



The impact of generation and socioeconomic status on the value of higher education in the UAE: A longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the differences between student and parents' value orientation for a college degree across a large sample in the UAE. The value of obtaining a higher education degree in the UAE is transgenerational. Salient benefits of a college degree can be categorized by economic, social and entrepreneurial factors and a model is set forth based on an intrinsic/extrinsic and self vs. other continuum. Education and income are related to valuing several educational outcomes. The most important factor identified across generations included both self-transcendence and self-enhancement values. From 2011–2015, the importance of higher education's social benefits has increased.

1. Introduction

Born in the late 20th century, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a young nation and has pursued a national growth strategy to build a knowledge-based economy by investing its significant oil and gas rents in education and infrastructure (World Economic Forum, 2013). With a total population of just over 9 million (World Bank, 2015), the UAE is located on the 7th largest proven oil reserve in the world (Gulf News, 2013). For the last several decades, like other oil rich countries in the Middle East, the UAE has sought to diversify their economy from one that depends on natural resources to one that is driven by knowledge and innovation, i.e., human capital (Bahgat, 1999; Nabli, 2007; World Bank, 2011).

Investment in improving the quality of higher education for nationals has gone hand in hand with economic growth. Due to the strategic importance of knowledge capital in a global economy, the UAE has sought to internationalize higher education by predominantly recruiting universities, faculty and administrators from Western academics (Mills, 2008). Central to a vision of preparing citizens for a leadership role in a global economy, education, including higher education, is funded by the government for *all* the country's citizens. Academics from around the world have worked closely with the government to transform the higher education system and ensure quality in teaching, learning and research. The country has been able to attract international expertise which has supported its rapid growth trajectory and has resulted in a more globally competitive growth

economy (Ewers and Malecki, 2010; World Bank, 2011). As a result of these developments, expatriates account for over 80% of the UAE population—a percentage which is one of the highest in the world (CIA Factbook, 2013). In addition, over the last several decades, there has been a significant increase in the rate and pattern of participation of nationals in higher education. In 2014, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research reported that the total number of students in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was 128,279 (Higher Education 2013–2014, 2013). Of this total, 77,397 in 2013/14 or 60% are nationals compared to 72,268 in 2012/13 and 67,711 in 2011/2012.

Many countries are engaged in the “great brain race,” as they understand the significant role that higher education and human capital play in fostering innovation, economic development and competitive advantage (Hatch and Dyer, 2004; Wildavsky, 2010 Lane and Johnstone, 2012). There is a growing understanding of the link between funding a college education and economic development (McMahon, 2009). For example, former U.S. President Barack Obama established targets to (1) double the percentage of U.S. citizens with a quality postsecondary degree over the next decade (Zaback et al., 2012) and (2) have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Bruce, 2012). Higher education is needed to develop a strong knowledge/skills base, which is required to underpin social and economic development. A citizen's access to education and the acquisition of knowledge benefit not only the individual but ultimately the entire nation.

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The striking transformation of the UAE from a developing country to a global economy is reflected in the [2015 Human Development Report](#), where the UAE is classified as very high in human development. The index is based on a country's average achievement of life expectancy, knowledge and standard of living. Other countries in the same category include Norway, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to name a few. Similarly, based on greater macro-economic stability and continued improvements in a market economy, the UAE is regarded as an economy in transition from an efficiency-driven to an innovation driven economy ([Global Competitiveness Report, 2014](#)). These milestones are noteworthy especially in light of the difficulties and conflict that is evident in the Arab region.

Against the backdrop of these significant social and political developments as well as improvements in global competitiveness and educational attainment, are there corresponding changes in attitudes and values regarding higher education among nationals? Related to [Bond and Lun's \(2014\)](#) notion of socializing citizens to align with national goals, has the country's agenda to build a nation through investments in human capital channeled through an institutional framework, resulted in the desired cultural transmission?

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived benefits of receiving a college education focusing on generational similarities and differences giving a much-needed look at how parents and students value a college degree in recent years in the UAE. More specifically, the following questions are addressed:

1. Has the perceived value of a college degree increased from 2011 to 2015?
2. Does the importance of a college degree vary by education levels?
3. Does the importance of a college degree vary by income levels?
4. Is there a difference in how students and parents perceive the value of higher education?

This study makes a number of contributions to the educational literature. First, it helps enrich the conceptual understanding of the value of higher education through the perspective of a nonwestern culture thus documenting the nature and extent of educational change and human capital development during a period of significant economic growth. Second, new insights are offered from a field-based perspective about the dimensionality of the construct as well as the differences among the groups. This is achieved by careful scale development and quantitative analysis based on a representative audience that includes students, mothers and fathers. In doing so, we validate the measure for a large sample group and offer a parsimonious scale that captures key information about the stakeholder groups. This study provides an empirical basis for developing the underlying latent set of dimensions that comprise students, mothers and fathers understanding of the perceived benefits of a college degree. We examine the findings in view of theories on values by identifying the salient values and validating the constructs within the nomological network—especially those constructs explicated by the extant research on socioeconomic factors and [Schwartz's \(1992; 1994\)](#) work on universal human values. By comparing the results from a unique sample to other contexts, this study adds to the body of knowledge on social structure and value change.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the relevant literature on the value of higher education in general is reviewed. Next, three theoretical views are discussed in relation to propositions linking socioeconomic status to higher education values. Last, the theories of generation cohorts vs. nationalization socialization effects are compared with a view to the culture and social networks specific to the UAE providing a theoretical foundation for the research questions and survey development. The methodology section introduces the hypotheses derived from the research questions followed by a description of the methodology, analysis and findings. The study concludes by considering the wider societal implications due to increased levels of

educational attainment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Values

The value of higher education in general, and for women in particular, is well documented ([Wang and Parker, 2011; Vuolo et al., 2016](#)). The benefits of a college degree are broadly categorized as economic (materialistic) and social/humanistic (e.g., [Kingston et al., 2003; McMahon, 2009; Trostel, 2010](#)). While economic benefits include higher salaries and benefits, better employment, higher savings, and more professional mobility, social benefits include better health and longer life expectancy, improved quality of life for children and others, better consumer decision making and increased personal status ([The Investment Payoff, 2005](#)). Not only do college degrees result in economic benefits to the individual, but also for a nation. Government spending for individuals with a college degree has been shown to be *negative*—the average return on government investments in college students is estimated to be over 10% ([Trostel, 2010](#)) – while citizens with a college education are more likely to contribute to their community ([Kingston et al., 2003](#)).

Overall, most scholars consider the values of an individual to have developed by late adolescence. It is also postulated that these values are relatively stable over time ([Konty and Dunham, 1997](#)). [Rokeach \(1973\)](#) defines values as enduring beliefs that certain behaviors are personally or socially preferable. According to [Rohan \(2000\)](#), values go beyond simply liking an entity; values define a personal or cultural ideal. People acquire values through experience and cognition, and values are important because they impact decision-making, motivation and behavior ([Latham and Pinder, 2005](#)), such as enrolling in a university. Individuals act to realize the values that they consider the most important. Therefore, values, which are embedded in the social structure, regulate the actions of individuals. In a study of value change due to education, [Bardi et al. \(2014\)](#) concluded that students self-selected into universities, and that their values did not change due to the socialization that occurs in college. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. There is no change in the perceived importance of higher education from 2011–2015 for all groups.

2.2. Socioeconomic status

Numerous studies have documented how parental socio-economic status (SES), i.e., parents' education, income and occupation, influences children's educational and economic outcomes. Although both parental education and income have received scholarly scrutiny, it is important to note that typically education, occupation and income are strongly correlated. Here, the literature is reviewed examining the relationship between the parents' education and income and children's education. Three important theoretical models that illustrate the direct and indirect affects of parental SES and children's educational and social wellbeing are (1) the family stress model (FSM) (2) the family investment model (FIM) and (3) Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction.

According to the FSM, financial distress and lower maternal and paternal education are negatively associated with parental socio-psychological wellbeing, which in turn affects the parent-child relationship ([Conger and Donnellan, 2007](#)). This is expected to have adverse effects on children's intellectual capabilities. More recently, [Zhang \(2012\)](#) found that in China, parental education is a significant predictor of family cohesion. This finding is congruent with the prediction that there is a positive spillover effect of parental education on family environment that fosters the intellectual growth of children ([Conger et al., 2010](#)).

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