years, despite the fact that enrolment in federal institutions is free for Emiratis. Branch campuses are a popular choice for Emiratis as they are able to gain an internationally recognised qualification. Many universities in Dubai may not provide the all-round university experience that is common on larger international university campuses abroad.

³ The Princetown Review (2012)

⁴ Grant-Valloe and Ensher (2000)

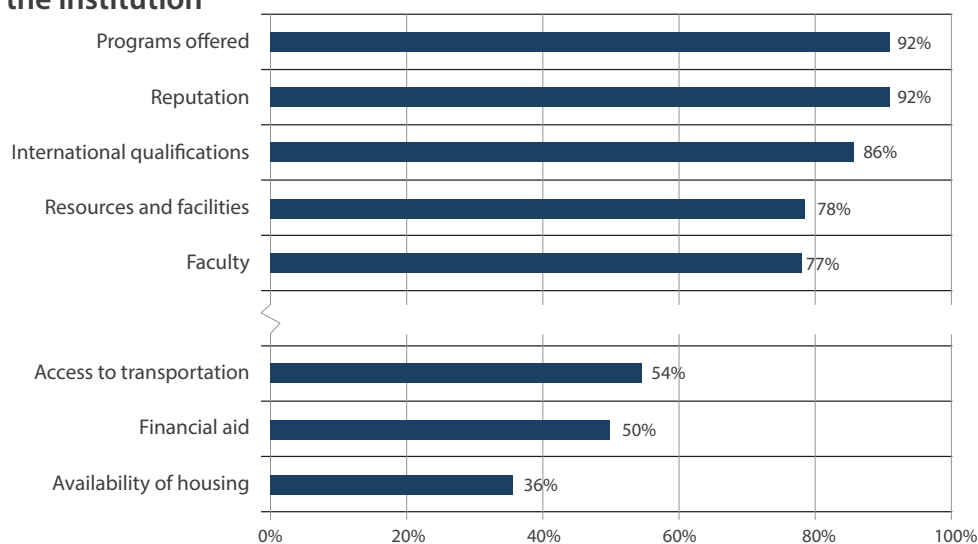
⁵ Newcastle University (2011)

⁶ KHDA (2011a)

⁷ KHDA (2011a)

⁸ Dubai Statistics Center (2012)

Proportion of student responses that rated a factor as important in deciding to enrol at the institution



Source: Higher Education Student Satisfaction Survey, 2011

The wide number of programme offerings in Dubai tends to be concentrated within a few fields, mainly in business, law, religion, IT and engineering. There are fewer opportunities to specialise in natural and physical sciences, mathematics, education, agriculture, transport and health care. Many private universities currently offer only a few particular programmes and, should a student wish to study something else, he/she will have to apply elsewhere.

Vocational education in particular is underdeveloped in Dubai, although some progress is being made in this direction with the establishment of the National Institute for Vocational Education (NIVE) which offers some programmes to help mainly Emiratis enter the workforce. There also remains a perception amongst young people in Dubai to view vocational training as a less credible alternative to a university or a college degree.

There is a current trend amongst the Emirati higher education applicants to follow each other into the same programmes. Emiratis often choose the same courses at a few selected universities.⁹ This may be because students do not always fully understand their personal strengths and interests, nor do they appreciate the range of courses and career options open to them in Dubai.

Quality

It is important that Dubai's higher education institutions attain international recognition for quality. In addition, students need to be assured that the quality of the education they receive at a branch campus matches that of the university

in its home country. In 2011, KHDA conducted a Higher Education Student Satisfaction Survey which revealed that students in Dubai rated availability of programmes of study as most important when choosing a university (see graph above)¹⁰. This supports the need for higher education providers in Dubai to match their programme offerings to meet the needs to the demands of the job market.

Although the higher education market in Dubai is young and will take a considerable amount of time to reach maturity and gain a long-standing reputation, universities have to abide by quality standards set by the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB).¹¹ Recently, Resolution 21 has come into effect, which certifies KHDA to authenticate the certificates of universities in the Free Zones, allowing graduates to have their qualification recognised and to take up employment within either the public or the private sector in Dubai. This has significantly boosted the interest in private higher education in Dubai.

Costs and value

Cost is a major factor in the decision-making process for students in many countries around the world as well as in Dubai. Generally, in the Gulf countries, citizens are provided with free university education, often in very modern facilities.

For Emiratis, the decision is whether to take advantage of a federally-funded education or to invest in study at a private university. For expatriate residents in Dubai and international students, there are a variety of options and, again, several choices

⁹ KHDA (2011a)

¹⁰ KHDA (2011b)

¹¹ KHDA (2009)

have to be made. These include the cost implications of choosing one institution over another, the value of the degree in Dubai versus its value abroad and the international standing of a branch campus, both in its home country and internationally.

Reputation

Word of mouth is an important factor in decision-making in the UAE. Families naturally play an important part in a child's decision. However, due to the generation gap between Emirati parents and students, it is increasingly common for students to seek advice from peers or career counselors (if available) in their schools. Expatriate students, however, traditionally rely more on advice from family members. Aid from career counselors has always been an important part of the application process. Students applying for institutions in the UAE have to rely on a university's home country ranking, prospectuses, attendance at open days, career fairs and other marketing information. Additionally, different ranking scales use varying methodologies to compile their lists.

The 2011 Higher Education Student Satisfaction Survey also revealed that reputation is one of the key drivers when choosing a university in Dubai. Dubai, as an educational hub, still to a large extent relies on students whose parents are resident in the UAE (50% of students who partook in the satisfaction survey stated that they lived with a relative whilst studying).¹² Dubai International Academic City is also establishing itself as a destination of choice for international students.

Opportunity

For many expatriate students, it makes sense to study in Dubai where they are in closer contact with a job market which may provide them with valuable future employment opportunities. Universities work closely with key employers to provide work placements after graduation.

Other ways of connecting with employers are available, including an online careers portal called Gradberry which was launched in November 2011 in Dubai. This functions as an online meeting place for students, graduates and employers. The careers portal mainly focuses on providing internships for students and entry-level positions for university graduates.¹³

¹² KHDA (2011b)

¹³ Gradberry (2011)

¹⁴ DSIB (2011)

Culture

As a generally conservative society, Emiratis sometimes show a reluctance to allow their children, particularly girls, to travel abroad for further education. For the students themselves, there can also be a reluctance to leave family and friends. Expatriates who choose to pursue education in Dubai are normally well aware of the different cultural context in which they have chosen to study. Having considered the above factors, it is clear that there is no single definitive characteristic that can be used to identify whether a university is right for a particular student. Every applicant looks for something different from a university and every university offers something unique.

Sources of Information for University Applicants in Dubai

Career counselors

One of the factors influencing a student's choice is the skills and training of a career counselor and these skills vary from school to school in Dubai. Within Dubai's private school landscape, career counseling is in some cases well defined, where the counselor has had proper training and significant experience. In other cases, a counselor is required to perform other duties and their role can be more accurately described as a guidance counselor. A good career counselor will provide help to the student in making better-informed choices or encourage him/her not to apply to a course at university for which he/she is not suited.

In a multicultural environment such as Dubai, the role of a career counselor can be particularly challenging. A lack of a central source of information and the absence of consolidated higher education brochures and/or websites means that it can be difficult for career counselors to provide students with truly comprehensive information. School inspections reveal that, sometimes, career counselors promote certain countries' university offerings over others, often depending on the curriculum of the school in which they are working. Cultural expectations of career counselors vary between different groups in society. For example, Indian families tend to rely less on career services, as education and career routes are often pre-determined by the family.¹⁴

Where schools have work placement programmes and/or invite people from a variety of work

backgrounds into the school, students generally have a clearer picture of the world of work and the career options open to them.

University fairs / Open days

University fairs in Dubai are usually annual events held by higher education institutions to promote their programme offerings, facilities and staff. Institutions conduct presentation sessions; and many institutions also bring professors, administrators and current students to meet prospective students. Students are generally able to pick up prospectuses and provide universities with their personal contact information for future communication. Universities also visit specific schools in Dubai to distribute promotional materials and to meet prospective applicants.

Universities also hold open day sessions, which usually take place in autumn or spring. They provide a great opportunity to visit the university, visit departments and colleges, sit in on classes, meet tutors and students as well as have a look around the campus itself.¹⁵

Career days

Schools in Dubai are increasingly organising annual career day events where speakers from different career backgrounds provide students with their insight of what is to be expected of a certain career choice. Different career booths are also set up on the school grounds giving students the opportunity to actively speak to individuals from different fields.¹⁶

Prospectuses

All Dubai universities provide prospectuses, either in paper format or an online version available on the university websites. The prospectus usually contains information about the institution and the available courses, including advice on how to apply and the benefits of accepting a place.

Perspectives of Dubai Parents

The Parents' Survey, conducted annually with parents of children in private schools in Dubai as part of the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) school inspection process, shows a high level of satisfaction with the career guidance offered to secondary school students. Amongst Emirati parents, only 6% are dissatisfied to some degree, with 94% expressing satisfaction with the career guidance in their children's schools.¹⁷ Non-Emirati parents are slightly less satisfied with 11% being dissatisfied to some degree (see chart below).

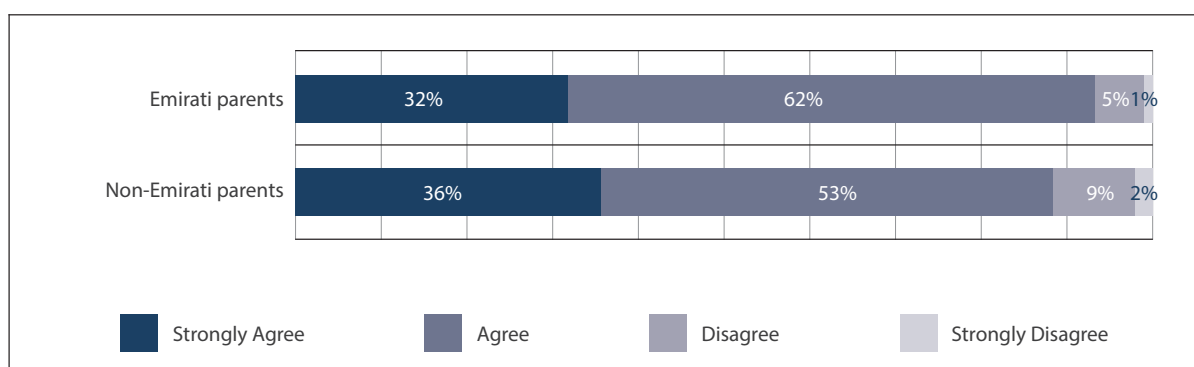
Correlating DSIB overall ratings for schools and parental responses shows that where schools are rated as outstanding, parents strongly agree that career guidance is delivered to an outstanding level. This seems to be the case throughout the different rating levels: the better the DSIB rating, the higher the parental satisfaction (see chart on next page).

Challenges and Opportunities

This report reveals that there are many challenges and opportunities within the private higher education landscape in Dubai. The following challenges and opportunities are noteworthy.

Challenges

- Ensure that programme offerings at universities in Dubai are appropriate for the demands of the local job market whilst staying competitive internationally to attract a greater number of students. It is important to emphasise offerings in a wider range of fields of study (such as education, service industry, tourism and hospitality and health care) in order to provide more choice for secondary school leavers.
- Many of Dubai's universities do not provide the same cultural and resident university experience that is common on larger international

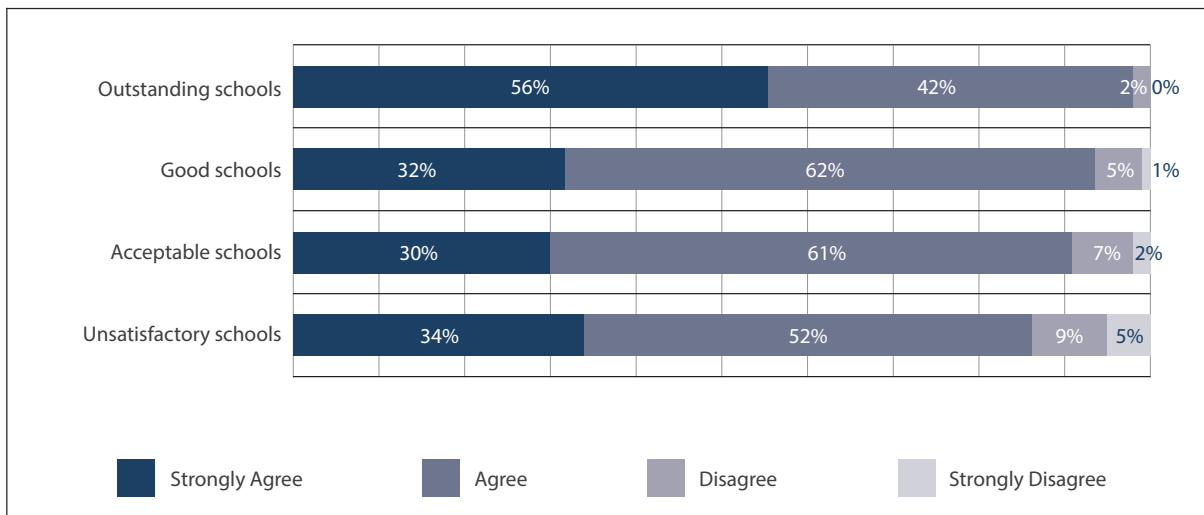


Source: DSIB Parent Survey, 2011

¹⁵ Menon (2011)

¹⁶ Al Hinai (2012)

¹⁷ DSIB (2012)



Source: DSIB Parent Survey, 2011

university campuses abroad, which might deter students from applying.

- The skills and training of career counselors vary from school to school in Dubai. Schools should differentiate between a career counselor and a guidance counselor and appreciate the need for both.
- There is a lack of widespread provision of career counseling to Emiratis in schools.
- There is a lack of comprehensive information on the higher education programmes on offer in Dubai.

Opportunities

- Increase choices - expanding general university programme offerings without compromising quality.
- Expand vocational programme offerings and promote vocational education as a valued alternative academic route.
- Promote universities’ link with the local job market and major companies.
- Encourage co-operation between schools and universities in Dubai to better provide secondary school leavers with the appropriate higher education information.
- Place an emphasis on quality, rather than trying to achieve 100% satisfaction with regard to location, facilities and cost/value.

Policy Recommendations

Clear and accurate information about higher education and career options in Dubai is of great importance to students. This will require students,

parents, schools and the community to work together. Higher education institutions need to work closely with schools and the community at large to raise awareness of the opportunities they provide. The Government of Dubai needs to support tools for creating an informative society which upholds quality at its core. Within schools, career counselors themselves need to ensure that they interact with a wide variety of tertiary education providers in order to match students’ abilities and preferences with the appropriate providers. The following approaches are recommended:

1. Encourage information seeking

Students and parents to more actively use the resources available to them whilst choosing a higher education institution. They should also be encouraged to consider a wider range of higher education programmes and career options.

2. Encourage students to seek advice from multiple information sources

Secondary school leavers, particularly Emiratis, to more actively seek a variety of information sources when applying for higher education, such as family members, friends, teachers, career counselors and mentors.

3. Ensure awareness of the importance of the role of career counselors

Encourage awareness within schools of the differing roles of career counselors and guidance counselors and the importance of the provision of both. Integrate a systematic approach across the school to nurture a broader awareness of career opportunities within society and particularly amongst Emiratis.

4. Improve connections between schools and higher education institutions

Schools and universities to work more effectively with each other in Dubai, including encouragement of participation in open days, career fairs, university fairs, etc.

5. Engage actively with the community

Higher education institutions to more actively engage with employers and the wider community in Dubai to ensure that programme offerings and graduate skills are relevant to the job market.

6. Increase awareness

The Government of Dubai to use its resources to increase awareness of what is offered within

Dubai's universities and colleges. Together with the university/college community, websites should provide information highlighting programmes, facilities, costs and campus life in Dubai, and the employability potential of their graduates.

7. Increase cooperation

The Government of Dubai to promote co-operation between private school career counselors. DSIB inspection reports can be used to identify schools that have good practice and those that would benefit from its wider dissemination.

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Fatma has a B.A. in education with honours from Zayed University and a Master of Public Administration from the Dubai School of Government where she graduated with honours and earned the best research award.

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During this time, Hanan has worked on a range of projects, including the Dubai Higher Education Landscape Report 2010 and 2011, the University Census project collecting data across all universities in Dubai, research report on why Emirati parents choose private schools in Dubai, EDAAD scholarship program for UAE Nationals and a report with Mercator Fund on the perceptions of unemployed youth in the UAE.

Currently, she is working with the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB). The purpose of UQAIB is to provide KHDA with reputable, independent, and international input and guidance on the quality of higher education provided in Dubai Free Zones.

Hanan has a keen interest in UAE culture and enjoys teaching Emirati dialect to non-Arabic speakers.

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About the Knowledge and Human Development Authority

KHDA is an education authority, created to improve schools and other human resource sectors in Dubai. They work to promote lifelong learning to fulfill Dubai's aspirations. KHDA's mission is to assure quality and to improve accessibility to education, learning and human development, with the engagement of the community. They coordinate with many different partners – students, parents, teachers, the private sector and other Government bodies. KHDA's work plans are derived from the Government's strategy and carried out in a transparent manner to make sure everything they do benefits their highest priority – Dubai's students.

About the Dubai School of Government

The Dubai School of Government (DSG) is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy. Established in 2005 under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, DSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the capacity for effective public policy in the United Arab Emirates and the region.

Toward this goal, the Dubai School of Government also collaborates with regional and global institutions in delivering its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy at the national and regional levels.

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