

**An Exploratory Case Study of the Development and Implementation
of Employment Policies and the Impact of these Policies on Graduate
Employability in the
United Arab Emirates – Societal Change in Action**

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Abstract

This study examines employment policies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and their impact on graduate employability, within the context of substantive labour market and socio-economic changes. These changes, driven by national policies, are viewed through the lens of social practice theories, to better understand the societal factors at play. Graduate employability is largely viewed in the literature as the skills and abilities needed by graduates to meet labour market requirements. Little research has been carried out on the societal factors that affect employability strategy, especially within the UAE context. My research addresses this gap by using a single case study qualitative design. Drawing on twenty-five years' experience of working on UAE graduate employability skills programmes, my research offers a unique perspective.

I conducted interviews with key stakeholders and reviewed publicly available documents on UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty stakeholders who represent policymakers, and leading Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and employers. All stakeholders interviewed have an active role in UAE graduate employability strategies, and provided invaluable insights into UAE employment policies. A review of publicly available documents provided the all-important context for stakeholders' responses and revealed that UAE employment policies have changed substantially over the last twenty years. The findings showed that multiple iterations of employment policy were in response to socio-economic factors, and these have had an impact on the UAE labour market and the lives of Emiratis and expatriates.

Using Bourdieu's framework and Positional Conflict Theory (PCT), this study provides a unique perspective of the UAE labour market and societal changes taking place. Drawing from these insights, my study provides recommendations for policymakers, HEIs, and employers on how they might build on their relationship, as Emiratis and expatriates navigate the labour market changes described in my study.

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Glossary and list of abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|---|
| ADEK | Department of Education and Knowledge |
| AHELO | Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes |
| CDA | Critical Discourse Analysis |
| DGE | Department of Government Enablement |
| Emirati | UAE citizen or national |
| Emiratisation | An affirmative policy to promote Emirati employment |
| Expatriate | A legal resident of the UAE |
| FNC | Federal National Council |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEI | Higher Education Institute |
| HRA | Human Resource Authority – replaced by DGE |
| KHDA | Knowledge and Human Development Authority |
| Labour Law | Regulations governing employment in the UAE |
| MOE | Ministry of Education |
| MOHRE | Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation |
| NAFIS | National programme promoting Emiratisation |
| NES | National Employment Strategy |
| OECD | Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PCT | Positional Conflict Theory |
| Quota | Mandated percentage of Emirati employees for employers |
| TA | Thematic Analysis |
| TANMIA | Early Emiratisation initiative |
| TAWTEEN | Portal used by employers to apply to MOHRE for work permits |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| Vision 21 | Overarching UAE economic strategy |

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Mohammed Islam

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been offered previously for any other higher degree elsewhere. The content of this thesis has not been previously published or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere.

The total word count, including appendices, conforms to the permitted maximum length.

SignatureMohammed Islam.....

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Preamble

Employability or the “propensity of students to obtain a job” (Harvey 2000:98) is a much talked about topic globally by universities, employers and indeed governments. This study undertakes a critical analysis of the factors that may be driving the development and implementation of graduate employability strategies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) within the broader context of general employment policies and UAE labour market changes. Particular emphasis was placed on employment policies that affect graduates’ propensity to secure employment in the UAE. Why and how these policies came about is considered through the lens of Social Practice theories. Stakeholders representing Higher Education (HE), Employers and Policymakers were interviewed on graduate employability in the UAE between 2020 and 2021. Publicly available documents from 1980 - 2024 provided the all-important context to understand these conversations. This chapter provides the background for the study, the gap in the literature, research questions addressing this gap, methods used, my position as the researcher, and the intended method of data interpretation with reference to the theoretical lens used.

1.2 Background

Developed and developing countries have increasingly adopted the standpoint that the economic welfare of its citizens and the competitive advantage of the country itself, depend on the knowledge and skills of its workforce (Brown et al 2003; Lauder 2011; Brown and Lauder 2012; World Bank 2024; World Economic Forum 2025). The term ‘knowledge economy’, often attributed to the economist Peter Drucker, can be described as an economy that is developed through the application of its knowledge diversification and capacity. The UAE is a wealthy emerging knowledge economy that seeks to diversify its revenue sources and compete on the world stage as a global trade and technology hub. Much investment has been made in building the UAE’s capacity in knowledge

and technology-based sectors (WAM 2015; Kazim 2017; Ministry of Investment 2024; Investemirates.ae 2025).

The significance of the pursuit of a knowledge economy in driving labour market changes is evidenced throughout my study. This is a reflection of successive government policies and the prevalent global neoliberal mantra that a knowledge economy is the sole route to a nation's economic success. As Smith (2000) argues, however, the term knowledge economy is sometimes used in a superficial manner and can be used by state actors to justify major changes in how the labour market is reshaped and regulated. A central theme in my study of UAE employment policies and approach to graduate employability, is the UAE labour market changes brought about by the nation's shift to high value-added skills in technology based industries. Brown and Hesketh (2004), in their critique of a wholesale pursuit of a knowledge economy, point out that the approach used by proponents of a knowledge based economy, oversimplify the relationship between skills and economic success.

The seemingly unquestionable mantra of the knowledge economy is led, in part by influential organisations such as the World Bank, with its Knowledge Economy Index (Chen and Dahlman 2006) and the OECD (2013). The influence of the OECD, particularly with regard to employability, is discussed further in 2.2.2. I agree with critics of the dominance of the knowledge economy mantra (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Brown and Lauder 2012; Brown et al 2020), who argue that the rapid expansion and marketisation of university education has not delivered on its promise of equality of job opportunities for all. The shortcoming in equating a university education to the promise of employment, ignores the societal structure of the nation in question. In this study, it is these societal structures, power dynamics and policy implications that are explored in more detail. As Alawad (2024) points out, the UAE labour market is undergoing profound change and the central driver is policymakers' strategy for the UAE to establish a globally competitive knowledge-based economy. My study explores these labour market changes, the socio-economic policy decisions driving them, the societal impact and the effect on higher education and graduate employability for UAE citizens and expatriates alike.

As the notion of knowledge economies has gained traction, one of the central issues for universities, employers and governments is the role of Higher Education (HE) and its relationship with the changing needs of society and the workplace. The notion of labour market needs, the knowledge economy and HE's role in serving market needs, are recurrent themes in HE policy at a global level. It is in this context that policies on graduate employability are shaped by governments. As Harvey (2000) indicates, there are '*New Realities that ask searching questions about the relationship between higher education and employment*' (2000:14).

Considering the fall in oil prices in 2008/2009, the UAE economy is diversifying, and the oft repeated term 'knowledge economy' is seen as a primary goal in this process. Repeated reference to the knowledge economy goal is made in the Vision 2021 National Agenda (N.D). Education and HE in particular, is seen as pivotal in ensuring graduates' skills match the country's needs. The UAE, as an emerging knowledge economy, is at the forefront of rapid change and has embraced the tripartite relationship between higher education institutes (HEI), employers and government. In doing so, it has embraced the 'triple helix' model of Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, (1995). This is evidenced by the UAE hosting the 2018 Triple Helix summit in Dubai. This echoes the neoliberal approach taken by successive UK governments, as shown in the UK Green Paper on HE (2016). Preparing students for employment is seen as a priority for HE at a global level.

The UAE has an evolving higher education landscape, where globalisation and an increasing emphasis on a knowledge-based economy have had an impact on the relationship between HEI's, government and employers. The demographic makeup of the UAE offers a unique set of circumstances within which to study graduate employability policy. The UAE has over 88% of the population who are expatriates (residents). My study considers the relative access to HE and employment for UAE nationals or Emiratis (citizens) and expatriates (residents). *Citizens* is the name used for UAE nationals in government policies, but the terms *Emiratis*, *locals* and *nationals* are more commonly used by UAE citizens and residents alike. For consistency, I use the

term Emirati throughout this study to describe UAE citizens. Likewise, for residents, I use the term expatriates to describe non-Emiratis who are legally resident in the UAE.

1.3 The UAE Higher Education System

The UAE HE system has changed significantly over the last 20-30 years. From a single, state funded public university in 1977 (UAE University), the UAE now boasts over 100 HEIs. The majority of these HEIs are private, fee paying institutions, with an array of international branch campuses. As Ashour and Fatima (2016) point out, the private sector has significant influence over HE in the UAE and the HE sector has become market dependent and driven by the demands of that market. Such is the expansion of HE in the UAE that the country positions itself as a global higher education hub, attracting large numbers of transnational students (DKP N.D). Ashour (2020) reminds us that to understand this rise in demand for HE in the UAE and the current HE landscape, we need to put in the context of the country's demographic composition and the UAE's drive towards building a knowledge-based economy.

As mentioned in 1.2, the UAE has a unique demographic composition, where expatriates represent over 88.5% of the population, with Emiratis making up 11.5%. While the demographic imbalance is discussed further in 5.1.2, Maadad (2003) reported that the 1968 population was just over 200,000 with Emiratis making up over 60% of the total population. Given the influx of expatriates, needed to transform the country into a wealthy knowledge-based economy, competing on the global stage, it is not surprising that the demand for HE expanded exponentially. As reported in the Gulf News (2018), the UAE has invested heavily in the public and private higher education sector to accelerate the development of a diversified knowledge-based economy. Such is the investment made to the UAE HE sector, that the UAE is becoming a large importer of international HEIs (Ashour 2020; British Centres for Business 2024; Alhashmi 2025).

The development of the UAE HE system is led by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Emirates News Agency (WAM 2017) reported on the launch of the National Strategy for Higher Education 2030. One initiative of the strategy was to develop The National Higher Education Institutions Classification Framework (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research 2024). one stated objective of the classification framework is to provide students and parents with data to make informed choices when selecting HEIs. The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) is the UAE Federal Government Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The CAA works with local and international authorities to provide institutional licensure and accreditation of degree programmes. A full list of the 103 accredited HEIs and their degree programmes is available to students and their parents (CAA N.D). When making decisions on HEIs it is important to note that HEIs in the UAE that offer degree programmes fall into three categories:

- State/public funded universities that are predominantly for Emiratis and are free to all UAE citizens. These include Zayed University, UAE University, Higher Colleges of technology, Khalifa University and police/military colleges.
- Local, private, fee paying universities with mostly expatriate students. Examples include Abu Dhabi University, Al Ain University, University of Sharjah, and Ajman University.
- International branch campuses, also private, fee paying universities where the students are mainly expatriates. Examples include New York University – Abu Dhabi, University of Birmingham Dubai and Middlesex University Dubai.

UAE has 16 accredited branches of foreign universities in the country – mainly situated in Dubai



Figure 1.1 International branch campuses - adapted from British Centres for Business (2024)

Although the Ministry of Higher Education has the overall mandate for UAE HE, it is also worth noting that all HEIs in Abu Dhabi must first seek approval from the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) for their institute and degree programmes before submitting an application for accreditation to the CAA (ADEK N.D.). Similarly, private HEIs in Dubai fall under the remit of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). KHDA (2023) boasts of 33 HEIs in Dubai at Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) and Knowledge Village (KV). For ADEK and KHDA, both look to see that the proposed programme meets the labour market requirements of Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively. Also worthy of note is that one of the criteria used in the national HEI classification framework is employability and alignment with the job market. It is this drive to prepare students for the job market and HE alignment with socio-economic that was of interest to me in my study and formed the basis of a very personal agenda.

1.4 Rationale – a personal agenda

How many research projects in the social sciences start from a sense of perplexity at a personal level? A personal interest and curiosity to understand UAE policy on graduate employability stemmed initially from the seemingly unequal aspects of policy implementation vis a vis Emiratis and expatriates. The ensuing impetus for this study came from a passion for being socially curious and acknowledging that these perceived differences in access to HE and employment between the two groups could be explored from different perspectives. As a resident of the UAE, my own biases can be seen as different to those of an Emirati and different again to an Emirati who shapes policy on employability issues. Holmes (2020) recognises that the researcher is not just a narrator but an active producer of knowledge, bringing a range of biases and subjectivity. Self-reflection and self-critique were used in checking my biases and subjectivities and balanced any assumptions with other possibilities. My position as the researcher is developed further in chapter 3 (3.6)

Having lived in the UAE for over 25 years, I have worked in the corporate development section of an Abu Dhabi based university that provided

employability development programmes for Emiratis and expatriates working in government and private sectors. This provided me with a unique appreciation of HE work-relationships in the UAE, the interplay between HE and Employers, and the relationship between government and HE. I embrace both Emirati and expatriate cultures through family, marital and professional ties. I believe my experience led to my research participants having genuine confidence that I would highlight the rationale for policy decisions in a balanced manner. I consider that this balance reflected the perspectives of the different actors in the unique socio-political context of UAE HE work-relationships. It was through my long-standing connections with UAE HE, Employers and government departments, that trust and rapport was established between myself and research participants during the interviews.

It is this background that drives my personal interest in employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE. My goal was to understand UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies within the context of significant societal and labour market changes and to add to the employability debate in a meaningful, constructive manner. As Holmes (2017) mentions, research into graduate employability should have practical implications and value for all stakeholders, not least the graduates themselves.

1.5 The gap in the literature – my contribution

Much of the employability debate has centred around the skills that graduates bring or should bring to the job market, a point echoed by UAE government representatives, employers and HEIs alike. While some research has been carried out by UAE HEIs to develop graduates' employability skills (Pizika 2014), (Temtamy et al 2016), little or no attention has been paid to the HE work-relationships when it comes to UAE employment policy development and implementation. The focus of debate, as evidenced by publicly stated rhetoric from government officials, employers and HEIs, has been on a perceived skills gap rather than policy (UAE Cabinet Media Centre 2019; Abbas 2023a; Carter et al 2025). Given that employability skills are key in the government's

approach to graduates' contribution to the knowledge economy, the implication therefore, is that an employability strategy is in place.

Strategies employed by UAE HEIs to date, include employability enhanced curriculum skills training in areas deemed to be important for future employment, such as communication skills, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, etc. These are presented as either integrated or bolt on modules, as seen in studies by Pizika (2014) and Temtamy et al (2016). Another strategy is to include internships with industry partners. While internships are not mandated by the Ministry of Higher Education, several HEIs include compulsory industry internships as a prerequisite for graduation. Examples include:

- Higher Colleges of Technology (state owned) – 8 week internship is mandatory for all final year students.
- Khalifa University (state owned) - 8 to 16 week internship is mandatory for all students to graduate.
- United Arab Emirates University (state owned) – students are required to spend one semester in an approved internship programme.
- Abu Dhabi University (privately funded) – supervised compulsory internship training.
- New York University in Abu Dhabi (privately funded) – while internships are not mandated, 90% of students take part in some industry partnered internships.

Industry partnerships are usually forged by having senior industry partners on their board of trustees. However, the societal impact on these employability strategies and the labour market changes brought on by the implementation of various iterations of employment policies in the UAE have been largely ignored by researchers.

As mentioned, little has been researched or discussed on this strategy and the policies that govern the UAEs approach from a societal perspective. I recognise both this gap in the literature and the political aspect of my research questions. UAE Government has a strong influence over HEI's and how employment, and

ultimately employability, is regulated. These hierarchical structures in the UAE may well confer higher degrees of power to particular actors over others. Such enactments could support power dominance relationships and can constrain actors by virtue of an uneven distribution of resources. It is within this myriad of interdependent socio-political factors and social practices, particularly power relationships, that this study explored UAE policies on employment and the approach to graduate employability. In doing so, my study adds to the debate on graduate employability in the UAE from the perspective of policy and explores its roots in the interaction between human activity and the 'system'.

1.6 Research questions

My research investigates UAE employment policy, graduate employability and HE work-relationships using a framework that draws from social practice theories. The research questions provided a springboard for a critical discussion on these policies and strategies within the specific socio-political context found in the UAE. These questions are:

1. What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?
2. What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?
3. What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE?

1.7 My methodological positioning

Having framed the research questions, I considered my methodological position and the data sources I would use for this study. In terms of data collection, I adopted a qualitative case study approach: interviews as my data source and a review of publicly available documents, as part of my literature review. Reviewing publicly available documents provided the context to the responses given and aided my interpretation of those responses.

It is relevant at this stage to clarify the order in which the literature and data were collected. Given my experience in the UAE, I had first-hand knowledge of UAE employment policies and employability strategies and had carried out a preliminary literature review at the time of conducting interviews in 2020/2021. In view of the iterative nature of UAE employability strategy, I continued to review publicly available documents after carrying out the interviews. In some cases, stakeholders provided insight into employment policy changes and suggested additional sources for publicly available documents. Therefore, it would be more accurate to describe my literature review and data collection as separate but intertwined.

Further details of my approach are described in chapter 3.

1.7.1 Publicly available documents

Firstly, I reviewed publicly stated rhetoric by government officials and employers on employment regulations, graduate employability and HE work-relationships for the period 1980 to 2024. These included newspaper reports, government employment policy documents and government directives on employability. Although part of my literature review, these publicly available documents also provided invaluable reference points to interpret stakeholders' statements.

Secondly, also as part of the literature review, I explored employability studies carried out by HEI's in the UAE, with a view to understanding the underpinning rationale and link to policy.

All national media publications in the UAE must abide by the media content standards stipulated in the Federal Decree for media regulation (2023) and regulated by the UAE Media Authority, which monitors content that might harm the country's reputation. On this basis, I made the assumption that media statements on employment regulations, employability, HE work-relationships and the role of HE in society, will reflect the official government position. Further details of my review of publicly available documents are provided in chapter 3 (3.5.2).

1.7.2 Interviews

Interviews were held in 2020/2021 with twenty individuals who represent a cross section of major HEI's, employers and UAE policymakers, to explore their attitudes and opinions related to HE work-relationships. Using a semi-structured format, particular emphasis was given to the stakeholders' views on policies and approaches that influence or affect graduate employability and employment opportunities. Although Bryman (2016) discusses the available options for carrying out interviews, such as telephone and Skype interviews, the initial preference was for face-to-face interactions. Unfortunately, the COVID 19 pandemic made face to face interviews impractical, and all interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Further information on the interviews and research participants is provided in chapter 3 (3.4.1).

1.7.3 Policy as social discourse in action

To understand the choice of theoretical framework used in unpacking data in the analysis and discussion chapters 4 to 6, it is important to first explain my standpoint on what constitutes policy. Policy is quite often viewed as a text where those in power dictate to those who should implement decision makers' wishes. Ball (2015), when revisiting his original study "What is Policy?", (Ball:1993), concluded that the focus remains on policy as a text. Much policy research has been carried out on the effects of policy decisions and the relative success of implementation rather than the underpinning factors. My stance is that policy is more than just a text which constitutes a static decision by decision makers for others to then implement. Policies change and morph as the stakeholders interact with one another and the policy itself. This view is supported by Ward et al (2016) where policy is seen as a process of change rather than a final product or text. Policies and the wider discourses shape the fields within which actors operate. Olssen et al (2004) argue that policy as discourse should also include an understanding of the connections between policy texts, social structures, and the political system. It is with this in mind that I looked at UAE employment policies and graduate employability as a policy change in action and in doing so, sought to add to the debate on policy as a social process.

1.7.4 Policy as a form of social change

Social practice theory offers a means to explain the relationship between human action and the 'system' (Shove et al 2012). It shifts the unit of analysis from the structural macro-economic level to understanding how social practices change over time by incorporating elements of the macro and micro together.

My study draws on Bourdieu's (1986, 1990 1997, 2005) work, where society can be viewed as multidimensional with an array of "fields" such as social groups, workplace etc. I regard fields as the social arenas where individuals interact and compete for resources. In looking at UAE employment policy, graduate employability and HE work-relationships, all the different players or agents (policymakers, administrators, and recipients) operate in diverse fields with specific motives and intentions. As Bourdieu contends, the power relations between and within fields, structures human behaviour. These power relations are dynamic and determine everyone's place in the specific policy change process of UAE employment regulation and their response to it.

In combination with the work of Bourdieu, this study also draws on, and seeks to expand, the work of Brown (2000). Brown put forward Positional Conflict Theory (PCT) as an approach that examines employability from the perspective of the *relative* position of graduates in the education system, the labour market and society. Their approach is that the skills and abilities of graduates is not the only factor to consider in an individual's success in the labour market. They posit that the actions and expectations of peers, employers, social groups and societal structures, have more influence on a graduate's chance of success and may create inequalities and advantages for some individuals over others.

My study looked at how UAE employment policies influence the direction of HE work-relationships and graduate employability. I also considered the role played by societal factors in a rapidly evolving labour market that that may not offer a level playing field for all. It is in this context that power relationships, opportunities, and privileges within UAE society, were also considered with respect to employment regulation and graduate employability.

1.7.5 Processing the data

Bernard et al (2017) see the process of data analysis as a search for patterns and I used Thematic Analysis (TA) to examine interview data for these patterns. Thematic analysis, as defined by Bryman (2016), is a *“term used in connection with the analysis of qualitative data to refer to the extraction of key themes in one’s data”* (2016: 697). In other words, it is a method of seeing patterns within data.

Policy documents, press releases, and publicly stated rhetoric on UAE employment policies and graduate employability, and interviews with key stakeholders in HE work-relationships convey a number of important messages. These include the intent of government policy, its ideology, what its plans are and where stakeholders want to be. Communication is a social event and the language we use forms the context of our social community. More specifically, the power relationships of stakeholders are laid bare, and we can see what the sender wants the recipient to understand and what behaviour is expected or intended. This takes note of what Fairclough (2013) refers as the *“focus on discourse, and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power, ideologies, institutions, social identities etc)”*. (2013:178).

It is these nuances of meaning and intent that I explore in my discussion of the findings, to better understand the socio-economic factors at play in shaping UAE employment policy and graduate employability.

1.8 Structure of thesis

This study is presented in seven chapters.

1. Chapter one details the background to my study, the gap in the literature that I sought to address, the rationale for a personal agenda, my research questions and an overview of my methodological positioning.
2. Chapter two is the literature review and is presented in three sections.

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- I. Section one is a discussion of current global employability discourse, the dominant definition(s) of employability and the relationship between employability and HE.
 - II. Section two details the different iterations of UAE employment policies over the last forty years, alongside a review of two UAE employability studies.
 - III. Section three is a presentation of the two theoretical frameworks used in my study, namely Bourdieu's (1986, 1990, 1997, 2005) concepts of fields, habitus, forms of capital and doxa; and Brown's (2000), Positional Conflict Theory (PCT).
3. Chapter three discusses the research design and methodology used in my study. I present my epistemological position, and the approach and strategies used in this study. I also explain the research methods employed, including sampling and data collection. I then provide details of how the data is analysed. Finally, the remaining sections of chapter three discuss my position as the researcher, ethical considerations and transferability.
 4. Chapter four combines both a presentation of the findings for research question one (RQ1) and a discussion of my interpretation of the findings. This format is repeated in chapter five for research question 2 (RQ2) and in chapter six for research question three (RQ3). A combined findings/discussions format was my personal preference over separate findings and discussion chapters, as it gave me the opportunity to discuss each of the findings as I presented them. I build on each interpretation of the findings to paint a picture of policy changes, how they are received, the factors driving and affecting the changes and the impact on both the labour market and UAE society.

Chapter four begins with a discussion of the interview stakeholders' views on employment policies and graduate employability and the implications of their opinions. The government's approach to employment regulation and graduate employability is then considered. The last section of the chapter looks at how the three stakeholders, policymakers, HE and employers, perceive the UAE's approach to graduate employability and the employment policies that impact the UAE labour market.

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5. Chapter five presents and discusses the findings that address RQ2. The focus of chapter five is socio-economic factors that drive government employment policy, alongside the factors that may be affecting the efficacy of policy implementation. Chapter five also considers the practices and beliefs of individual stakeholders in their approach to the UAE job market.
 6. Chapter six presents and discusses the findings that address RQ3. It is in this chapter that I draw upon Bourdieu's theoretical framework and Brown's Positional Conflict Theory (PCT) to better explore the societal changes that result from adjustments in the labour market which, in turn, are a consequence of the UAE's employment policies.
 7. Chapter seven, the final chapter, revisits the aims of my research, presents the major lessons learned, my recommendations for all three stakeholders, along with its contribution to knowledge. In my final reflections, I consider the limitations of my study and put forward proposals for future research.

1.9 Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the reasons for choosing to examine UAE employment policy and graduate employability in the context of an emerging knowledge economy and the contribution this research makes to the literature. A critical analysis of the development and implementation of employment policy in the UAE was made, anchoring the discussion to a theoretical framework that draws on social practice theory. Policy, when seen as discursive, was unpacked critically when considering the unique socio-political forces at play in the UAE. My study adds to the debate on graduate employability in the UAE from the societal perspective of policy and explores its roots in the interaction between human activity and the 'system'. I believe that this thesis provides a holistic view of what I regard as '*policy change in action*'. I present a unique view of UAE employment policy change, and the impact of these changes on HE-work relationships and graduate employability.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature related to graduate employability and UAE employment policies and how these policies may relate to the socioeconomic makeup and development of the UAE. There are three distinct sections considered in the literature review.

Firstly, I discuss the definition of employability, albeit contested, alongside the equally contested view of the role of graduate employability in HE. The role that employment policies can play in shaping HE and HE work-relationships is then considered. The role of graduate employability in HE is then further highlighted in the approaches of HEIs to employability in previous studies on employability and employability skills programmes. My study seeks to add to the limited literature on the socio-political factors, particularly in non-western contexts, that might be driving the UAE approach to graduate employability.

Secondly, I discuss the policies laid out in UAE national employment strategies, in more detail, alongside the systems, rules and regulations in force to achieve government objectives. These national strategies provide some insight into the intent of policy makers and could be viewed as a form of socio-political tool to shape UAE society. I regarded publicly available documents, government web pages and press reports as a valuable literature source. While such references would normally only add context to the research, for the purposes of my study, they also served as relevant references in their own right, when interpreting interview data.

The third section looks at social practice theories, notably the work of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital (Bourdieu 1986), to understand how UAE government employment policies impact Emirati and expatriate graduates differently. Bourdieu's notion of Doxa (Bourdieu 1997) is also considered important when looking at the way apparent differences are accepted as normal within UAE society. The third section also draws from the work of Brown (2000), Brown et al (2003) to explore what might appear as unequal opportunities

afforded to Emirati and expatriate graduates when entering the UAE job market. Consideration is also given to how groups such as Emiratis and expatriates might establish and maintain boundaries between themselves and in so doing, establish their social positions. My study looks at UAE employment policies by using Bourdieu and Brown to see the relationship between Emiratis and expatriates, not as a dichotomy or one of conflict, but as symbiotic in nature. It is this balanced, holistic view that my study aims to bring to light.

2.2 Section One – The Employability Debate and HE

2.2.1 Defining Employability

Graduate employability, and indeed employability in general, is a much-debated topic. As Stoten (2018) suggests, graduate employability is a contested idea within HE. The notion of employability, as pointed out by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), was first used at the beginning of the twentieth century and has changed somewhat over time. Some of the commonly used definitions of employability align with Hillage and Pollard (1998) who see employability as the **capability** of the individual to find initial employment, maintain their position and find new employment if necessary. Similarly, Yorke (2006), De Vos et al (2011) and Hogan et al (2013), emphasise the capabilities of individuals to secure employment by having the **skills, capabilities** and **attitudes** required by employers. Guilbert et al (2016) point out that emphasis was initially placed on **attitudes towards work** and self-image, then **knowledge** and **abilities**, and the acquisition of transferable **skills**. While skills, capabilities and attitudes to work are different, the common thread is the emphasis placed on the graduate to have the 'right' skills, capabilities and attitude towards work. This focus highlights the **absolute dimension** of employability.

Despite the commonalities described above, in their systematic review of current understandings of employability, Williams et al (2015) point out the difficulty in defining employability, with a range of definitions co-existing. They attribute the existence of multiple employability definitions arising because of the alternative perspectives on employability held by different stakeholders.

Thijssen et al (2008) and Guilbert et al (2016) both distinguish between three perspectives. Firstly, the governmental / societal perspective, where employment rates and the strength of the economy are front and centre. Secondly, the organisational requirements for employees to meet the needs of the company. Thirdly, the individual's perspective which Thijssen et al (2008) indicate, relates to whether individuals have the opportunity to gain and keep a job. These three perspectives all have relevance to each group of stakeholders, as each stakeholder has a vested interest in meeting their own objectives.

2.2.2 Employability and HE

As seen in 2.2.1, the employability debate has been dominated by the *absolute* dimension of employability, and it should come as no surprise that HE has largely bought into the approach of meeting employers demands for knowledge and skills. Many HEIs, including those in the UAE, now pay particular attention to the yearly QS Graduate Employability Rankings (Sircar 2025) as a metric of their ability to produce employable graduates. What drives this desire to meet employer demands, and how does this reflect on the role that HE plays in society? The next consideration is a possible explanation for the status quo.

Orthodox interpretations of human capital theories hold a widely shared view that the economic health and prosperity of a country relies on the expansion of knowledge driven activities. Meeting the needs of the knowledge economy can foster a functionalist approach or as Saunders (2006) describes it systems which encourage:

a much tighter control over the supply of graduate labour to 'fit' the requirements of the labour market more precisely (2006:5).

I personally agree with McArthur (2011), who indicates that such an approach to HEI and the workplace, is a rather narrow interpretation of what constitutes higher education and its relationship to the economy of a country. A case in point, Tymon (2013) presented a summary of the skills and attributes linked to employability, and this mirrors the way UAE policy makers and HEIs focus on

the *absolute* dimension of employability. Emphasis in UAE HEIs is on lifelong learning, 21st century skills, communication, teamwork, entrepreneurship, critical thinking etc. HEIs see employability in terms of employability skills that are integrated with students' curricula in the UAE. Speight et al (2013) point out that employability skills or an employability enhanced curriculum can range from embedded, integrated or bolt on modules. It is worth considering why HE programmes have aligned with this approach, particularly in knowledge driven economies.

Sum and Jessop (2013) posit one explanation, that the governance and higher education policies of knowledge economies gained ground due to the influence of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank. Sellar and Lingard (2013:722) argue that the OECD grew in stature at a point when "*education and economic policy had reached a point of convergence*". Such is the influence of the OECD, that Sellar and Lingard (2013) consider that their dominance has shaped an increasingly global view of educational systems. The globalisation of higher education policy is seen through initiatives such as the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, which were carried out in the UAE and other countries. As Shahjahan and Torres (2013:615) point out, globalisation promotes a 'market logic'. The notion of customer need within the knowledge economy and education as a product, are recurrent themes in current UAE higher education policy.

The OECD (2012) report 'Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives' about enhancing employability sets the tone for governments, including the UAE, to address workforce employability and the importance of transferable skills. The OECD Skills Strategy (2019) sees the first task of addressing workforce employability as developing relevant skills with a rise in the demand for higher level skills. According to the OECD, the "*Skills Strategy has provided countries with a strategic and comprehensive approach to assessing their skills challenges and opportunities*" (ibid 2019). This would appear to support the views of Sellar and Lingard (2013) who comment on the effect that the OECD has had in shaping an increasingly global view of educational systems through:

influential work on knowledge-based economies, lifelong learning and skills. Sellar and Lingard (2013:722).

The issue of employability, the perception of misalignment of HEI's with industry needs was discussed at the UAE Public Policy Forum in March 2017. The Minister for Higher Education (MHE), reported by Swan (2017) in the National, announced the setup of a new department to address the perceived skills gap by highlighting UAE labour market requirements.

The MHE went on to identify skills such as team building and critical thinking, as missing in graduates. Warner and Burton (2017) in their summary of the aforementioned UAE Public Policy forum, reiterated that the reforms in higher education in the UAE are, in part, inspired by OECD and World Bank initiatives. Statements from the MHE confirm that the approach to UAE graduate employability sits squarely with the *absolute* dimension of employability and that addressing students' skills would bridge the perceived skills gap.

It is appropriate at this stage, however, to contrast the oft repeated notion of skills, capabilities and attitudes, with the social perspective of employability, or the *relative dimension*, an area that has received less attention to date.

2.2.3 *Absolute* and *Relative* Dimensions of Employability

As Cheng et al (2022) illustrate in their study of key stakeholders' perspectives of employability in UK HEIs, dominant definitions of employability highlight the *absolute* dimensions of employability whereby it is these skills, capabilities and attitudes that determine a graduate's success. This *absolute* view of employability dominates the current debate and ignores the societal context and does not consider any inequalities that may exist. The *absolute* dimension does not take account of the fluctuations in market demand, in some cases determined by governmental priorities, and how these inequalities may impact different groups differently.

Brown et al (2003) interpret employability as the *relative* chance of an individual finding and maintaining employment. According to Cheng et al (2022), little attention has been given in the literature to the *relative dimension* of

employability, and it is this gap that is the focus of my study. One notable theoretical development in relation to the *relative* dimension of employability is the work of Brown (2000), and subsequent studies by Brown et al (2003) and Brown and Hesketh (2004). They challenge the dominant, *absolute* view of employability in a meritocratic labour market, where personal qualities, skills and abilities alone determine a graduate's chances of securing employment. Brown (2000), drawing on Bourdieu's (1997) notions of capital and their unequal distribution, posited that it is the societal context and market demands that prevails as a major factor in securing access to employment. As Fejes (2010) also comments, an *absolute* view of employability puts the responsibility of success firmly with the individual and ignores the societal context. Siivonen et al (2023) noted that Brown's Positional Conflict Theory (PCT) approach:

measures how well the individual has succeeded in matching their human capital profile to labour market demands. (Siivonen 2023:3)

Given the apparent scarcity of employability research into the *relative* dimension of employability, I felt that PCT and Bourdieu's (1984, 1990, 2005) theory on fields, habitus and forms of capital were relevant and appropriate lenses with which to study the societal aspects of graduate employability in the UAE. Skills, capabilities, knowledge and attitudes to work are all important for policymakers, HE and employers alike, and obviously for the graduates themselves. These aspects of employability representing the *absolute* dimension, have received substantial attention in employability studies. My study focused on the *relative* dimension of graduate employability to present a unique perspective of employability in the UAE. The UAE has unique socio-economic characteristics and is a country that is navigating major economic and labour market changes that impact both Emiratis and expatriate graduates differently. My study explored this uniqueness with a distinctive approach that adds value to the employability debate.

Although some studies such as Tholen (2014) have looked at the *relative* aspects of employability, very few have studied the interplay between the

labour market, HE and social factors in the manner I explore in this study. The human capital, meritocratic approach appears to be dominant in knowledge economies that draw on neoliberalism. Such an approach posits equal opportunities for those who study and work hard, irrespective of societal context. In their review of *relative* employability, Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (2023), highlighted the lack of attention given to the *relative* aspect of graduate employability. They mapped the interplay between the labour market, HE and social factors, shown in Figure 2.1 below.

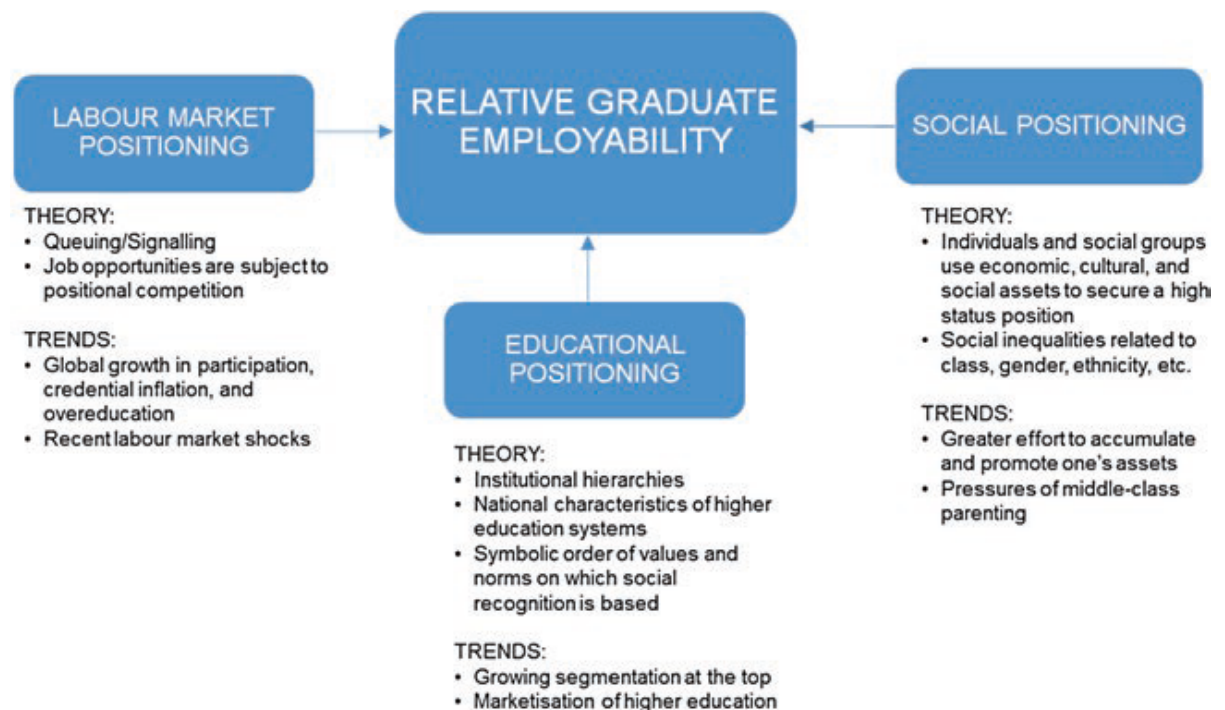


Figure 2.1 Relative graduate employability. Reproduced from Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (2023:53)

Social, educational and labour market positioning in Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen's model are all considered in my study. Given the importance of the societal context that this study seeks to focus on, it is also worth remembering that studies of the *relative* dimensions of employability were in western contexts. Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (2023) highlight the need to move from the dominant policy discourse that emphasises the *absolute* dimension of employability. They advocate for a more sophisticated approach to employability policy. The UAE has its own unique societal context, and my

study aims to not only fill a gap in the literature but posit an alternative view of graduate employability.

As previously mentioned, my study does not negate that the *absolute* dimension matters, but looks to see how UAE policy makers, HE and employers might establish a balance between the *absolute* and *relative* dimensions. The difference between the two dimensions matters because UAE stakeholder might benefit from an understanding of the unique societal factors of the UAE. A better understanding of the factors at play could enhance the current approach to employment and graduate employability and the role that UAE HE plays.

2.2.4 UAE Employability Studies

In terms of UAE focused research on employability, published papers citing the UAE context are not common. Previously, the focus of UAE HEIs was on teaching rather than research. Research at UAE HEIs has now become widespread, as it is one of the criteria for achieving global ranking. The two UAE employability studies below were carried out in two state funded universities. This scarcity of research on UAE employability is further illustrated by Hassock and Hill (2022), in their book chapter on the role of HE in employability. Their stated focus was on the Middle East, yet they drew from case studies in Europe and Asia, which I suggest only highlights the paucity of UAE based research on employability. The choice of including Pizika (2014) and Temtamy et al (2016) below, highlights that employability is seen in *absolute* terms, where skills and attributes are the focus of HEIs. Policy is not discussed in any depth in either of these two reported studies.

Pizika (2014) reported on embedding employability skills in computer and information science (CIS) program curriculum at an HEI in the UAE. The study highlighted employability basics in core subjects, integrated industry projects in course work and required individual course outlines to support the development of teamwork, creative thinking, problem solving, time management and project discipline. Pizika's study recommended a planned approach with HEI's working hand in hand with industry partners and that the process of embedding

employability skills requires regular revision to meet the economic needs of the country.

The second employability study carried out at a UAE HEI was reported by Temtamy et al (2016) at another state funded university. The purpose of the study was to investigate the link between participation in a university sponsored employment skills programme and employment post-graduation. The perceived skills gap in graduates was addressed by developing an employability skills programme for its students, entitled World of Work (WOW). The WOW programme consisted of a series of workshops that focused on employability skills development (communication skills, time management, critical thinking) followed by internships with industry partners. Temtamy et al (2016) went on to state that the WOW programmes helped graduates:

join the labor force and in so doing contribute to supplying the UAE economy with the needed human capital. (Temtamy et al 2016:111)

As can be seen from the above two studies, the focus of both is on the ‘correct’ combination of skills needed for students to secure employment and to meet the labour market requirements. Given the dominance of the *absolute* dimension of employability in the employability debate, it is not surprising that the UAE mirrors the global trend for education policy to be seen as based on skills. Lauder and Mayhew (2020) comment that in adopting such an approach, policymakers forged a direct link between HE and the knowledge economy. This linkage is, in part, driven by globalisation of the world economy and marketisation of HE, influenced by global economic bodies.

I agree with Wheelahan et al (2022), who go as far as to describe the domination of human capital theory in HE as the “fetishisation of skills” (2022: 475). Wheelahan et al (2022) also note that few question the enthusiasm that policymakers, HEIs and employers have for skills. The UAE, as a developing knowledge economy, is no exception and its economic prosperity and global competitiveness centres on the role played by skills.

The taken for granted belief on the primary importance of skills training in HE is so prevalent that it can be seen as a doxa (Bourdieu 1984), where assumptions are so deeply ingrained within society that they are rarely challenged or questioned. Such is the reach of the perceived non-negotiable importance of having the right skills to secure employment, that this doxa underpins employability approaches in international policy discourse, in the UAE and in many countries. Wheelahan et al (2022) are of the view that policy debates do not question this doxa but focus on ‘correct’ configuration for employability skills. This was seen in the two UAE employability programs reported by Pizika (2014) and Temtamy et al (2016). This *absolute* view that skills training in HE is pivotal for securing employment is not challenged and is accepted as normal.

Doxa is a theme that I revisit in 2.4, in relation to how different sections of UAE society are affected differently by UAE employment policies and how these differences are perceived within UAE society. In the next section, I discuss UAE national employment strategy decisions within the UAEs unique socio-economic and political context.

2.3 Section Two – UAE National Employment Policy over the years

To better understand the context of graduate employability in the UAE, it is important to understand current national employment policies from both their historical and socio-economic perspectives. With an abundance of natural resources, and advancements in the socio-economic sphere, the UAE is considered to be amongst the most prosperous countries in the world (WorldData.info 2025). Following independence in 1971, the UAE government embarked on huge infrastructure projects, across different sectors and embraced expatriate workers in both public and private sectors. Employment policies have undergone substantial changes and continue to change. The UAE employment policy changes for the period 1980 to 2024 are detailed in 2.3.3. The policies selected reflect the major decisions taken at a federal and national level.

It is first pertinent to revisit what I understand by *policy* as this provides the backdrop to the way policy is viewed in this study, as a change process, influenced by the unique socio-political context of the UAE. Although this is considered in 1.6.3 when outlining my methodological positioning, it is relevant to revisit and expand on my standpoint on policy before discussing the policies themselves.

2.3.1 Policy as text versus policy as a social process

Policy texts have been viewed quite differently by various researchers. These viewpoints include Taylor's (1997) perspective, "*policy texts constitute the outcome of political struggles over meaning*" (1997:26). Similarly, Jones (2013) views policy as value-laden actions and argues that policy is a pursuit of fundamentally political objectives. I agree that the political element of policy cannot be discounted but as Olssen et al (2004) also mention, policy should not only be seen as an exercise of political power but also as the discourse used to legitimate that process.

As Heimans (2012) suggests, there are no clear definitions of what constitutes policy, but policy is quite often viewed as a text where those in power dictate to others who should implement decision makers' wishes. Ball (2015), when revisiting his original study "What is Policy?", concluded that the focus remains on policy as a text rather than the process:

There is a lot more text work than discourse work; that is, a lot more focus on what is written and said, rather than how those statements are formed and made possible. (Ball 2015:311)

For me, this is important because so much attention is focused on the policy text itself, the effects of policy decisions and the *relative* success of implementation. What is missing, in my opinion, is the way policies are formed, the driving factors and how policies change and morph over time as the stakeholders interact with one another and the policy itself. My study views UAE graduate employability policies as dynamic, a view supported by Ward et al (2016) where policy is seen as a process of change rather than a final

product or text. The context of the policy changes reviewed in this section reflect a shift towards a knowledge-based economy, which is a clearly stated UAE government objective (Vision 2021).

I agree with Fischer (2003) in their work on public policies as discursive constructs, that much more research and attention are needed to focus on the policy process itself. Focusing on the policy process allows for a deeper understanding of how each situation is unique, how the socio-economic and political conditions are important and how these factors will evolve and produce different versions of policy over time. My study looks at the UAE policy on graduate employability and HE work-relationships, which I regard as a policy change in action, and adds to the debate on policy as a social process.

2.3.2 The UAE labour market imbalance

Before considering UAE employment policies, it is worth considering the unique nature of the UAE, where approximately 88.5% of the 12.5 million population are expatriates. Sarker and Rahman (2020) make the point that the initial surge of importing labour after independence in 1971 had the effect of segmenting the labour market and made the Emirati population a minority in the country's workforce, not just in terms of numbers, but also decision making. In effect the labour market was segmented into the state sector, where Emiratis would be employed and the private sector, predominantly for the expatriate workforce.

The concept of a segmented labour market in the UAE was cited by Thompson and Wissink (2016), who described it as:

two-tiered and bifurcated, comprised of expatriates and their subsets of various nationalities and occupational groups on one hand and the indigenous population segment of the labour market on the other. However, these two primary tiers are governed by different sets of regulations. Thompson and Wissink (2016:2)

Sarker and Rahman (2020) go on to assert that, to address this perceived imbalance, UAE employment policies have a broader meaning than just Emiratis securing employment.

It is not merely about creating job opportunities but also about repositioning Emiratis in the thriving social and economic arena of the country. Sarker and Rahman (2020:175)

In 2.3.3, I provide details of how policymakers have sought to regulate the labour market and, in effect, reshape UAE society. Thompson and Wissink (2016) view UAE employment policies as not merely a mechanism to equalise opportunities for Emiratis but to reshape the political economy in a manner that grants power and advantages to the indigenous, Emirati population. It is within the context of a perceived labour market imbalance that I describe UAE employment policies to date.

2.3.3 Key UAE Employment policies (1980 – 2024)

The policies selected in Table 2.1 below reflect the UAE employment policies for the period 1980-2024. These provide insight into the intention of UAE policymakers and the perceived issues that they seek to address. They also signal the direction that policymakers are giving to the labour market and can provide an opportunity to posit future changes. The policies described are sourced from publicly available documents, government websites and press releases. As mentioned in 1.6.1, regulations are in place to control the content released by media outlets, and my assumption is that information on UAE employment policy and graduate employability will reflect the view of policymakers. Another reason for including press releases as part of the literature review is that they also often carry the views of key stakeholders, policymakers, HE, employers etc.

| Policy Name | Year | Focus |
|--|-------------|---|
| UAE Labour Law | 1980 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer/employee rights and obligations • Emirati citizens given priority over expatriate residents in job market (Article 14) |
| TANMIA Early Emiratisation initiative | 1999 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early attempt at Emiratisation or localisation • TANMIA means development in Arabic • TANMIA programmes aimed at Emiratis • Provided incentives for private sector employers to recruit Emiratis |
| Vision 2021 | 2010 & 2014 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy to position UAE as complete, diverse, knowledge-based economy • Focus is on the development of Emiratis as entrepreneurs and leaders • Recruitment/retention of talented expatriate workforce |
| MOHRE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation | 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Labour renamed as MOHRE • Inclusion of Emiratisation in its new title signals policymakers' intent to promote Emirati employment |
| TAWTEEN Portal used by employers to apply to MORHE for work permits | 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TAWTEEN means localisation or Emiratisation in Arabic • Prioritises Emiratis who have registered in the Tawteen job seeker database |
| National Employment Strategy 2031 | 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government sets out its focus on key job sectors to build a knowledge economy • Priority given to Emirati citizens over expatriates in these sectors |
| NAFIS National Programme promoting Emiratisation | 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NAFIS means to compete in Arabic • Job portal exclusively for Emirati citizens • Financial and training support given to Emirati graduates |
| Projects of the 50 | 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visa reforms for expatriate residents • Expansion of long term 'Golden visas' announced for talented expatriates |
| The UAE Strategy for Talent Attraction & Retention | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled human capital at the heart of economic growth and competitiveness • Talent demand forecasting • Attraction and retention of talented expatriates |
| Emiratisation legal updates | 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector companies to increase their employment of Emirati citizens by 2% a year • Subsidised salaries for Emiratis employed in the private sector • Targets monitored closely by MOHRE, and substantial fines issued |

Table 2.1 Key employment policies (1980-2024)

2.3.3.1 UAE Labour Law

All employees, Emiratis and expatriates, from 1980 onwards, were required to have a work permit issued by the Ministry of Labour. For an expatriate worker, it is this work permit that allows a resident visa to be issued. UAE Labour Law (1980) governs the rights of employers and employees. When looking at government policies that can affect graduate employment in the UAE, the same labour law enshrines the priority given to Emiratis in the workplace. Article 14 of UAE labour law (UAE Labour Law: 1980) is quite explicit that expatriates can only be offered positions if the recruiting organisation has satisfied the Ministry of Labour that no suitable Emirati is available for the post.

Article 14 – The Labour Department may not give its approval to the employment of non-Nationals until it is satisfied that there are no unemployed Nationals registered with the employment section who are capable of performing the work required. UAE Labour Law:1980

Work permit requirements rarely had an impact on private companies in terms of who they would recruit throughout the 1980s and 1990s as Emirati graduates could easily get a position with a government company. It was considered a rite of passage for Emirati graduates to get a well-paid position within a government body with fewer hours and better pay than people working in the private sector. In effect, the private sector was left to make its own recruitment decisions. It was and still is a common practice for the private sector to import job ready expatriate workers at a much lower cost than if they were to employ Emiratis. The global downturn of 2008/2009, saw the country's economy contract (IMF Staff report 2010) and focused policymakers' attention on the need to develop more sustainable knowledge-based industries with local talent at the helm. Shaheen (2011), and Hunter (2011) reported on a 2009 report of an unemployment rate for Emiratis of 13% and saturated government sector employment opportunities. Given this economic reality check, it is not surprising that 2010 onwards saw a reduction in opportunities for Emirati graduates to find employment in the government sector, and the impact of fewer government jobs is felt today.

2.3.3.2 TANMIA, Quotas and early attempts at Emiratisation

The creation of TANMIA or the National Human Resource Development and Employment Authority in 1999 marked a milestone in the government's attempt to regulate employment in the private sector. It was one of the earlier attempts at Emiratisation. Emiratisation derives from the word Emirati or UAE citizen and is an affirmative action policy of the UAE government to give preferential hiring status to Emiratis over expatriates.

In 2005, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, announced that the ministry would adopt a stricter approach towards private companies to make sure all of them observe the Emiratisation quota, which is two per cent in commercial establishments with more than 50 per cent foreign workforce and four per cent for the banking sector. Alluding to the need to deal with the perceived demographic imbalance and inherent social issues for Emiratis, The Minister, stated:

If all establishments abide by this small quota, the issue of unemployment among UAE citizens will be over. Khaleej Times (2005)

The Khaleej Time's rather emotive headline "*UAE is heading for a demographic collapse*" (Khaleej Times:2005), speaks to a fear that the UAE could lose its identity and culture. The same minister, attending a conference of business leaders, reiterated that:

I want UAE nationals to be the biggest segment in the country. (Khaleej Times 2005)

Interestingly, some criticism was reported from delegates on the Emiratisation drive, particularly the fees imposed on companies that did not meet their quota of Emiratis employed.

Forstenlechner (2008) mentions three high growth sectors that were targeted for state regulation, namely banking, insurance and hospitality. Quota systems were established, whereby companies had to achieve a set number or

percentage of Emirati employees. Forstenlechner (2008) goes on to explain that the TANMIA initiative and quotas of the number of work visas and therefore residence visas issued to expatriates, was a powerful means to regulate employment opportunities. Private sector companies failing to meet quotas were subjected to fines and withdrawal of government contracts.

Modarrass et al (2013) commented that although the policy of Emiratisation and quotas had been in force for over ten years, unemployment for Emiratis persisted. This was an indication that the policies up till that point were not particularly effective in addressing the issue of employment for Emiratis. The year 2013 was a time of relative instability across North African and Arab countries. Given the need for policymakers to maintain social and political stability and to address the concerns and needs of its citizens, it is not surprising that new initiatives were then introduced. These new initiatives produced further iterations of Emiratisation initiatives, which are discussed in the subsequent sections of my literature review.

2.3.3.3 UAE Vision 2021

Following the global economic downturn of 2008/2009, and previous initiatives such as TANMIA, the UAE reiterated its aim to diversify its economy away from its dependence on oil revenue by focussing on knowledge-based activities. In 2010, Vision 2021 was launched with the key aim of the UAE becoming a top tier globally competitive knowledge-based country. In 2014 a list of national priorities was published, based around four pillars. The third pillar calls for a *Competitive Economy Driven by Knowledgeable and Innovative Emiratis*. The use of the word Emiratis or citizens of the UAE, as opposed to the inclusion of expatriate residents can be seen as noteworthy and tells the reader of government priorities. The policy sets out a perceived need to harness the full potential of its human capital by increasing the participation of Emiratis in the workforce, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship. In the downloadable PDF version of UAE Vision 2021 it is noticeable that the focus is on Emiratis only, inclusive of all the graphics used. It could be argued that this seeks to

address the concerns of its citizens and puts the preservation of Emirati culture and identity front and centre. Section 3.1 Vision 2021 states:

The UAE will harness the full potential of its National human capital by maximising the participation of Emiratis, encouraging entrepreneurship, and nurturing home grown public and private sector leaders while attracting and retaining the best talent (UAE Vision 2021:16)

The strategy laid out in Vision 2021 highlights the focus is on Emiratis, citizens of the UAE, but recognises that it will attract and retain the best expatriate talent to achieve its economic and political objectives. Although a demographic imbalance exists, there is a recognition from policymakers that expatriates are an important part of the socio-economic equation. Based on my own personal experience, I would argue that despite the prioritisation given to Emiratis, both Emiratis and expatriates enjoy a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship.

The UAE's employment strategy and focus on Emirati citizens is not without its critics though. Toledo (2013) describes the UAE as:

a welfare state when it comes to the treatment of its own nationals. Toledo (2013:41)

Toledo (2013) goes on to caution that such benefits decrease the incentives for Emirati citizens to seek employment in the private sector. While this may be true of some individuals, no researched evidence was submitted to confirm such a concern. Other critics are of the opinion that labour market forces alone should drive changes in the labour market. Barnett et al (2015) recognise the importance of Emiratisation for UAE policymakers but argue that:

structural changes of this nature will be effective and sustainable when it arises organically from market-based conditions. Barnett et al (2015:298)

In the eyes of UAE policy makers, such a view could be seen as representing a purely economic viewpoint that ignores the unique context and social structure of the UAE. I also agree that organic structural changes to the labour market,

without intervention from the state, would struggle to achieve policymakers' objectives of a knowledge-based economy led by Emiratis.

2.3.3.4 Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE)

In 2016, the Ministry of Labour, which oversees employment contracts, work permits and workers' rights, was renamed as the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE). This name change, by adding Emiratisation to the title, is quite significant in terms of the government signalling its intent and its priorities. The MOHRE strategic plan is to:

transform the job market in the UAE into an empowering attractive market for Emirati talents. This represents a roadmap in managing manpower in the UAE to reach a new phase of development and establish a knowledge-based economy according to the future vision of the government; thus, contributing to the government's efforts to realize the objectives of the UAE Vision 2021. In order to achieve this, MOHRE adopts a comprehensive system of policies, standards, regulatory instruments, institutional partnerships, and excellent services. (MOHRE: N.D)

Although this was a significant development, criticism of the government's approach to labour market regulation and the pace of implementation of Emiratisation policy came from within its consultative body. A sense of frustration was evident in the debates within the UAE parliament or Federal National Council (FNC), in December 2017, which highlighted members concerns. Members of the FNC pressed government to ensure that Article 14 of UAE labour law is applied in full. Al Kuttub (2018) reported one FNC member saying:

We are a priority, we are locals, and we are not finding jobs in our country - this is not normal. Khaleej Times (Al Kuttub:2018).

Likewise, Dajani (2018) reported on a FNC member who speculated that more Emiratis would be employed now if Article 14 of UAE labour law had been enforced earlier.

Why is Article 14 of the Federal Law No. (8) for the year 1980 concerning the organisation of labour relations and its amendments on this subject not implemented? It is not permissible to issue a visa or a work permit (to an expat) for any job, which an Emirati is suitable for. The article since 1980 to date has not been implemented and applied...We would not have reached the struggle we have reached today where we are begging companies to recruit nationals. (Dajani: 2018)

The Minister of Human Resources and Emiratisation, clarified that all expatriates applying for work permits in private or public sectors, must pass a 'database procedure' to ensure that suitable Emirati candidates are not overlooked. The minister also said that that all entities must adopt a recruitment system that ensures Emiratis are prioritised for any new job openings.

The FNC thus argued that a database must be created for all entities to ensure that prior to issuing work permits for expatriates, that government, semi-government, and private entities must make sure that there is not a suitable Emirati candidate available to fill the job opening. It is this database that is now discussed in more detail.

2.3.3.5 Tawteen Portal

One such database is the Tawteen Portal that was set up by MOHRE in December 2016 to regulate the recruitment of workers by the private sector. Tawteen (means localisation in Arabic and is akin to Emiratisation) can be seen as signalling the priority given to Emiratis in terms of employment. Employers are required to apply to the MOHRE for work permits and then, in the case of expatriates, to apply for residency. Since February 2017, companies applying for work visas in knowledge-based industries, were required to post vacant positions on the Tawteen portal. The database searches for Emiratis, who have registered with Tawteen, and during this phase, the employer could not proceed further with the hiring phase. If a suitable Emirati candidate was found, the employer was required to interview them for the position, alongside other candidates. If no Emirati appears suitable, the system alerts the employer that no match was found, and they can proceed with expatriate applicants. MOHRE

offers incentives to employers posting vacancies through their portal, such as fast track options for employment and immigration related transactions.

Reynolds (2019a) reporting in the National, in an article on Emiratisation, narrated that through the Tawteen portal:

20,000 new jobs would be created for Emiratis over the next three years, in the banking, aviation, communication, insurance and property sectors. Managerial positions in government will be reserved for Emiratis. (Reynolds: 2019a)

Drawing on 2017 data from the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority, Reynolds (2019a) went on to mention that only 48% of Emiratis were participants in the labour market and that over 80% of those were working in the government sector. It was also noted that less than 10% of Emiratis worked in the private sector with expatriates as the major participants of the sector. Employment data therefore demonstrated an imbalance in the private sector, which prompted policymakers to adopt strategies to address the dominance of expatriates in private industry.

Reynolds (2019a) also reported on some of the measures that policymakers were taking to address the dominance of expatriates in the private sector. These measures included plans for Emiratis to be given priority for 160 job titles in the private sector, although the full list had yet to be released. While the full list of reserved job was not available to Reynolds (2019a), some of the sectors were identified in the quote above, notably banking, aviation, communication, insurance, and property sectors. It is worth noting therefore that Emiratisation of the private sector was not targeting the sector as a whole, but rather skilled sectors that were seen as important in meeting the Vision 2021 objective of becoming a “*Competitive Economy Driven by Knowledgeable and Innovative Emiratis*” (Reynolds: 2019a). ‘Driven by ...Emiratis’ refers to the fact that managerial positions in government are reserved for Emiratis.

Another reporter from the National, Sanderson (2019), referred to the same 2017 employment data, asked the question “Is Emiratisation working?”, and

concluded yes, it was, but slowly. This admission of slow progress in reshaping the labour force in the private sector, may well explain the emergence of subsequent initiatives in UAE employment and employability related policies, and the perceived need to go further.

2.3.3.6 National Employment Strategy 2031

As noted by Reynolds (2019a) regarding the Tawteen portal, policymakers had planned to earmark 160 job titles for Emiratis but without further details at the time of Reynold's report. Policymakers, keen to accelerate Emiratisation in the private sector, provided further details of the key sectors where Emiratis are given priority over expatriates in the National Employment Strategy 2031 (NES). Originally launched in November 2018, the strategy sought to increase the participation of the Emiratis in the labour market by enhancing Emiratisation rates in economic sectors such as energy, communications, technology, transport, storage sectors, financial, health and educational sectors, artificial intelligence (AI), space, digital transactions, and advanced science. This is also seen in the government's Vision 21 and Emiratisation policies. The main objective is clearly stated:

The National Employment Strategy 2031 aims to support the government's efforts to build a knowledge-based economy. It also seeks to increase the participation of the UAE's citizens in the labour market by enhancing women's participation and increasing Emiratisation rates in value-added economic sectors. (National Employment Strategy 2031:2018)

NES states that the aforementioned sectors are those that support the objective to build a knowledge-based economy and to enhance the participation of Emiratis in that endeavour. The NES sets out the sectors and jobs reserved for Emiratis and specifies that legal measures are in place to ensure that Emiratis are given sustainable employment. Part of that initiative was to revamp and build on the Tawteen portal by creating a programme that not only served as a job portal, but as an inclusive hub where Emiratis could apply for jobs in the

private sector, apply for job seeker allowances and gain admission to skills training courses. This led to the creation of the current NAFIS programme.

2.3.3.7 NAFIS Programme

NAFIS (meaning to compete in Arabic) was set up in 2021 as part of Vision 21. As an Emiratisation initiative, the NAFIS programme was launched with over £5 billion allocated to employ 75,000 Emiratis in the private sector over 2021-2025. The government's aim is for Emiratis to have 10 per cent of the UAE's skilled private sector jobs by 2025. Note that the target category is skilled private sector jobs, which explains the focus on job categories that contribute to the country's status as a knowledge-based economy. Although there is no data to show how close the UAE is to achieving their target 10 per cent, the Khaleej Times (2024) reported that 100,000 citizens are now employed in the private sector.

The NAFIS programme's portal is a platform exclusively for citizens to seek employment. As reported by Nagraj (2021), the Emirati salary support contributes to the recruitment and training costs of Emirati graduates in the private sector. The scheme offers a monthly salary top-up of up to Dhs8,000 (£1,750) for Emirati university graduates in the first year of job training and will support their salaries to just over £1,000 for up to five years. Emirati graduates are at a competitive advantage over expatriate graduates based on the monthly financial top up, and accompanied by pension contributions, family allowances, and other benefits available through the NAFIS portal. It also goes a long way to assuage the private sector concerns of hiring an Emirati rather than a job ready expatriate who will work for a lower salary and can then be let go when there is no longer a business need.

2.3.3.8 Updated Federal Law on Employment Regulation

One further notable development in employability policy changes was that in 2021, a federal decree was issued on the regulation of employment. Article 4.1 of federal decree No 33 makes it illegal for employers to discriminate on the

basis of sex, colour, religion, or nationality. As UAE based companies trade on the global stage, and as part of the objective to be a leading knowledge economy, policymakers appreciated the importance of having employment legislation that was in line with international standards. However, policies that prioritise Emiratis over expatriates are *not* considered as discrimination:

Article 4.2 Rules and regulations that aim to enhance the participation of UAE citizens in the labour market shall not constitute discrimination. (Federal Decree Law regarding the regulation of employment and its amendments 2021:14)

This caveat was part of the federal decree to ensure that Emiratisation policies that prioritise Emiratis are not viewed as legally inadmissible. One example of this is in Figure 2.2, showing a LinkedIn advertisement for a job that only Emiratis can apply for.

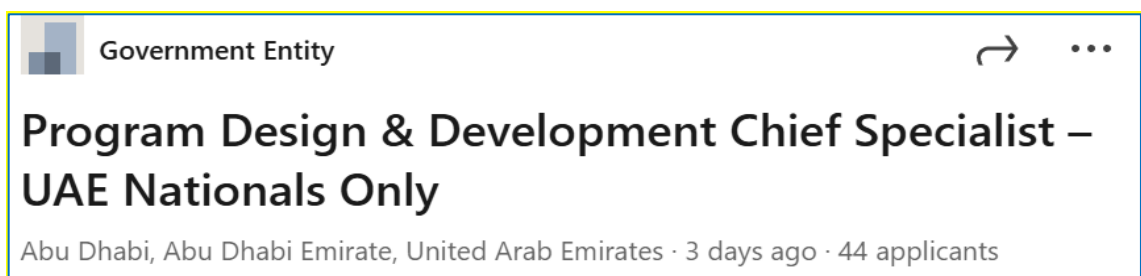


Figure 2.2 LinkedIn job advertisement targeting only Emiratis

2.3.3.9 UAE's 'Projects of the 50'

Emiratisation, where priority is given to Emirati citizens in key job sectors is a key strategy to see Emiratis in the driving seat of the country's transition to a knowledge economy. There is, however, a clear understanding from policymakers that talented expatriates have a key role to play in the UAE's vision. Vision 2021 recognises that one key factor in support of economic objectives is 'attracting and retaining the best talent'. The reference here is to expatriates who can support policymakers' initiatives, while benefitting from tax free employment. The initial components of the UAE's 'Projects of the 50' were announced by WAM (2021a), the official Emirates news agency. 50 in the title of the projects is noteworthy because 2021 was the fiftieth anniversary of the

creation of the UAE in 1971. A host of visa reforms for expatriates was announced, making it easier for expatriate graduates to remain in the UAE after graduation. Likewise, long term “golden visas’ were expanded to:

include managers, CEOs, specialists in science, engineering, health, education, business management, and technology, while the pathway has been smoothed for highly skilled and specialised residents, investors, entrepreneurs, scientists, pioneers, leading students, and graduates. (WAM 2021a)

What the WAM (2021a) report shows is that there is a recognition by UAE policymakers of the importance in achieving a balance between Emiratisation and having qualified expatriates who can support the knowledge-economy aspirations of the country.

As part of the ‘Projects of the 50’ initiatives, the UAE Talent Attraction and Retention Strategy 2031 was also launched in 2021. As its name suggests, the strategy is designed to help the UAE compete in the global competition for talent.

The Talent Attraction and Retention Strategy recognises the importance of talented expatriates to its economic growth. WAM (2021b) reported on the launch of the strategy by the UAE cabinet as ‘*strengthening the UAE leading position as a preferred destination for living, working and investing*’. (WAM 2021b).

The UAE strategy for talent attraction and retention has three main targets: positioning the UAE among the top ten countries in the global talent competitiveness indices, ensuring talents availability across all strategic sectors and to cementing the UAE image as an ideal destination for living and working. (WAM 2021b)

These targets are represented graphically in the strategy:

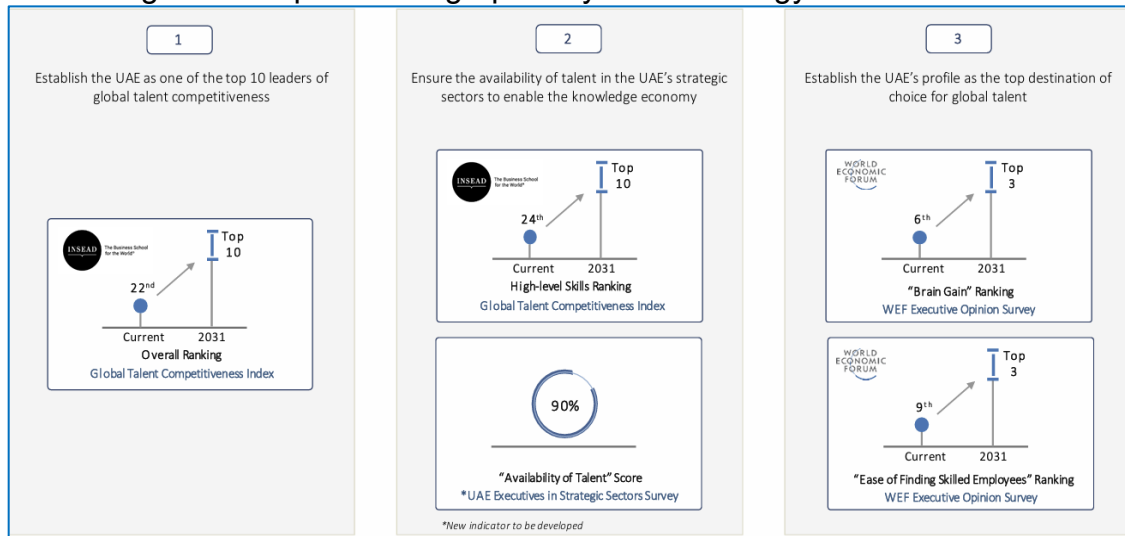


Figure 2.3 Talent Attraction & Retention Strategy 2031 Ministry of Economy (2021)

Similarly, the strategy also identifies the strategic sectors for which it intends to attract and retain talented Emiratis and expatriates, represented in Fig 2.4 below.

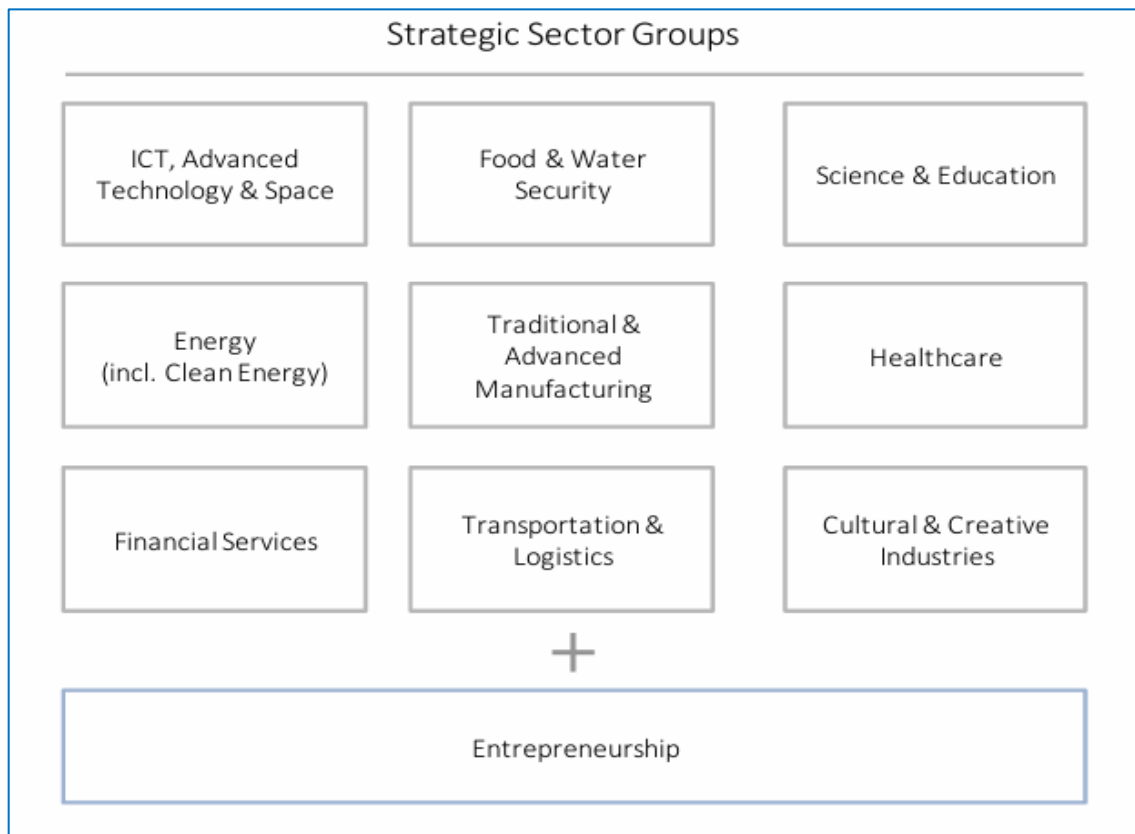


Figure 2.4 Extract from UAE Talent Attraction & Retention Strategy (2031)

While recognising the importance of skilled expatriate talent to enable the knowledge economy transformation, the strategy also serves to ‘augment’ the national talent pool. Although it is no surprise that the national talent pool refers to Emiratis, there is acknowledgement that a pragmatic approach is required to balance the needs of the country and aspirations of both the Emirati and expatriate workforce.

2.3.3.10 Emiratisation – updates

A number of Emiratisation initiatives have been tried, including quotas, financial incentives, legal action etc. with mixed success. In 2022, MOHRE announced its most ambitious Emiratisation regulations, with tough legal consequences for those companies who do not comply. It was made mandatory for companies with more than 50 employees to increase their Emiratisation quota to two per cent for skilled jobs by the end of 2022. The quota is increased to four per cent for 2023. Abbas (2023b) 2023 reported on the potential fines for companies who did not meet their 2023 targets:

Failure to meet the quota by December 31 will incur fines of Dh7,000 [£1,480] per month for each Emirati national short of the quota starting from January 1, 2024. (Abbas 2023b)

In July 2023, a major change in these Emiratisation targets was announced by MOHRE. All private sector companies across 14 business sectors with 20 – 50 employees are now required to meet Emiratisation targets. The National (2023) related a manager of a major recruitment firm affirming that:

Essentially, every company in the UAE will employ an Emirati at some point in the future. The National (2023)

Efforts to see that this target is met are quite extensive and include massive investment in programmes such as NAFIS, career fairs exclusively for Emiratis, and adopt a carrot and stick approach with the private sector. The National (2024a) reported that the:

UAE approves Dh6.4bn budget to boost Emiratisation this year
(the National 2024a)

This is in addition to the Dh 4.2 billion paid out to Emirati citizens in 2023 through the NAFIS programme. A total of Dh 10.6 billion (4.2 in 2023 plus 6.4) equates to approximately £ 2.3 billion. Career fairs exclusively for Emirati candidates are now normal and the major private sector companies vie with each other to meet their Emiratisation targets. One such event is the Ru'ya career fair in Dubai. Interestingly, the fair emphasises the development of skills as one of its targets as:

empowered Emirati youth by providing them with skills development and networking opportunities to prepare them for their future careers. (Ru'ya careers: N.D)

Private sector employers are encouraged to align with the government's vision by attending:

[Ru'ya] provides local and international companies with a platform to meet and exceed their Emiratisation goals by discovering and nurturing the best young Emirati talent. (Ru'ya careers: N.D)

MOHRE provides incentives for private companies to adhere to targets of increasing their Emirati workforce by 2% a year and announced in 2023 that companies complying with targets would be given priority in tendering for government contracts. The Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, reported by WAM (2023a), stated that:

Granting priority to companies committed to achieving Emiratisation targets in the government procurement system is a form of support and an incentive for them, in recognition of their alignment with national strategic directions. To that end, enhancing these companies' business activities will undoubtedly lead to increased contributions on their part towards supporting government and national goals across various sectors. (WAM 2023a)

Similarly, MOHRE also launched an Emiratisation awareness campaign to encourage the private sector to adhere to Emiratisation targets. WAM (2023b) reported the Director of the Professional Guidance Department at MOHRE, saying:

That is in line with raising awareness among private sector companies about the importance of adhering to Emiratisation decisions and regulations, as well as the legal repercussions that result from non-compliance with these decisions. (WAM 2023b)

The MOHRE does, however, audit private sector employers and conducts inspections. Penalties for noncompliance are quite severe, and it was reported in March 2024 that more than 1,200 companies are in breach of Emiratisation rules (The National 2024b).

It is clear, therefore that UAE policymakers are taking substantial steps to ensure they meet their socio-economic targets through a process of quotas, incentives, and the threat of punishment for circumventing government targets. The UAE employment policies have not only changed over time but are also changing the makeup of the UAE labour market and, by default, UAE society.

2.3.4 Summary of UAE Employability policies

In this section, I have laid out the various iterations of UAE employment policy between 1980 and 2024. While **UAE labour law** has always mandated the prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market, policymakers paid little attention to the private sector until the late nineteen nineties, when **Tanmia** was launched. Tanmia sought to address Emirati unemployment and a perception of a demographic imbalance that meant expatriates dominated the private sector.

Vision 2021, launched in 2010, set out a clear vision for the UAE, to diversify its economy and become a globally competitive knowledge economy. The focus of Vision 2021 is on developing the Emirati workforce, while also attracting and retaining talented expatriates who can contribute to the nation's vision.

In 2016, the Ministry of Labour was rebranded as **MOHRE**, with the letter E in their acronym representing Emiratisation or the prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market. Also in 2016, **Tawteen** was set up and the **Tawteen portal** served as a mechanism to filter job opportunities for employers and to promote the hiring of Emiratis.

2018 saw the launch of the **National Employment Strategy 2031**, which gave the clearest indication yet, of the skilled job sectors reserved for Emiratis and those same sectors seen as supporting government efforts to build a knowledge economy.

Tawteen was upgraded in 2021 to the **NAFIS programme**, as a more comprehensive package to support Emirati employment in the private sector. While the NAFIS programme caters exclusively to Emiratis, the UAE's **Projects of the 50** and the **UAE Strategy for Attracting Retaining Talent 2031**, both also launched in 2021, target talented expatriates.

What the UAE has now is a system that prioritises Emiratis, while recognising the importance of expatriates who can help grow the economy. I would contend that earlier employment policies had not delivered on expectations but can be seen as attempts to deal with socio-economic changes. In response to further socio-economic changes, the UAE labour market will continue to change, and these changes have an impact and will continue to have an impact on both Emiratis and expatriates alike. To understand the impact that UAE employment policies are having on both the UAE labour market and society, I opted to view these changes and the *relative* dimension of employability through the lens afforded by social practice theories. The social practice theories I chose to use are discussed in section three (2.4).

2.4 Section Three – What social practice theories can tell us about the UAE Employment strategy

As seen in 2.3, the roles afforded to expatriates and citizens have changed, as the country moved to diversify the economy and put policies in place to put its citizens at the centre of its employment strategies. This suggests that the

employment policies discussed are an exercise in social engineering, where policymakers are leading societal change and regulating the development of the different segments of UAE society. I now move on to discuss the power relations at play in the UAE labour market, alongside the social practice theories to consider the factors at play in the employment opportunities available for Emirati and expatriate graduates.

Ball (1994) referred to policy as both text and action, words and deeds, and contends that what is put into practice, is what is intended by policymakers. Both the policy, in the form of text, and policymaker actions, form the basis of my research. Through the lens of social practice theories, I sought to understand both the reason and intent for UAE employment policies. Social practice theory, in this case, Bourdieu's framework and Brown's PCT offer a mechanism to explain the relationship between human action and the system. The intention is to provide a comprehensive understanding of UAE employment policies and Emiratisation initiatives. As Lingard and Ozga (2007) indicate, policy research is best carried out by considering why the policies were written and what issues they seek to address. Using this approach and integrating these theoretical perspectives can provide a holistic understanding of the socio-economic and political processes at play in the UAE labour market.

2.4.1 Bourdieu's Social Practice Framework,

The social practice framework of habitus, field, and capital, proposed by Bourdieu (1984, 1990, 1997, 2005) is discussed, alongside Bourdieu's concept of doxa. The first point to note, as Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) acknowledge, is that Bourdieu's framework provides better reflexive opportunities when the concepts of habitus, field and capital are considered together. Swartz (2008) reiterates the relational aspect of these three concepts which they argue were central to Bourdieu's approach. Heimans (2012) refers to habitus, field, and capital as:

Bourdieu's conceptual triad for use in a relational analysis
(Heimans 2012:377)

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is central to Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Habitus can be thought of as socialised norms that guide peoples' behaviour in society. In essence, as Power (1999) puts it, habitus is:

a way of describing the embodiment of social structures and history in individuals. It is a set of dispositions, internal to the individual, that reflects external structures and shapes how the individual perceives the world and acts in it. (Power 1999:48)

Habitus is influenced by a person's social status, social class, gender, ethnicity, education etc. Habitus, understandably, can shift from one context to another and, as Navarro (2006) points out, is not fixed and can change over time. Emirati and expatriate graduates will have quite different experiences and dispositions, in part shaped by societal norms and experiences, enabled or prescribed by UAE employment policies. As UAE employment policies have changed over time, so have the employment prospects and attitudes towards employment for both segments of UAE society. The private sector, for example, was long ignored by Emirati graduates until policies and programmes such as NAFIS were put in place. Emiratisation initiatives can be seen as reshaping the habitus of Emiratis, while expatriates navigate an evolving UAE labour market and adapt to changes in societal structure. Power (1999) postulates that:

habitus tends to generate practices that coincide with the social conditions that produced it (Power 1999:49)

Class, culture, the organisation and re-organisation of the UAE economy, reflected in its employment policies, shape and reshape the habitus of Emirati and expatriate job seekers.

Fields can be seen as the social arenas where individuals interact and compete for resources. People can occupy different fields such as education, employment, family, politics etc. Depending on the situation people may behave quite differently in each. For example, an Emirati mother may occupy a position of power in a ministry yet comply with the cultural norms of being a wife and mother at home. In the context of UAE employment policies, the fields of government, education and private sector employers intersect. As stakeholders

within these three fields negotiate and navigate themselves through the impact of policies, the labour market becomes a contested field in its own right.

Swartz (1997) has a somewhat blunt description of fields in that they:

denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different forms of capital. (Swartz 1997:17)

Fields do not exist without capital, namely the resources or assets that individuals have or are able to access. Bourdieu identified four main types of capital, namely economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Bourdieu:1997).

Economic capital - money, wealth or property is the most straightforward form of capital. It can be argued that the 'cradle to the grave' welfare system afforded to Emiratis with free education, generous salary supplements under the NAFIS programme, and impressive social housing, puts Emiratis at a distinct advantage in terms of their economic capital.

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital can exist in the embodied state or long-lasting dispositions acquired throughout life (e.g. parental instruction), in the objectified state such as cultural goods and in the institutionalised state in things such as qualifications. UAE employability related policies may aim to enhance Emirati graduates' cultural capital through education and training programmes such as NAFIS and thereby enhance their ability to compete in the job market.

Social capital is accrued from networks of relationships such as family or, being a member of a community, social group, or indeed ethnicity or nationality (Bourdieu 2005). Social capital in the UAE and across the Arab world is often conflated with the term 'wasta' or influence. The UAE indigenous population is a tribal, collective society where tribal affiliations remain important. 'Wasta' or influence is found in every country and is known under different names such as 'piston' in France, 'old boys' network' in the UK, to name but a few. Similarly, within the UAE, networks of influence exist amongst multiple ethnic groups and

can play a role for any student in finding employment post-graduation. Al Subaihi (2013), writing for the National, raised the issue of 'wasta' and called it a 'potent factor' in hiring and for Emiratis in particular, 'wasta' often takes the form of tribal preference. While this article takes a negative view of wasta Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016) point out that wasta can be found in all aspects of Arab society and:

For the betterment of society, or for its ill, wasta is a mechanism that is essential in the daily operations of the Arab world: a tradition that is deeply ingrained, is not seen as universally negative, does not necessarily adversely affect society and is unlikely to disappear. Instead, it is more important for those evaluating the Arab world to understand its merits and adapt accordingly. (Kropf and Newbury-Smith 2016:13)

Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016) also point out, however, that social capital and wasta can be both an asset for the individual and a means of perpetuating social inequalities. In the context of UAE employment policies, Emiratisation policy has placed an increased number of Emiratis in job hiring positions, where social networks, social capital or 'wasta', can confer preferential treatment on Emirati candidates.

Bourdieu's Symbolic Capital or prestige/reputation confers a sense of respectability and honour on the individual (Bourdieu 1997). The other forms of capital described above can feed into the volume of symbolic capital someone possesses. Economic (wealth) and cultural capital (knowledge and education), for example, can elevate an individual's symbolic capital. I contend that the UAE employment policies have conferred greater symbolic capital on Emirati job seekers and shape not just Emirati individuals' standing in society but also for UAE citizens as a group. Symbolic capital, in this sense, has a part to play in the social stratification and power dynamics in UAE society. In so doing, Emiratisation initiatives elevate Emirati candidates in the UAE job market as representatives of their national identity and culture.

The final concept put forward by Bourdieu (1984) that is of relevance to my study is that of *doxa*, or the taken for granted beliefs and norms that society accepts as 'common sense'. The *doxa* of the *absolute* dimension of employability, where having the right skills is rarely challenged, was discussed in Section 1 (2.2). I suggest that the graduate employability strategies and employment policies in the UAE can also be seen as examples of *doxa*, as they are not challenged or questioned by a large part of the UAE population. Emiratisation initiatives, for example, are framed within the context of national identity, national development, and national stability. While employers, HE and policymakers navigate themselves during the implementation phase of employment policies, sometimes through negotiations, round tables etc, policymakers hold significant authority, and this ultimately shapes public discourse. As seen in section 2 (2.3), employment policies are often enacted through government directives and regulations enforced with a carrot and stick approach. The changing UAE workplace has had an impact on both Emirati and expatriate communities. Understanding these changes and the social practices driving these changes is the bedrock of this study. I argue that it is through a better understanding of the forces at play, that stakeholders can better navigate the changing UAE job market.

2.4.2 Brown's Positional Conflict Theory (PCT)

Brown (2000) coined Positional Conflict Theory (PCT) to rebuff and challenge the dominant *absolute* dimension of employability presented by positional competition. Positional competition focuses on individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, and their ranking against each other in the competition for jobs.

Brown's PCT, elaborated further in Brown et al (2003) and Brown and Hesketh (2004), distinguish between rigging and ranking strategies used by different social groups. As Brown (2000) notes:

This distinction between competition 'ranking' (resources in the marketplace and competition 'rigging' (influences over markets) is important in a global context where the trend towards international integration can itself be seen as an example of

how social elites have extended their influence over markets.
(Brown 2000:637)

Rigging or a form of social closure, is where particular social groups or indeed the structure of the system, can exercise a degree of exclusion and thereby benefit one party over others. As we have seen with UAE employment policies, such as Vision 2021 and the National Employment Strategy 2031, certain job sectors are considered priorities for Emiratis with expatriate graduates being effectively excluded.

Ranking, on the other hand, refers to the ability of individuals to use their social, cultural and economic capital to gain an advantage in the labour market. Brown et al (2003) suggest that since positional competition is not exclusive to individuals and social groups, that ranking also needs to be understood at an institutional level with universities and employers.

While PCT proposes a framework to understand how rigging and ranking occur within social and economic systems, it effectively illuminates the disparities that are seen in society. Brown et (2003) conclude that PCT offers:

a promising way of bringing together contrasting theories of education, employment and the labour market. These ideas are clearly in need of further development, but it is hoped that they provide a solid platform for future analyses. (Brown et 2003:122)

Unfortunately, little has happened with PCT, despite Brown et al (2003) coining the phrase *duality of employability* and the need to turn the focus away from the *absolute* dimension and to look at the *relative* dimension, the societal context of employability policy. They argue that:

Employability cannot be properly understood outside of this duality (Brown et al 2003:111)

As mentioned in chapter 2 (2.2.3), Isopahkala-Bouret and Tholen (2023) highlighted the lack of understanding of how positional competition in PCT is played out in non-Western contexts. While my study draws from the PCT

concepts of rigging and ranking, put forward by Brown et al (2003) the focus is on the unique aspects of UAE graduate employability. Whereas Brown's PCT looked at rigging as influence over the labour market by professional status groups, I expand on the concept to include state actors who have the power to rig the market in favour of groups based on nationality. Ranking, according to Brown's model, looks at the way individuals and groups mobilise their social, cultural and economic capital to gain advantage in the labour market, and therefore has parallels with Bourdieu's work. My study builds on the concept of rigging and ranking by simultaneously drawing from Bourdieu's main concepts of habitus, capital, and fields. It is through a combined Bourdieusian / PCT approach that I seek to add to the debate by studying the unique features of the *relative* aspects of UAE graduate employability using Bourdieu's framework and PCT. Bourdieu's framework, on forms of capital and doxa, offers the researcher an insight into various iterations of UAE employment policies.

The approach used to regulate employment and support graduate employability in the UAE, is the focus of the discussion on the findings for research question 1 (chapter 4) and how this strategy is perceived by policymakers, HE, and employers. A Bourdieusian / PCT approach adds depth to our insight into the societal factors at play. These societal factors are the focus of the discussion on the findings for research question 2 (chapter 5). Similarly, Bourdieu's social practice model, alongside PCT, is used as the theoretical lenses to answer research question 3 (Chapter 6).

2.5 Chapter summary

Chapter 2 has provided an overview of the literature relevant to the UAE employment policies and how these policies may relate to the socioeconomic makeup and development of the UAE. Firstly, following a discussion on the *absolute* and *relative* dimensions of employability, the lack of any thorough research on the socio-political factors at play in UAE policy formation and enactment was identified as a gap in the literature. My study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the socio-economic and political factors at play. The research questions are crafted to provide such a focus, by looking at the current

approach used to regulate employment and support graduate employability, how this approach is perceived by stakeholders, and the societal factors driving the approach.

Secondly, the UAE employment policies between 1980 and 2024 are laid out, alongside commentary on the socio-economic issues operating at the time. Looking at the progression of employment policies over such a period, offers more insight into how and why employment policy is crafted both as a response to societal events but also as a mechanism to shape societal structure.

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu's social practice framework and Brown's PCT are presented as the theoretical lenses with which to understand UAE employment policies in the unique socio-economic political context of the UAE. Bourdieu's framework provides insight into the UAE approach to regulate employment and support graduate employability and the manner in which it has evolved over the years in the UAE. Combining Bourdieu's framework and PCT adds depth to our insight into the factors at play driving the current approach. It is through a deeper understanding, from a societal perspective that government bodies, higher education and employers can operate more closely together.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of chapter 3 is to set out the research approach used in this thesis. The ontological and epistemological positions taken, are presented first (3.2). This positions my research within a social constructionist paradigm. The reasons for choosing a qualitative case study research design are then explained in detail (3.3). Next, the method used, and sampling strategy are explained (3.4), together with details of how the research data was collected and analysed (3.5). Considerations are also made for my position within the research (3.6) and how this may have had an influence on the data interpretation. Finally, information is provided on any ethical considerations (3.7) and transferability (3.8).

3.2 Research Philosophy – ontological and epistemological perspectives

The research paradigm or framework that guided me through the research process included my beliefs as the researcher, and to some extent, my biases that influenced the way data was collected, analysed, and interpreted.

In this research, I took a social constructionist view (Bryman 2016), where social and cultural factors play a central role in how knowledge is understood. My position is that the social and cultural context is important, in that the subjective experiences of individuals and groups shape both the research participants' and researcher's perception of 'reality'. The ontological position I took is that reality is constructed by individuals and that no one 'reality' exists. Given this social constructionist stance, the focus in my study was on how knowledge is created and understood, and what constitutes acceptance of these beliefs within different groups. Working off this assumption that knowledge is constructed through social and cultural practices, it is fair to say that different social/cultural groups may have different and quite subjective perspectives on what constitutes acceptable interpretation of knowledge.

Taking this socially constructionist approach, I argue that UAE employment policy and the way it is perceived and interpreted by stakeholders, can be seen as socially constructed through interactions with and through the key stakeholders and actors in HE work-relationships. As my study aligns with the argument put forward by Olssen et al (2004) that policy is discursive, the approach that I used focused on the connections between text, social structures, and the political system. For example, policies that might appear to favour one graduate group over another, could be interpreted quite differently by members of the different groups affected by them.

My ontological and epistemological position is central to the choice of, and approach to, the research topic, including its formulation and alignment with the research questions (RQ) asked.

RQ1: What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers? To answer this question, I examined the social negotiation of meaning and considered the perception and expectations of stakeholders, such as employers or HEIs who seek to understand and navigate what is expected of them from the government's policy. Perception and expectations are constructed differently by different stakeholders, and it was these differences which my study explored.

RQ2: What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability? This asks for clarification on the factors behind UAE employment policy development and implementation by examining how individuals and groups in the UAE participate in the construction of their perceived reality. It is therefore fair to say that this process of meaning making, and negotiation, is specific to the socio-political context of UAE society. It is worth noting that such social constructs are based on the society in question and the events surrounding the time period in which they exist.

RQ3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE as an emerging knowledge economy? In

choosing social practice theory as my lens with which to explore the research data, I felt that this aligned with my social constructionist, interpretative approach that as human beings, we are meaning makers. The world is one in which we are required to seek out meaning rather than one where meanings are fixed. This underpinned the broad social constructionist approach used in my study. In taking such an approach when unpacking UAE employment policy, I sought to understand the values, meanings, ideologies, and beliefs of those developing it and putting it into practice.

Having taken a social constructionist position and posed my research questions, this in turn modified the methodology of my study. It provided the rationale for the selection and application of method(s) for gathering evidence and the subsequent approach used to explore the research data. Research design, as Yin (2018) indicates, links the data to be collected and the conclusions drawn, to the research questions.

Using a model adapted from Carter and Little (2007), the relationship between epistemology, methodology and methods is provided in Figure 3.1 below.

Adapted from Carter and Little (2007:1317)

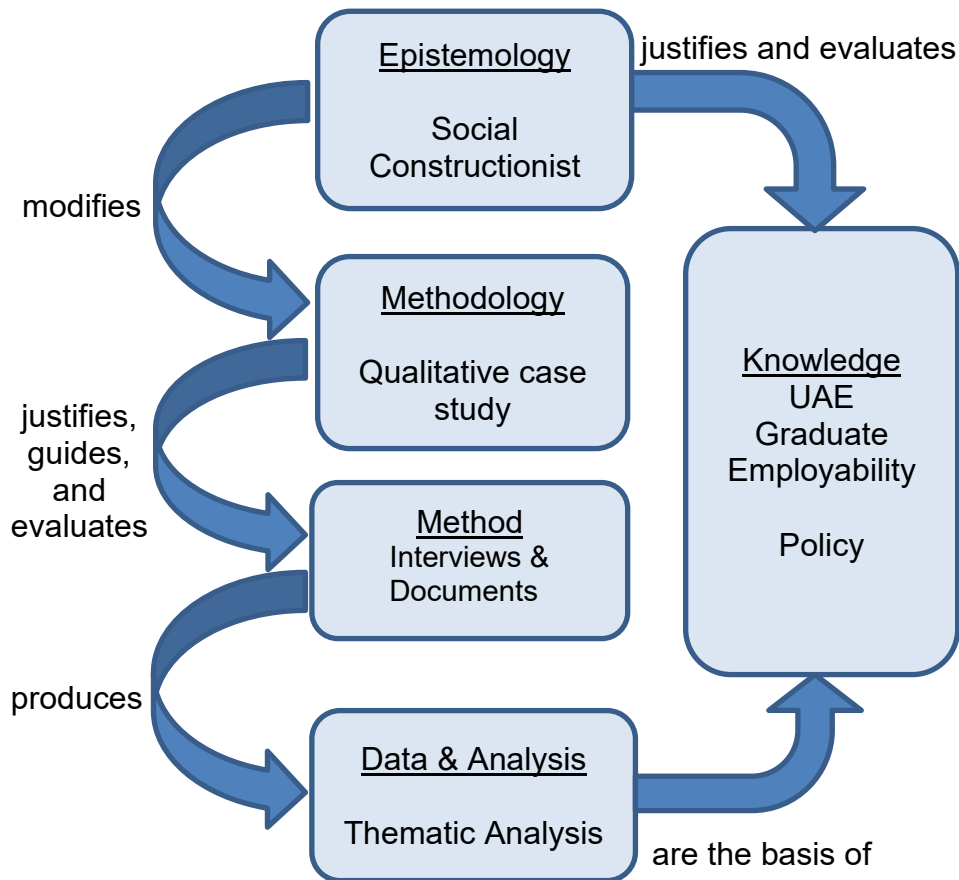


Figure 3.1 Relationship between epistemology, methodology and method.

3.3 Qualitative case study research design

Having taken a social constructionist, interpretive approach to answer my research questions, I chose a qualitative case study design as it fits well with the aforementioned ontological and epistemological position in this study. As pointed out by Merriam (1998), a qualitative design aligns with the notion that meaning is socially constructed by individuals as they interact with their world. My approach agrees with Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who state that qualitative methods are appropriate when looking for answers to questions about how meaning is created as people interact with each other and society.

My study is an in-depth exploration of UAE employment policies, within the real-life context of policy development and implementation. Employment policies were viewed through a range of qualitative methods, including interviews,

document review and thematic analysis. Given that my focus was on UAE policy development and implementation, and the impact on UAE graduates, I considered my study to align with a case study framework. UAE employment policy and the approach to graduate employability is the case, and the context is policy change in action. The research questions posed, and qualitative methods used in my study, are an exploration of the complexities of the case.

As Simons (2009) states, a case study is a study of something particular and unique. In this instance the relationship between government, employers and HEIs vis a vis employment policy and employability, is the unit of analysis. As Stake (1995) points out, case study has increasingly become associated with in-depth analysis of a particular context, using interpretive qualitative methods, aligning with the research paradigm used in this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Creswell and Poth (2018), are in agreement that a case study approach is a relevant strategy of inquiry used in qualitative research.

There is, however, more to a research design than positioning it on the qualitative/quantitative spectrum. I was cognisant of the fact that, to maintain design consistency, there should be a clear alignment between the epistemic approach, the theoretical lens(es) used for interpretation, the objectives of the project, the research questions, and the implementation phase. In essence, the analytical framework used, structured my thought process and served as a model to facilitate meaning making and understanding.

For the purposes of this study, my analytical framework was the process through which core concepts, in this case social constructionism in policy development and implementation, could be used to view evidence and make an informed analysis and interpretation.

3.4 Method used to collect data

As Crotty (1998) mentioned, any piece of research begins with the questions being asked, the rationale for the methodology and methods chosen and the data sources available. According to Dey (2003), there is a tendency to believe

that data are simply 'out there' awaiting collection. In reality, Dey suggests that data sources have to be carefully selected, and the data have to be noticed and identified as relevant for the purposes of research.

Having discussed the methodology underpinning the research approach, the method used to collect data is detailed below (3.4.1). My study used interview data and incorporated publicly available documents from my literature review to discuss findings and draw conclusions.

3.4.1 Interviews

As Byrne (2004) notes, qualitative interviews are particularly useful when accessing people's attitudes and values. Interviews, as Hammond and Wellington (2013) point out, can be described as conversations between the researcher and the researched, often carried out to gain an understanding of their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. As a method, I felt that interviews were appropriate in terms of the social constructionist approach used, and for the research questions being asked. Taking the view reported by Silverman (2014), the interview approach used in this study focused not only on the interviewer/interviewee interaction, but also the content of what was said in its relation to the world beyond the interview. I was able to construct meaning from the interactions, based on an in-depth grasp of the stakeholders' context within which they operate.

A semi-structured approach was used, with a list of questions in the form of an interview guide, as Bryman (2016) refers to it. When developing the guide and crafting my questions, I was mindful to include topic areas that would cover what I needed to know to answer my research questions. I initially piloted the questions with two colleagues and made some minor revisions before finalising the interview guide. Using a semi-structured approach allowed for a certain degree of flexibility, both for the interviewees and me as the interviewer. This approach gave me an opportunity to ask additional questions where the replies merited further questioning. Although a core set of questions were put to interviewees, some questions were more relevant to the profile of the person being interviewed. A full list of questions asked is given in Table 3.1

| | Questions and Prompts |
|----|--|
| 1 | <p>These first set of questions ask you about your background.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me briefly about your background and your organisation? • Which organisation? What is your role? |
| 2. | <p>These questions ask you about your general views regarding the topic of graduate employability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me what you understand by the term graduate employability? • In your opinion, what are the main factors that affect graduate employability in the UAE? |
| 3. | <p>These questions ask more in-depth questions about graduate employability and its importance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think all universities, employers and policy makers should make graduate employability a priority? Why, why not? |
| 4. | <p>These questions ask you about your views on the higher education work-relationships in the UAE and how important you view this relationship for graduate employability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you outline your views on the current relationship between universities, employers, and policy makers in the UAE? • Can you give me some examples from your own organisation? • What challenges do universities and employers face in meeting the needs of the UAE's knowledge-based economy? • Could you tell me what you think these needs are? • Can you talk me through some of the challenges your organisation is facing? • How do you think universities, employers and policy makers should respond to future trends in the UAE job market? • How do you think your organisation will deal with future trends? • Could you tell me what trends you think will be the most significant? • Can you tell me about the channels of communication available for universities, employers, and policy makers to work together on graduate employability? • Do you think these channels of communication are important? Why or why not? • What types of discussions have you had, if any, within your organisation, about meeting current and future needs of the economy? |

| | |
|----|--|
| 5. | <p>These questions ask about your views on UAE policy and how your organisation interacts with it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me what you know about the UAE's policy and vision on regulating employment and promoting graduate employability. • Do you know if your organisation has any guidelines about employment and graduate employability? If so, how are they used? • How does your organisation measure its effectiveness in implementing national employment strategies? • How is this performance data communicated to governing bodies? • Given the importance of Emiratisation in national policy, how do you think universities and employers are addressing this key issue? • Can you give me some examples of how your organisation focuses on Emiratisation? • Do you have any suggestions on additional measures universities and employers can take to enhance Emiratisation? • How do you think UAE graduate employability approach might affect the choices that universities and employers make? • Could you tell me how these policies have influenced your organisation? |
|----|--|

Table 3.1 Interview questions

Interviews were held with 20 stakeholders who represent a cross section of major HEI's, employers and UAE policymakers, to explore their attitudes and opinions related to HE work-relationships. Emphasis was given to their views on policies and approaches that influence or affect UAE graduate employability and employment opportunities. Careful attention was paid to having an even distribution across the three groups and to select interviewees who could talk at length about graduate employability and HE work-relationships, and had interacted with employment policy, either in its development or implementation. 9 people were interviewed from 4 HEIs in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and 6 other interviewees were human resource officers, senior managers in 6 different organisations that recruited graduates from the UAE labour market. 5 policymakers were interviewed from government bodies, including the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE). See Table 3.2 for a more detailed breakdown of the twenty research participants.

| Participant | Sector | Position | Private vs State Sector | Nationality | Gender |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| S01 | HE | Faculty Dean | State owned | Emirati | Female |
| S02 | HE | Director Employability | Private | Expatriate | Female |
| S03 | HE | Director Industry partners | State owned | Emirati | Male |
| S04 | HE | University Dean | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S05 | HE | University Dean | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S06 | HE | University Dean | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S07 | HE | University Dean | Private | Expatriate | Female |
| S08 | HE | Director Employability | State owned | Emirati | Male |
| S09 | HE | Director Careers | Private | Expatriate | Female |
| S10 | Policymaker | Director MOHRE | State owned | Emirati | Male |
| S11 | Policymaker | Manager ADEK | State owned | Emirati | Male |
| S12 | Policymaker | CEO Advisor | State owned | Expatriate | Female |
| S13 | Policymaker | Director Policy Institute | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S14 | Policymaker | Director Industry Partners | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S15 | Employer | Director Training | State owned | Expatriate | Male |
| S16 | Employer | CEO | Private | Expatriate | Male |
| S17 | Employer | Manager Emiratisation | State owned | Emirati | Female |
| S18 | Employer | Manager Emiratisation | State owned | Emirati | Female |
| S19 | Employer | Director HR | Private | Expatriate | Female |
| S20 | Employer | Director HR | State owned | Expatriate | Male |

Table 3.2 Research participants

Note that information provided in column 3 does not compromise participant anonymity. For example: with S10, there are several people at MOHRE at director level; likewise with S11, there are multiple managers at ADEK. It is worth noting that I was able to source participants because of my extensive links with UAE HE and employers, and my familiarity with UAE culture. This

was particularly important when it came to interviewing policymakers. As one Emirati intermediary pointed out to me, a number of projects carried out by expatriate researchers with different government bodies, had resulted in findings that were perceived as over critical and reflecting an inadequate grasp of the UAE societal factors at play. My reputation of bridging the gap between the Emirati and expatriate perspectives proved invaluable in addressing such concerns. I also made it clear to all interviewees that the findings and recommendations would be shared with them, on completion of the final version of my thesis.

Although Bryman (2016) discusses the available options for carrying out interviews, such as telephone and online interviews, the preference was for face-to-face interactions. As Cohen et al (2003) quite rightly point out that this is not just a data collection exercise but also a social, interpersonal encounter. Unfortunately, the global COVID epidemic meant that interviews had to be carried out via Zoom and MS Teams during 2020-2021. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and, with the consent of the interviewees, was recorded for the purpose of transcription and subsequent analysis. For those research participants who requested it, a copy of the questions was provided in advance of the interviews. Transcripts were shared with all interviewees and an opportunity given to make changes or add additional information by e-mail where necessary. Only one research participant submitted minor changes to the transcript (short addition to one of their responses) and all others confirmed their agreement with the transcripts.

In the interviews, when asked about policies, it was important to consider the position of the research participant(s) making the statements, the context, what was said, what was not said and what assumptions are made about the author of the policies. As mentioned, employment policy and graduate employability announcements available in policies and press releases will convey intent and purpose. How that message is received and interpreted by those implementing policy in HEIs and employers can be quite different, and I anticipated that this would be reflected in interviewees' responses. Each respondent's answers offered a window into their differing perspectives.

The underpinning approach used in my study is that people's perception of 'reality' will differ, and that knowledge is constructed through social and cultural practices. It is these subjective perspectives that were explored with research participants and presented in the findings and discussion chapters, with my interpretation as the researcher.

Transcription of interviews from audio recordings and preparation of texts provided the raw data as the basis of analysis. All interview transcripts were managed using NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. As Spencer et al. (2014) note, such packages provide researchers with a convenient data reservoir from which the analytical structure and coding can take place. Analysis and subsequent interpretation are supported through NVivo's features of searching, filtering, and reorganising the text, and also through diagrams that can be created to chart the researcher's thinking. A more detailed of my analysis is provided in 3.5.

All interviews conformed to strict ethical considerations and the confidentiality and security of data obtained was explained to each interviewee beforehand. Further discussion on the ethical considerations is found in 3.7.

3.5 Understanding the data – analysis

Data collection and data analysis are usually considered as separate, distinct processes. However, according to Merriam (1998) this distinction is often misleading. While my study did not adopt Maxwell's (2012) suggestion that data analysis should be conducted simultaneously with data collection, there was an informal processing and initial analysis of interview data as it was collected. This is particularly pertinent when interviews were carried out. As the conversations between the interviewer and interviewee developed, the process of social interaction and construction of meaning lent itself to further probing of the interviewee's position. This is, in itself, is an intuitive, subconscious interpretation of what is heard.

Bernard et al (2017) see the process of data analysis as a search for patterns. It is in this section where further details are given on the approach used to search for patterns and the underlying factors behind them. Several qualitative data analysis methods are available to social science researchers. Any plan for qualitative data analysis should be both rigorous and systematic, to counter criticism that qualitative research is casual or anecdotal, (Chowdhury 2015). Rapley (2016) on the other hand, cautions against taking a strictly linear approach and argues the case for the researcher to adopt a qualitative analytical attitude.

The approach I took was to use Thematic Analysis (TA) (Bryman 2016) with the transcripts of the 20 interviews, alongside the sociopolitical context provided by a review of relevant publicly available documents. I felt that TA, as a method, offered me the flexibility to highlight and interpret stakeholders' comments in a manner that matched the social constructionist research paradigm. TA allowed me to identify key patterns and to capture the different perspectives on employment policies from stakeholders' answers. Capturing the different viewpoints of HEIs, employers and policymakers through TA, provided me with the means to compare these viewpoints, highlight similarities, differences, sources of tension and concern, and posit areas for improvement. On the latter point, I felt that TA would provide systematic evidence of the different perspectives, on which to make pertinent recommendations on the current iterations of UAE employment policy and graduate employability strategy.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

Ryan and Bernard (2000) view Thematic Analysis (TA) as sitting *within* the major analytical traditions. Braun and Clarke (2006) define TA as *"a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data"* (2006:79). Similarly, Bryman (2016), defines TA as *"a term used in connection with the analysis of qualitative data to refer to the extraction of key themes in one's data"* (2016:697). While Braun and Clarke (2006) see the compatibility of TA with social constructionist paradigms, they stress the importance of TA matching the epistemological position of the researcher in answering the research questions.

They remind the researcher who employs TA to acknowledge the active role they play in identifying patterns. My position as the researcher is discussed in more detail in 3.6. I was cognisant, however, that my personal and professional background, as someone with over twenty-five years' experience of workforce development projects for UAE graduates, would influence the role I played when interpreting interview data and identifying patterns. Braun and Clarke (2019) reiterate this position in a refined version of TA which they regard as reflexive, and distinct from other forms of TA. At the heart of their reflexive TA is the researcher's role in knowledge production. Patterns in the data or themes, are *"actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity"* (Braun and Clarke 2019:594).

My study adopted a reflexive position because of my assumptions on how knowledge is created or constructed through distinct social interactions. My study does not, however, claim to have used the approach Braun and Clarke (2019) approach in the manner they advocate. As Braun and Clarke (2019) themselves point out that *"other creative uses of TA per se – indeed, these are welcome, if they are done deliberately and thoughtfully"* (2019:589). It is this deliberate and thoughtful line that I adopted in my analysis.

The approach to data analysis followed six key stages, represented below in a simplified version of events. It is important to note that while this may appear to be a linear process, it was in fact, recursive and involved several iterations, moving back and forth between each stage.

Stage 1: Referred to as **familiarisation** by both Braun and Clarke (2006) and Spencer et al. (2014), involved immersion within the discourse to gain an overview and to identify key topics. Although Corbin and Strauss (2015) highlight the need to refrain from carrying out a detailed analysis, I felt it useful at this stage, to create sticky notes on noticeable and recurrent topics. To this end, Figure 3.2 shows a manual sticky note approach that I used to visually represent topics/patterns that stood out for me. This was created after reviewing three transcripts to produce a nascent codebook from which I analysed the remaining transcripts and updated the sticky notes as appropriate.

Stage 1 was an iterative process as the codebook was refined, integrating new codes, integrating them, and ensuring that the codes captured stakeholders' answers. Taking a reflexive approach, the initial codebook was a living document, facilitated by using sticky notes that I could move around the board based on my interpretation of the data.

Stage 2: From my initial codebook using sticky notes, I developed a topic map and second round of coding using NVivo 12. As Rapley (2016) points out, it provided a systematic labelling of the data, identifying key themes and patterns, and allocating a code to that segment. An example of this is given below in Figure 3.3:

| File Home Import Create Explore Share Modules | | | |
|---|-------|------------|--|
| Codes | | | |
| Name | Files | References | |
| Factors affecting Graduate Employability | 1 | 1 | |
| Capital | 0 | 0 | |
| Free HE | 2 | 2 | |
| Gov't HE act as recruitment agenci | 2 | 2 | |
| HE refer locals for jobs | 2 | 2 | |
| Social capital Wasta | 4 | 5 | |
| Nationality | 1 | 1 | |
| Sense of Emirati entitlement | 1 | 1 | |
| Stereotyping | 1 | 1 | |
| Government policy for Emiratis | 2 | 2 | |
| Better than before | 1 | 1 | |
| Innovations schemes | 2 | 2 | |
| National priority areas | 2 | 2 | |
| Space, Energy | 2 | 2 | |
| Points system | 2 | 2 | |
| Previous initiatives | 2 | 2 | |
| Importance of Emiratisation | 3 | 3 | |
| Private sector focus | 4 | 5 | |
| Top down approach | 5 | 6 | |
| Quota system | 7 | 9 | |
| Language issue with Emiratis | 2 | 3 | |
| Reserved sectors | 2 | 2 | |

Figure 3.3 Stage 2: Topic map and initial coding using NVivo 12

Stage 3: Refining the initial coding of themes into categories, reviewing their interconnectivity and relationship to one another and possible hierarchy. This involved me revisiting the original sticky notes and transcriptions manually, to refine codes and themes. While Braun and Clarke (2022) encourage the use of central organising concepts over content/topic summaries as themes, I held a looser view on what constitutes a theme. The all-important question in using a reflexive form of TA and not necessarily the Braun and Clarke reflexive TA, was to assign codes and then themes that provided a scaffold for my interpretation of the data. One of the questions I asked myself at this stage was ‘what constitutes a theme?’. I did not see this as an either-or choice between descriptive themes (content summaries) and interpretive themes (overarching concepts).

As one of the key goals of my research was to make policy recommendations, I opted for a mix of both approaches. An example of a descriptive theme is ***Having the right skills for the job***, taken from stakeholders’ definition of employability. A case in point was when one HE stakeholder said:

Employability anywhere is simply defined as you have the skills that the job demands. (S04-HE/university dean)

Descriptive codes were particularly useful in highlighting key issues in the UAE graduate employability debate.

An example of an interpretive theme is ***Barriers to graduate employability***, taken from codes made on stakeholders’ views on oversubscribed courses not perceived as needed in the labour market, or students opting for fashionable job sectors. One illustration is given below:

Here in the UAE, many students do not choose their degrees and so the parents choose them for them. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

Stage 4: This stage consisted of me reviewing the coded data for each theme to ensure a suitable fit. Some codes and themes were merged or not used in later interpretations. The key issue for me was how well the themes could assist

with answering the research questions. An example of codes and themes merged was codes referring to the *lack of structured meetings* between HEIs, employers and policymakers initially put under the sub-theme **ad hoc meetings**. The codes associated with the sub-theme **tension between stakeholders**, were merged with **ad hoc meetings** to form a new combined theme ***absence from the debate***. The new combined theme encapsulated elements of both sub-themes.

An example of codes/themes that were not used in the findings/discussion chapters are those that pertained to career advising. Figure 3.4 illustrates those extracts coded under *career advising*:

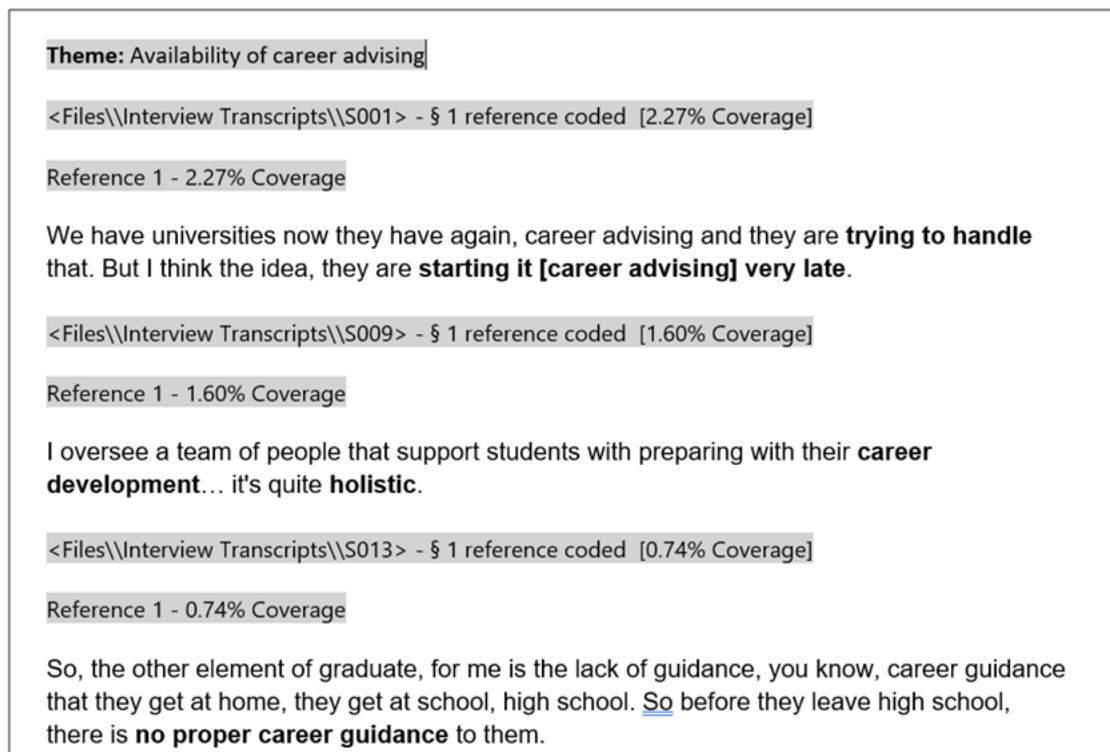


Figure 3.4 Example of codes omitted from the analysis phase in Stage 5

While codes omitted such as career advising, were interesting topics and relevant to further follow up studies, I did not include them as I felt that they did not add sufficient value in answering my research questions.

Stage 5: Analysis at this stage was interpretive and explored the social relationships and practices in play to explain the bigger picture that each theme

represents. It was at this stage that I selected interview extracts for inclusion in the findings and discussion chapters to illustrate aspects of themes to create a narrative. For reporting purposes, each stakeholder was attributed with a code from S01 to S20, followed by a hyphen and HE, employer, or policymaker, followed by their position. The stakeholder's quote used in my description of a descriptive theme in Stage 3 was S04-HE/university dean or research participant number 4, representing a HEI.

Stage 5 culminated in me producing a list of themes, codes/sub-themes, associated stakeholder quotes and examples of pertinent extracts from publicly available documents. These are provided in Appendix 1 and formed the basis of the narrative I used in my findings/discussion chapters.

In selecting stakeholders' quotes to illustrate the themes I had selected to answer the research questions, I personally felt challenged by the prospect of merely reporting what research participants had said, without discussing the implications. I therefore made the decision not to have separate findings and discussion chapters but to have three distinct chapters, addressing each of my research questions with findings and discussions combined in each of these three chapters. I believe that this aligned better with my social constructionist interpretive approach.

Stage 6: This stage was the initial writing up of findings around my themes but also drawing connections from my literature review detailing relevant employment policies, any prior research and social practice theories. My approach allowed me to meaningfully discuss my findings while considering the interconnectivity of actors, agency, ideology, power relationships, and societal structures. I moved beyond a description of codes and themes, and provided a narrative of how the data was interpreted and why the selection of themes and subsequent interpretations were important in answering the research questions.

3.5.2 Publicly available documents

My review of publicly available documents focused on two areas. Firstly, publicly stated rhetoric by government officials, employers and HEIs on UAE

employment policy, graduate employability, and HE work-relationships for the period 1980 to 2024. These included newspaper reports, government policy documents and government directives on employment and graduate employability. Secondly, a review was made of studies carried out by HEI's in the UAE in the same time period, on the explicit teaching of employability skills, with a view to looking at the underpinning rationale and link to policy. Further details of the numbers, types of documents I reviewed, together with the criteria employed to select them, is provided in Table 3.3 below.

| Criteria used to search and select publicly available documents | |
|---|--|
| Date range: | Between 1980 and 2024 |
| Main data sources: | Public media statements, government websites |
| Additional sources: | HEI and major employer websites, recruitment agency websites, international organisation websites (OECD, IMF, World Bank, UNESCO) |
| Mode of access: | Digital |
| Method used: | Keyword search: this included but was not limited to: Emiratis, Emiratisation, employability, employment, expatriates, graduate employability, human capital, HRA, job skills, knowledge economy, labour imbalance, labour market, market demands, MOHRE, NAFIS, points system, policy, quotas, skills-gap, unemployment, wasta. |
| # Websites: | Over 250 websites accessed. 54 websites were used throughout the thesis. Links are provided in the references chapter. |

Table 3.3 Criteria used to search and select publicly available documents

As discussed in 1.6.1, announcements on policy changes on employment, employability, and HE-work-relationships are often made via the press, such as 'The National', 'Khaleej Times', leading UAE newspapers and through government news websites. Media announcements on all topics, but particularly those of national significance, are subject to government oversight.

The UAE government has a strong influence over HEIs, the labour market and how employment, and ultimately employability is regulated. The assumption I made, therefore, was that government websites and public statements in the press reflected the official government position.

Relevant publicly available documents were presented in chapter 2 (2.3), in the literature review, and provided me with the all-important sociopolitical context to interpret the themes I presented. Additional document sources are referenced in the three findings/discussion chapters 4 to 6, where more specific details were required to provide a more nuanced interpretation. The language and associated graphics used in government websites, did provide pointers to the intent of policymakers, alongside their priorities. Van Dijk (2001) and Wodak and Meyer (2014) argue that language used in texts can be viewed as social practice and more specifically, issues of power relationships in society. Similarly, Fairclough (2010) highlighted the value in critically studying written and spoken texts when exploring opaque relationships of causality between text and social/cultural factors. Some elements of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were incorporated into my analysis, to highlight areas which signalled the intent of policymakers or the societal context in the UAE. However, I do not claim to have carried out an in-depth critical analysis of publicly available documents.

Policy documents, press releases, and publicly stated rhetoric, convey the strategies and intent of UAE employment policies. Those receiving the policies can interpret them differently, depending on the social group that the receiver belongs to. As mentioned, the intended message can include the intent of government policy, its ideology, what its future plans are and what they expect from HEIs and employers. Considering publicly available documents as a social event, the language used reveals the power relationships of stakeholders. We can see what the sender wants the recipient to understand and what behaviour is expected or intended. This takes note of what Fairclough (2013) refers as the:

focus on discourse, and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power, ideologies, institutions, social identities etc (Fairclough 2013:178).

Social researchers, as Punch and Oancea (2014) point out, have a broad range of documents available to them, and in my case study, included policy documents sourced from institutions, reports, and media statements. As my study took a social constructionist approach, it is worth noting Silverman's (2014) perspective that constructionists:

who study documents are more concerned with the process through which texts depict 'reality' rather than whether such texts contain true or false statements (Silverman 2014:285).

The documents and press releases sourced in my study were viewed with such a social constructionist lens, to better understand the process of UAE employment policy formation, and the factors that drive the changes being made. The internet provides a unique discursive milieu that allows the social researcher to witness and analyse the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and the construction of social structures as they occur discursively.

3.6 The researcher's position.

In this study, where a qualitative, social constructionist approach was used, it was important for me to recognise my position as the researcher. Holmes (2020) reminds us that when taking such an approach to data, the researcher is not merely a narrator, but an active producer of knowledge, bringing a range of biases and subjectivity. Researchers and those being researched, as Charmaz (2006) notes, make assumptions about what is real, and their views are influenced by their position, knowledge, and views.

That is to say, different researchers, with their own experiences, understanding and views on employment policy and graduate employability, could arrive at different interpretations of the data I collected. Such interpretations, based on an individual's opinions and biases are equally valid. To counter those who

would argue that biases skew research, Maltreud (2001) notes that any such preconceptions are not synonymous with bias if these preconceptions are acknowledged.

My personal interest in employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE and being socially critical were determining factors in choosing to investigate the topic through an analysis of discourse. The experience of having spent over twenty-five years on UAE workforce development projects with HEIs and employers, provided me with a unique and extensive background into the topic of UAE graduate employability. This insider knowledge into the topic, of the local context, allowed me to explore in-depth the unique circumstances of UAE graduate employability and provided me with the opportunity for originality in this study. Maltreud (2001) points out that the approach used to investigate an issue, methods, findings and ultimately the way conclusions are framed, will be affected by the researcher's background and position. Wodak (1999) reiterates this view that researchers do not separate personal values and beliefs from the research conducted. This study acknowledges that my personal interest and knowledge, influenced the research I carried out.

Acknowledging my position as the researcher, I was acutely aware of this when carrying out the analysis and interpretation of my research data. Consequently, I recognised that a certain distance was required to avoid falling into the trap of trying to prove a point, and a certain degree of self-reflection was therefore necessary throughout my study. I would describe the approach that I took as an inward looking, self-critical, and at times confessional review of my assumptions and beliefs. As researchers, we need to adopt a level of honesty with ourselves, acknowledge the position we have taken and recognise that a different approach would have yielded a different, but equally valid, interpretation.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Punch and Oancea (2014) refer to some of the main ethical issues in social research as being potential harm to participants, including the researcher, and the confidentiality of data. They go on to highlight the issue of trust when

sometimes personal and sensitive information is shared with the researcher, particularly in interviews. I was also cognisant of the issue of power relationships when carrying out interviews and the need for me to present a fair and honest representation of what was said. To this end, interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with research participants.

The ethical guidelines set out by Lancaster University were followed and ethical approval granted to proceed with data collection on 31 July 2019. All research participants received an invitation to take part in interviews, summarising the aims of the research and their role therein. My position as the researcher and my experience within UAE HE work-relationships was explained in the interview invitation. Completed informed consent forms were collected prior to the interviews and assurances given on the confidentiality and security of the audio data. Cognisant of the power dynamics within interviews, interviewees were given the topics that would be discussed in advance of the sessions, along with the opportunity to review the transcripts and add comments after the interview. This demonstrates the position adopted in this study of building trust with the research participants and a willingness to negotiate meaning. When following a social constructionist approach to analyse the discursive nature of interactions, this also provided opportunities to negotiate and indeed re-negotiate meaning and allows for alternative interpretations.

3.8 Transferability

Transferability, as Hammond and Wellington (2013) state, is often considered to be the feasibility of taking findings from one situation and applying them to another. This study acknowledges the unique set of circumstances in UAE HE work-relationships and the forces at play in both developing and implementing employment policy. Findings and recommendations made in this study are not transferable to disparate contexts where the socio-political dynamics are different. It may, however, be possible to draw similarities with employment policies and graduate employability approaches developed and enacted in similar contexts. For example, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, namely Bahrain the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the

UAE, all have programmes, in varying stages, of nationalising various job sectors and prioritising citizens. All, to a lesser or greater extent, can be seen as emerging knowledge economies, moving away from a dependency on oil revenues. GCC governments have a strong influence over HEI's and how employment, and ultimately employability, is regulated. As Waal and Frijns (2016) indicate, the 'Sheikocracy' in place is very hierarchical, with power centralized at a senior level.

My study does not claim that the findings and recommendations are transferable across the GCC, but rather, where there are perceived gaps in localised studies, researchers may find the similarities useful in their own policy studies. As my research is a case study with its own unique variables, the onus is on the reader to decide how they compare similarities and differences with their own specific context.

As Schofield (20011) states, transferability in qualitative research can be seen as a matter of the 'fit' between concepts and conclusions drawn in one study and other situations. One such area where such a 'fit' could be of interest to those researching policy in other contexts, is the epistemological approach and by virtue of that, the methods and data analysis employed. In this particular case, the concept employed is one of analysing policy as discursive practice within a social constructionist paradigm. It is this methodological concept that could potentially be of use in other quite different situations.

3.9 Chapter summary

This chapter provided details of the methodological decisions I took in support of this study. It describes the epistemological background to the social constructionist approach taken when formulating the research design and addressing the research questions. The focus of this study was on UAE employment policy development and implementation, graduate employability, and the significant societal changes brought about by changes in the UAE labour market over the last twenty years. It is within this context that I sought to understand the underlying socio-political factors, and power dynamics at play.

Data was collected from interviews with twenty stakeholders. Stakeholders represented three distinct groups – those working in Higher Education (9), employers (6) or policymaker (5) roles. Representing a cross section of major UAE HE, employers and government officials, the interviews explored their attitudes and opinions related to UAE employment policies and graduate employability. I placed particular emphasis on the stakeholders' views on policies and approaches that influence or affect graduate employability and employment opportunities. A full list of interview questions asked, is given in Table 3.1 (3.4.1).

Having identified a set of themes using the methodology described in this chapter, I used a social constructionist approach to discuss the findings with the publicly available documents evidence provided in chapter 2. This provided me with the essential context to interpret stakeholders' comments.

In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I address each of the research questions in turn. Each of these chapters combines both findings and discussion. This suited my social constructionist approach rather than presenting them separately. When discussing the findings, my position is supported with quotes from the interview data, relevant literature and documentation, and personal interpretation.

Each of the research questions, their associated topic areas and the themes identified from each, are presented in depth in the next three chapters. A summary of findings is presented at the end of each of these chapters with an accompanying graphical representation in Table 3.4. Table 3.4 is expanded with each iteration at the end of chapters 4, 5 and 6. The completed table is used in chapter 7 with references to the appropriate chapter/section(s).

| |
|---|
| <p>RQ 1: What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?</p> <p>Approach used:</p> <p>Stakeholders' perspective:</p> |
| <p>RQ 2: What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?</p> <p>Factors driving UAE employment strategies:</p> <p>Factors affecting UAE graduate employability:</p> |
| <p>RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE?</p> |

Table 3.4 Findings template

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion – RQ 1

What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into three distinct sections. Firstly, 4.1 serves as a reminder that the focus on graduates' skills and usefulness to employers and the economy, permeates and dominates the employability debate. 4.1 also considers whether the dominance of the *absolute* dimension of employability, extends equally to the UAE. Next, 4.2 highlights the approach used by policymakers in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability. Finally, 4.3, investigates the stakeholders' perspective and how policymakers, HE and employers perceive the government's approach.

In 2.2.1, I discussed the definition of employability and current prevalence on the *absolute* dimension of employability. As noted by Cheng et al (2022), such a prevalence puts the emphasis on graduates acquiring the 'right skills' to secure employment, without taking into account the socio-political context. Wheelehan et al (2022), who described this approach as the "fetishisation of skills" (2022:475), also pointed out that few question the enthusiasm that policymakers, HEIs and employers have for skills. I regard this unchallenged position, or taken for granted assumption, as a doxa (Bourdieu 1984). Skills are important for a graduate to succeed in the labour market, but they are only one aspect of gaining a job. Excluding the societal factors in our approach to graduate employability does not actually describe what is happening when a graduate looks to enter the job market.

The two UAE employability programmes reported by Pizika (2014) and Temtamy et al (2016) in 2.2.4, also focus on employability skills, and would suggest that the dominance of skills, also extends to the UAE. I therefore believed that it was relevant to ask each of the stakeholders to define graduate

employability to determine how widespread the skills focus is, across policymakers, HE, and employers in the UAE. This then sets the scene when discussing the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability.

All stakeholders were asked to outline their own views and beliefs on graduate employability in the UAE. See Figure 4.1 below.

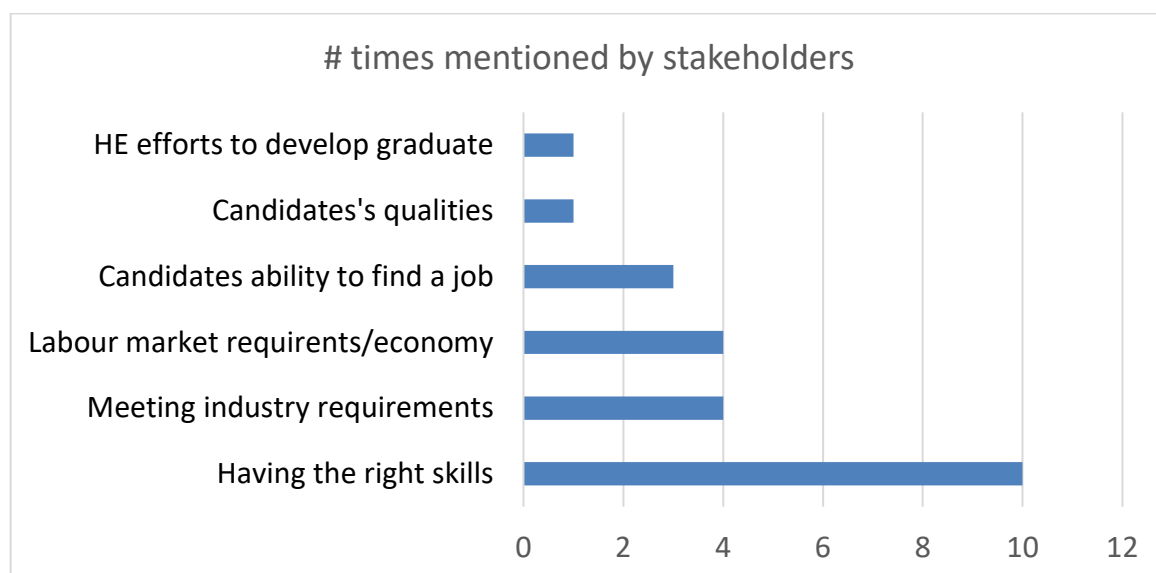


Figure 4.1 Summary of stakeholders' definition of graduate employability

There was consistency across stakeholders, regardless of their sector, in that they viewed graduate employability as the '*usefulness*' of a graduate to a future employer and having the '*right skills*' for the UAE labour market. Examples of the comments made by stakeholders across the three sectors are given below.

4.1.1 'Right skills'

A consistent theme across all three sectors, policymakers, HE and employers, was that stakeholders regarded graduate employability as a graduate having the right skills for the job. Examples from each sector are given below.

Do they have the right skills, the right competencies as a fresh graduate? (S14–policymaker/director industry partners)

Employability anywhere is simply defined as you have the skills that the job demands. (S04–HE/university dean)

What factors make them employable to companies and what are companies looking for in candidates. (S20–employer/director HR)

What these quotations all have in common is that they reduce the notion of employability to an objectified set of skills or attributes that make a graduate useful to either employers or the wider economy. There was no reference to the societal context in which graduates are operating. As Fejes (2010) points out, where the discourse on employability highlights the notion of adjusting or adapting to the labour market requirements, the individual is regarded as responsible for their own employability. As mentioned, skills are only one aspect of gaining a job, and by relying on this aspect alone, we overlook the societal factors that also have an impact on a graduate securing employment.

Positional Conflict Theory (PCT), espoused by Brown (2000), offers an alternative to the notion of employability as a mere set of ideal attributes needed by the labour market. The ‘usefulness’ of graduates to employers, the labour market, and ultimately the nation’s economy was also evident in the responses from stakeholders. This ‘usefulness’ to the UAE labour market permeates the discussions held with all three categories of respondents.

4.1.2 ‘Usefulness’

Linked with the notion of having the right skills to meet the needs of the economy, graduates’ ‘*usefulness*’ was highlighted when asked to define graduate employability. As mentioned, this notion was shared by all three groups of stakeholders.

How the knowledge that they've learned, how that transfers to the workplace and is useful. (S12–policymaker/CEO advisor)

It's how you make somebody useful in the economy – that's employability. (S03–HE/director industry partners)

Employability would be how useful they are to a business when they graduate. (S19–employer/director HR)

The usefulness referred to in these three quotations portrays the graduate as a commodity or asset. The usefulness quoted by stakeholders was whether or not graduates have the required skills, those needed by employers and the country. This is in keeping with the global neoliberal trend, steeped in human capital theory, and espoused by influential organisations such as the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The dominance of the *absolute* dimension of graduate employability in terms of skills and traits that the labour market finds useful, was echoed by one policymaker who considered this skills focus as a global trend.

The employer seeks for skills, more than this and this worldwide by the way. It's **not only in the UAE** ...Now the labour markets, either the government labour market or the private labour market, they are seeking for skills. (S10– policymaker/director MOHRE)

The relevance of this comment and the other themes identified in my analysis of interview transcriptions is discussed in more detail in the following chapters. The three stakeholder groups appeared to hold similar views when defining graduate employability and the importance of skills and being useful. This chapter now moves on to discuss how employment is regulated by policymakers in the UAE and the impact that it has on graduate employability.

4.2 What is the government's approach?

The themes/sub-themes I identified from the interview data on the government's approach are shown in Table 4.1 below.

| THEME | Sub-themes |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Government approach 4.2 | National policy 4.2.1 |
| | Role of MOHRE 4.2.2 |
| | Multiple players 4.2.3 |
| | Priority for Emiratis – providing a head start 4.2.4 |
| | Reserved sectors 4.2.5 |
| | Emiratisation 4.2.6 |
| | Quota/Point system 4.2.7 |

Table 4.1 Government approach to employment regulation

4.2.1 National Policy

As seen in 2.3, the government's approach to regulating employment has evolved considerably over the years and will undoubtedly continue to change, in response to changing socio-economic conditions. While chapter 5 looks at the factors that drive these changes, here I consider the responses of stakeholders to unpack the policies that have been communicated to HEIs and employers, directly or indirectly.

In terms of the approach used, when asked about how HE knows what is expected of them, S08-HE/director employability mentioned meetings held in government to plan out strategy:

meetings that take place every October. As a result of that, a number of documents come out and as I told you now, the 12 critical sectors critical economic sectors have been identified. That document is called the National Employment Policy [Strategy] (NES). So, in that policy **you see the future of employment, what are the critical sectors** through the growth and prosperity and continuation of the country. And definitely **that document is the baseline** for employers, for teachers, for ministries like Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation. (S08-HE/director employability)

The NES refers to the National Employment Strategy 2031, where the 12 critical sectors for the UAE as an emerging knowledge economy were set out, including sectors such as energy, financial, health, education, artificial

intelligence (AI), and space. As S08-HE/director employability illustrates, the NES serves as the bedrock for policymakers, HE, and employers. The NES was also referred to by policymakers:

We have the National Employment Strategy 2031 which has focused on what would be the **vital sectors** required. (S10-policy maker/director MOHRE)

The employment strategy is both national in terms of building the economy by focussing on ‘vital sectors’ and for also for increasing the number of nationals or Emiratis in the labour market. Another indicator of government intent is that policy formation and enactment for the UAE employment strategy is in the hands of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE). The fact that there is a central, government ministry of human resources that regulates employment policy is, in itself, an indication of a human capital approach.

S03-HE/director industry partners also referred to these high-level annual meetings that discuss government employment strategy.

In UAE [we] are fortunate to have the government summit every year. A government summit gives us an indication **where people are moving**. We believe a lot of jobs will vanish, especially in UAE. (S03-HE/ director industry partners)

This was in the context of a government summit to discuss future labour market trends for UAE graduates, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and space science. This is in anticipation, as S03-HE/ director industry partner suggests, that certain positions in the labour market will become obsolete. Such is the push towards new technologies that the Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence was established in Abu Dhabi in 2019. Additionally, the meetings referred to by S03-HE/ director industry partners, are those held annually, at government level to map out governmental strategy for multiple areas including education and employment.

One of the published tenets of this strategy is empowering *national* labour productivity and providing *national* human resources with the skills required for the labour market. The phrase ‘national labour productivity’ and ‘national human resources’ is referring to the national, as an Emirati or UAE citizen within the labour force, as opposed to expatriate residents.

One of the key tenets laid out in the NES is Emiratisation or nationalisation of the workforce, prioritising Emiratis in the labour market. It is MOHRE whose role it is to enact this strategy and is evidenced by the letter E in its title.

4.2.2 Role of MOHRE

MOHRE has a key role in employment policies both in their development and implementation. S03-HE/director industry partners, described the work that MOHRE carries out:

developed a report, on critical cases about the jobs and the job market and where the **job market** is moving. Where's the job now, in high demand and low demand so we also know about this. So, or the industry when they need to bring employees, they go to MOHRE, that's **where they get their employees** from. (S03-HE/director industry partners)

As shown in the above quote, MOHRE does market studies to anticipate future demands. Of interest to my study is another function, which is to regulate employment permits for both Emiratis and expatriates alike. In Article 14 of UAE Labour Law (UAE Labour Law:1980), it is quite explicit that expatriates can only be offered positions if the recruiting organisation has satisfied MOHRE that no suitable Emirati is available for the post. There is concurrence with all three stakeholders of the legal requirements to put Emiratis first and that systems and legal measures are in place to ensure compliance. One employer explains succinctly:

And **we are subject** to the Tawteen system. So, we have to go through the Ministry of HR and through the portal, so we register, we put the vacancies, we attend open days, you know, and all of that kind of thing...all the roles have to be posted and

for every 50, we **need to have** at least one Emirati national. but with the portal, all the postings having to go on there, we've seen a really long lead in time for recruitment. So, your recruitment process probably takes like at least six months now, whereas before it might have been three months. (S19-employer/director HR)

Tawteen, or localisation/Emiratisation in Arabic was the name of the programme and portal that employers must use to get approval from MOHRE to recruit people. Tawteen was updated in 2021 with the NAFIS programme (meaning to compete in Arabic) and its accompanying job portal. NAFIS is a MOHRE initiative to prioritise Emiratis in the labour market. Its use by employers when recruiting staff is not optional and note the reference to a legal requirement to employ at least one citizen for every 50 employees. The power dynamics are evident in S19-employer/director HR's comment that they are '*subject to it*' MOHRE regulations. Although MOHRE has a central role in this strategy, it is also worth noting that there are other bodies that have a part to play in its implementation. It is these organisations that are now considered.

4.2.3 Multiple players

At a local level, there are organisations that have an impact on the strategy to prioritise citizens. One policymaker points out that in Abu Dhabi:

what jobs are needed, what are the numbers and critical numbers in those categories. (S11-policymaker/manager ADEK)

This was in reference to the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) in Abu Dhabi, which regulates HE and requires HEIs to articulate how their course offerings contribute to the economy. '*What jobs are needed*' refers to the job market analyses carried out by ADEK. Similarly, in Dubai, it is the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) that regulates private HE. Another key body was mentioned:

we have a local authority called HRA Human Resources Authority. So, this authority is a local authority in Abu Dhabi.

And it really regulates all sorts of plans. So, they created like a pool of candidates. ... So, this is another way where they **enhance the employment level of Emiratis**. (S18-employer/manager Emiratisation)

Note the focus on citizens as a mandate for HRA in Abu Dhabi. Human Resource Authority (2023). HRA states that its aim is to “*develop the needed legislation and strategies for the development and consolidation of practices, controls, standards, and regulations for human resources management and Emiratisation within Abu Dhabi*” (HRA N.D). The use of **needed legislation** on their website suggests that the strategy has rules in place that oversee nationalisation of the workforce. In 2024 HRA merged with other government entities in Abu Dhabi to become the Department of Government Enablement (DGE 2024). The associated job portal is aimed exclusively at Emiratis looking to apply for work in the government sector. The graphic used by DGE on their website focuses on their target audience, namely Emiratis rather than expatriates (Figure 4.2). There are no pictures of expatriates which sends the message that Emiratis are the focus of attention, given that it is the public sector.

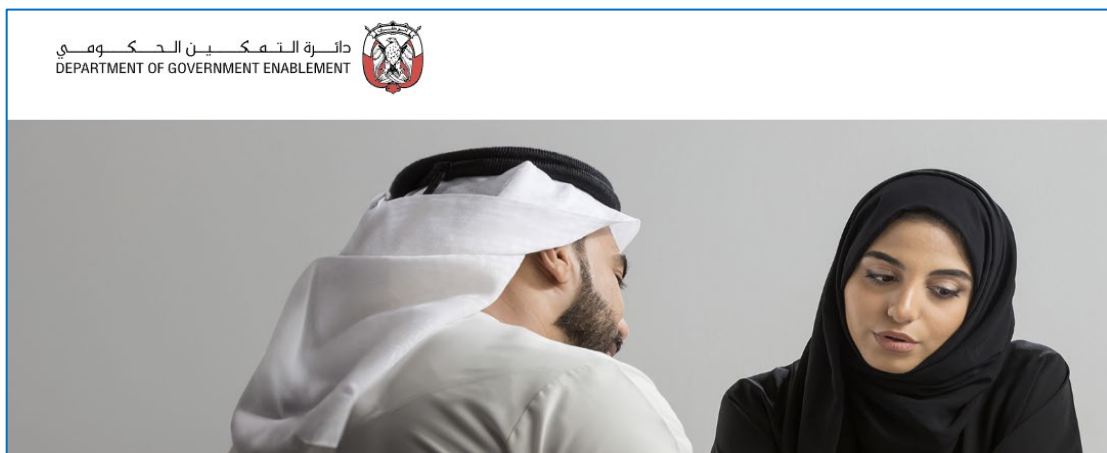


Figure 4.2 Screenshot of DGA website home page

This focus is evident on their webpage:

identifying, recruiting, and deploying talent, facilitating career development and training opportunities for **Emirati employees** to increase productivity in the UAE labour market. In addition, it collaborates with relevant entities to **address any barriers to**

Emiratisation and find suitable solutions to overcome them. [\(DGA 2024\)](#)

Given the central role of government departments, such as MOHRE, HRA, and DGA to prioritise citizens, I argue that the labour market favour Emiratis, and it is this prioritisation that is now considered.

4.2.4 Priority for Emiratis – providing a head start

Prioritisation of Emiratis begins before graduates reach the labour market. It is important to realise that there is a distinction in the UAE between state HE and fee paying HE:

the UAE for Emiratis is one of the very few jurisdictions globally where [Education/HE] in a financial sense, at least, is **a free ride [for Emiratis]**. You know, we find great studies, there's no fees, even receive free textbooks at X (State HE), total University. So that's a very significant financial investment on behalf of the nation. And I think like every aspect of government, the policymakers are concerned on return on investment. (S06-HE/university dean)

This is important because Emiratis can access free education from kindergarten to HE, a privilege not extended to expatriates. The latter must be prepared to invest heavily in fee paying schools and HE programmes to be in a position to compete in the graduate employment market. This suggests that in terms of economic capital, Emiratis are in a much better position financially to compete and are indeed favoured in this regard.

As Brown et al (2003) point out, the idea of meritocracy can be challenged if one group has easier access to academic credentials than another. Brown et al (2020) also mention that “*people are positioned differently in terms of being able to develop skills and get a good education*” (ibid 2020:139). The same challenge to the notion of meritocracy can be applied if the same group has exclusive access to specific job sectors and in this case, job sectors reserved for Emiratis.

4.2.5 Reserved sectors

Another important area where Emirati graduates are given priority over residents is in the key sectors identified in the NES 2031. The strategy seeks to increase the participation of Emiratis in the skilled labour market by enhancing Emiratisation rates in the 12 economic sectors in the NES. This is also seen in the government's Vision 2021, where the main objective is stated:

Emiratisation is a key performance indicator of Vision 2021. The UAE Government trains Emiratis in various fields, provides life skills, **reserves jobs for them** and has made legal provisions for recruiting and retaining them in jobs. (Vision 2021)

This quite clearly states that job sectors are reserved for Emiratis and that legal measures are in place to ensure that Emiratis are prioritised in employment. It is worth noting that the reserved job sectors are those presented in Figure 2.4, in 2.3.3.9, and are knowledge-based industries that support the country's goal of becoming a leading knowledge economy. Job sectors outside skilled, knowledge-based industries are not prioritised.

One stark example of how expatriates can be excluded by this approach to reserve job sectors for Emiratis, was given by S09-HE/director careers:

I can think of three students, that were physics students, or engineering students, and they really specialised in **aerospace**. And they were really strong, running our satellite club, and interning all over the place. But when it came to graduation, they were unable to get into any of the space agencies or the Space Centres, it was **confusing for them**, because they felt like they've invested in something that the country really cares about. And now there was **no place for them, these roles were being given to [Emiratis]**, there was a different pipeline. (S09-HE/director careers)

These expatriate graduates sought other avenues for employment because Space and Space Science are areas reserved for Emiratis, and they were effectively excluded. This casts doubt on the notion that graduates may seek

employment based on their merit when the cards are stacked in favour of one group over another in the guise of Emiratisation policy. It is this Emiratisation policy that is now considered.

4.2.6 Emiratisation

Emiratisation is a key approach adopted by policymakers when regulating employment. A case in point is the existence and reach of the MOHRE in regulating and authorising work permits for residents. The UAE cabinet sets out seven National Agenda Targets. The seventh target is spelled out clearly by the cabinet, and the need to enforce targets:

Increase Emiratisation in the private sector 10 times. If **motivation** is not enough, the government will **enforce new measures** to increase Emiratisation (UAE Cabinet N.D)

The caveat that Emiratisation focuses on skilled, knowledge-based job sector still applies. A tenfold increase in Emiratisation across the entire private labour market would be very ambitious and would add little benefit to the knowledge economy ecosystem, hence the focus on skilled job sectors. The concurrent use of '*motivation*' and '*enforce new measures*', indicates a carrot and stick approach.

Emiratisation targets apply equally to HE but differs according to whether the HEI is state owned or private:

In terms of universities we're set, have FAHR the federal government authority for HR, over the last six months, has **required** all federal universities to submit plans about how we'll achieve the overall Emiratisation targets, which I think is 60% employment in universities in 10 years' time, and that's both faculty and staff. And that's a pretty **challenging target** I can tell you. (S06-HE/university dean)

Federal universities are the state-owned HEIs and whose population is almost entirely Emirati. In terms of public image, having Emirati university staff and faculty in state owned HEIs, feeds into the narrative of national identity. This will vary from one university to another, as S06-HE/ university dean mentioned, and

suggests that not every public university is on track with their Emiratisation target:

I suspect there's a lot of **variance** in terms of how well universities are doing, from within universities and between universities. (S06-HE/university dean)

From the private HE's perspective, it is up to each individual HEI to set its own Emiratisation targets. S07-HE/ university dean commented on Emiratisation policy, voicing their support:

Well, see, every country has its own nationalisation policy. And we at X [name of HEI] we fully **support the Emiratisation policy**, and we encourage the Emiratisation policy in each and every area ... due to the increase in the Emiratisation demands. Or you can say the various policies related to Emiratisation, we ***need to adhere with certain rules and regulations***, and especially even the employers. **They are also approaching us** for fulfilling their Emiratisation targets and so on. (S07-HE/university dean)

Note the comment that HE is subject to mandatory rules and regulations, that the demands to enhance the employment of Emiratis have increased and that employers' approach HEIs to fulfil their own targets or quota to employ Emirati graduates. It is this system of quotas and points for employers that I now consider.

4.2.7 Quotas/Point system

All stakeholders were aware of the UAE mandatory quota system:

by the government, it's **a mandate** for certain organizations having certain number of employees that **they have to have** certain number of UAE nationals working. (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

The same sense of obligation was seen in comments from S19-employer/director HR:

for every 50, we **need to have** at least one Emirati national.
(S19-employer/director HR)

This signals a mandatory requirement for all employers, particularly in the private sector. Although the practice of prioritising Emiratis is enshrined in UAE Labour Law since 1980, the private sector was *relatively* untouched by:

the traditional business model. It's **usually you buy it [employees] from outside**, hire somebody to do the work and send them home when it's finished. (S16-employer/CEO)

This was the dominant format for the private sector, employing contracted expatriates for specific periods and flying them back to their home countries when the job was done. While this may well still be the case for low skilled jobs, over the last 10 years or so, things have changed for employers, particularly in knowledge-based industries. In 2022, all companies were given an ultimatum by MOHRE to increase their percentage of Emirati employees, or face extremely high fines. It was made mandatory for companies with more than 50 employees to increase their Emiratisation quota to 2% for skilled jobs by the end of 2022. The quota was increased to four per cent for 2023.

The approach to regulate employment has evolved substantially and the major changes have been highlighted in 2.3. These changes are in response to and driven by socio-economic challenges and these are discussed further in chapter 5. The current situation is that the UAE is pursuing a knowledge-based economy where Emirati graduates are given priority in the labour market over their expatriate counterparts. The UAE labour market can be seen as rigged in favour of Emiratis, by virtue of belonging to that singular social group. Stakeholders are mindful of the government's strategy to prioritise its citizens through Emiratisation in the private sector, using a carrot and stick approach. It is appropriate at this stage to consider how the government's approach is perceived by policymakers, HE, and employers.

4.3 What is the stakeholders' perspective?

Policymakers, HE, and employers will each have their own perspectives within the fields in which they operate, the social group they belong to, their own subjective opinions, and the power dynamics between them. I suggest that these differing perspectives play a role in how they interact with and perceive graduate employability and employment policies. The themes and sub-themes that I identified from interviews with stakeholders are listed in Table 4.2. and have been grouped to represent the views of policymakers, HE, and employers.

It is worth noting that there are, of course, other key stakeholders, namely the students/graduates themselves and their parents. The impact that the choices made by students and parents are considered in chapter 5.

Chapter 6 revisits some of the interview data presented in this chapter to examine the power dynamics and relationship between stakeholders using the lens of social practice theory.

| THEME | Sub-themes |
|--|---|
| Stakeholders' Perspective 4.3 | Top down 4.3.1 |
| | Party line 4.3.2 |
| | Doubters 4.3.3 |
| | Good intentions/building relationships 4.3.4 |
| | Absence from the debate 4.3.5 |

Table 4.2 Stakeholders' perspective of government strategy

4.3.1 Top Down

In terms of the strategy employed in the UAE to promote graduate employability, there is consensus that government strategy comes from above, from policymakers. Well, we tend to get no end of **directives from above** us, directives, making sure we engage with initiatives... we definitely see direction from the Ministry of Education, the Prime Minister's office about the future events in the country and **how the rulers see the country's economy evolving** and the needs of the job market. So, in essence, the message coming from the highest levels of government. (S05-HE/university dean)

This suggests that socio-economic strategy is led from the top of UAE government. This view of a top-down approach was corroborated by S01-HE/faculty dean

Here, the way I see it ... it's a kind of, I would say **top-down approach**.... We will receive direction from ministry and act upon it. (S01-HE/ faculty dean)

HEIs receive direction from above and are expected to put these decisions into operation. A further HE stakeholder corroborates this top down, 'receive and implement' approach:

a lot of those conversations are probably a bit above my pay level it's fair to say. We certainly do receive a lot of communication about this. But the policy itself does tend to be generated within government entities. And **we're more the recipient** of that. (S06-HE/university dean)

This intimates that HE and employers alike are not participants in policy formation but rather the recipients of policy mandates.

Interestingly, S12-policymaker/CEO advisor goes on to say:

that's been mandated. This is just the case for [NAME] from the top down...This is from the senior executive council. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

This is an indication of policy formation coming from the very top of government and more of a one directional flow of instructions to be followed.

4.3.2 Party line

As with any policy or strategy that impacts people's lives, in this case employment policies and graduate employability, there will be those who have doubts, and those with mixed feelings. The focus in 4.3.2 is on supporters of the strategy or those who follow the party line.

In UAE it's a free market and the government would love to keep it a free market as they want it to be appealing. And they

would like to tackle the Emiratisation by putting some quota here, some interest in certain points. **The point system is working very good** and you can ask MOHRE about it. When you hire for a technical job, you get more points than other sections. So, the point system works. (S03-HE/director industry partners)

This signalled approval of the points system, where points are given based on the number of Emiratis employed and the more senior the position, the more points are then awarded. Employers with many points are given preferential treatment by MOHRE when asking for work permits for graduates.

The concept of showing preference to employers who hire more Emiratis is evidenced in S01-HE/faculty dean statement about ranking. What is also clear is that MOHRE checks and monitors Emiratisation rates and determines whether targets are met.

You need to send reports to the Minister of HR for example, they are **checking, you are ranked against** that, employees Emirati growth and how many in your sector, because, for example, in my current job it's one of my KPIs, as a manager of my sector. It's one of the **KPIs** that I would judge on is Emiratisation, and how many employees, Emirati employees in my faculty area in my sector. So that's how serious it is when it comes to government sector. It's one of the KPIs I got rate on it every year. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

HE and employers are both monitored by MOHRE to ensure that Emiratisation targets are met. Despite the mandatory nature of Emiratisation targets and sanctions in place for those who deliberately disregard targets, some policymakers held a more pragmatic position:

Private sector little bit very **cautious about this [Emiratisation]**. If I hire an Emirati, there is a consequence. There are concerns. You need to see what their [employers] concern ... if you don't do that kind of confrontation with those international employers to make the doors open, to make it easier for them, they will not hire. You [policymakers] cannot sit in your seat and the government side and tell them that, just

you guys, you need to recruit... You really need to dig inside, need to get inside those employers to see what **is their pinpoints to hire Emiratis**, what are the policies and **incentives** that will convince them to hire. (S11-policymaker/manager ADEK)

This is a more conciliatory tone and recognises that employers have concerns, mainly financial, when hiring Emirati graduates, due to the high wages demanded. It is with this thought in mind that I argue that a number of policies have been put in place to incentivise the private sector to take Emirati graduates, notably the NAFIS programme detailed in 2.3.3.7. Despite these incentives, there are those who doubt the efficacy of the strategy used to promote Emiratisation.

4.3.3 Doubters

Given that multiple organisations are involved in employment policy, and that decisions tend to get reported via the national media, it is not surprising that there are those in HE and industry who doubt the efficacy of government strategy.

S01-HE/faculty dean, expressed a sense of bewilderment on how the graduate employability strategy is operationalised.

we will receive direction from ministry and act upon it. Sometimes I feel like**'Are they in the field?** Do they know what you are facing and reality? So, this is how I feel sometime, from some of the resolutions, memos that we receive. Really, **why they are focusing on such thing**, why I'm struggling in that area. So, this is how I see it, it's more of a goal, it's only from top to down cascaded to university and then for other operational to deal with it. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

There is a marked frustration from this HE respondent, in having to follow instructions from above without really understanding the logic behind those decisions and then deal with the operational issues of policy implementation. This implies that for S01-HE/faculty dean, at least, the reasons for policy decisions have not been communicated to everyone.

Other stakeholders, including employers, appeared not to understand or know about the government's approach:

I **haven't come across any policies**, usually our policies are developed in-house, and they just need to be in conformance with the laws. Maybe where I sit is not where I have visibility to this [employment policy], but I haven't seen such policies asking us for implementation. And to be honest, I **doubt if there is anything [policy]** as such. (S17-employer/manager Emiratisation)

This was a surprising comment in that, although only made by one stakeholder, it doubts even the existence of policies to regulate employment and support graduate employability. This might imply that the overall strategy of policymakers is not known or understood by all those who are expected to implement it.

Despite the fact that Emiratisation is a central pillar to UAE graduate employability policy, everyone is not on board with the effectiveness of the approach. An expatriate policymaker, doubted the effectiveness of some of the employment policy decisions:

My personal knowledge about the quotas, **quotas are not working**, most businesses are working around it at the moment. (S13-policymaker/director policy institute)

Given that there is a doubt from some of the policymakers interviewed, this might indicate that there is a sense that not all aspects of employability policies produce the desired effect.

It is also worth noting that despite the incentives offered to employers, there will be those employers who doubt the efficacy of the quota system and try to circumvent MOHRE checks. Such employers are dealt with quite firmly and as reported in the Khaleej Times (2023), MOHRE issued over £85 billion in fines in January 2023 to employers who had breached Emiratisation regulations. Similarly, Khaleej Times (2024) also reported on strict measures taken against companies who had forged Emiratisation data.

Emiratisation in UAE: Firms fined Dh400 million for failing to meet targets in 2022

More than 50,000 Emiratis are now working in the private sector, with 28,700 having joined since the launch of the Nafis programme

Published: Wed 11 Jan 2023, 5:03 PM | Updated: Wed 11 Jan 2023, 6:06 PM

By A Staff Reporter



Figure 4.3 Fines for missing Emiratisation targets (Khaleej Times 2024)

Behind the sensational headlines in Figure 4.3, reporting on punitive action taken against rogue employers, there is a recognition among policymakers that not all employment policies work as intended. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE made a balanced statement that:

I believe personally **most of the strategies** that we work on made the **success**. But we **cannot still say that the success is as planned**, or the success is still behind the objective. Again, I would refer to the last two to three years since my organisation took the role of the Emiratisation in the private sector. We've started putting the plans in place. **So, most of the plans are new to the markets, new to the private sector, or even to the Emiratis as well.** So, having the results in a quick matter won't be something easy. (S10-policymaker/director MOHRE)

This is interesting because the reference to policy decisions being new, indicates the discursive, iterative nature of policy design and implementation. This does show a willingness to accept that such a major change cannot be achieved overnight and that initial targets may not have been met and that they can change based on the reality on the ground. Contrast this with S04-HE/university dean, who was a little blunter in their appraisal of Emiratisation.

You know, just because you Emiratised and you've got more nationals working, how is that impacting productivity? I mean, when we were doing focus groups on a project and the government said, *well, you got to have **minimum 5% Emiratis***, the focus group, the industry people, said so *that's great, you **just reduced my productivity by 5%***. And that was right in

front of the Minister, and you know, the people, they get it, they know, to some extent, **with a certain demographic of the population**, to create a bit of a welfare state. And they've [policymakers] got to tackle it, they got to deal with it somehow. You can't ask an ostrich to bury herself in the sand. So, it's all well and good to put the percent target, but what are you positively impacting the workplace productivity. (S04-HE/university dean)

This is a stark critique from employers present at the focus group, openly saying that employing Emiratis would reduce their productivity. It does, however, also indicate a willingness from policymakers to discuss the issue or at least listen to employers' concerns. The 'certain demographic' comment reflects the fact that Emiratis represent approximately 11.5% of the total population of approximately 12.5 million. The reference to a welfare state and an 'ostrich burying its head in the sand' is also quite telling and reflects the trepidation that employers have when it comes to quotas and a system that puts Emirati graduates at the front of the queue.

When it comes to employers, feelings are mixed in terms of the priority given to Emirati graduates in the labour market, through quotas, a points system and legislation. S15-employer/director training, feels that the approach used is harming the economy:

I do not believe the intent of **Emiratization is being successfully implemented**, but rather Emirates are being placed in job positions **simply to fill a quota** creating a perception of Emiratization. Many Emirates filling critical job positions do not have the knowledge or skills necessary to successfully complete the job duties. Currently, the cultural focus of the placement of Emirates in job positions is **to meet a statutory quota**. Unfortunately, this is **not in the best interest** of the employer, university, nor the future prosperity of the UAE. (S15-employer/director training)

Contrast this with S17-employer/manager Emiratisation, who also touched on the issue of competencies and skills:

So initially at the beginning of our journey, **years back**, we did have a quota. But the problem that came with that quota was we started **recruiting UAE nationals, regardless of their competencies**, which put us in a very awkward situation now that we have people who just have the school degrees in the workforce and we don't know what to do with them because we can't get we can't upskill them, they're not in adapting within our system. So, we ended up **going for numbers versus the competency/versus quantity**. So, Emiratisation is tied now to Emiratising critical positions, decision making positions, which I think we've done really well so far. So that would be smart we call it smart Emiratisation, not just Emiratisation. (S17-employer/manager Emiratisation)

This is a more measured, realistic standpoint in that it highlights the lack of success when initial attempts to nationalise the workforce used a scatter gun approach of numbers over quality. It does, however, confirm that refinements have been made and as seen in 2.3.3, changes occur over time and further changes may well be made. As Ward et al (2016) point out, policy can be seen as a process of change rather than a final product/text and the policy of prioritising Emirati graduates is no exception.

S16-employer/CEO also refers to the previous employment policies and indicates that Emiratisation has been part of the government's strategy for a long time. The reference to previous iterations of Emiratisation being largely reactive, would indicate that this is no longer the case:

Well, it's something that people like to talk about. And **it's been in every single government policy document. It's [Emiratisation]** at the federal and local levels as long as I can remember, which is quite a time now. They love to talk about either they call it Emiratisation, or they call it opportunities, or they call it developing the knowledge economy or they did it in various names. It's always been there, whether that's a slogan, or an actual policy, I don't know, because I think at one time it was **largely reactive**...I think there's a lot of **good faith** work going on because you've got to remember that the national level includes the northern Emirates, and a great deal of their employability is in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. (S16-employer/CEO)

The reference to *good faith* is an indication that despite any disagreements over the effectiveness of the policy or its implementation, the intention can be seen as well-meaning in its attempt to address societal concerns. In 4.3.4, the concept of good faith or good intentions in building a better relationship between the three stakeholders is explored.

4.3.4 Good intentions/building relationships

When asked about current efforts to promote UAE graduate employability, S08-HE/director employability commented that:

I think all three parties are **genuine** in their escapements and **willingness** to come together and develop an approach or a framework. (S08-HE/director employability)

I personally believe that there is genuine intent and willingness for stakeholders to collaborate on graduate employability policy implementation, as evidenced by S13-policymaker/director policy institute's comments:

The **intention is good** because actually this will give them a good lay of the land and to understand what's coming up ...I think the intention is there, but probably the application, **implementation is not there**. (S13-policymaker/director policy institute)

There is recognition in the above statement that despite best intentions, there needs to be improvements in the implementation of the government's strategy to regulate employment and support graduate employability. Another policymaker acknowledged the shortcomings of earlier initiatives but stressed the improvements in stakeholder relationships.

For the last two to three years the whole government in relationship with the private sector partners, we see that the **relationship [HE work-relationships] is becoming better** and stronger. (S10-policymaker/director MOHRE)

Having better and stronger relationships between policymakers, HEIs and employers is the foundation of improving policy implementation. Relationship building between stakeholders was also seen as an important step:

The relationship between employers and universities **needs to be very strong**. The triumphs and credibility of graduates depends upon the **success** of the relationship. (S15-employer/director training)

Another employer commented on the need to improve the relationship between policymakers, HE, and employers in terms of the employment policy and Emiratization in particular:

There **isn't a serious cooperative effort** going on, driven by policy level, which is saying to employers look, seriously we're **not trying to put you out of business**. We're not trying to force you; **we understand what you have to do**. And we understand why you do the way you do it now. This is the challenge we have; **can we work together?** (S16-employer/CEO)

S16-employer/CEO makes a valid and helpful recommendation for policymakers, namely more collaboration.

Clearly, not everyone is onboard with the government strategy, notably from the private sector and in some cases, private HE. Private HE in the UAE, fee paying universities, with a student population of mainly expatriates have shareholders and investors and are, in essence, marketized to generate income. Whenever you have competing priorities and interests, it is understandable that the task of aligning those competing priorities poses a real challenge for all three stakeholders in achieving such alignment. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE commented on the relationship between policymakers and private HEIs:

See for the last two to three years, the relationship becoming better and stronger, I would say, better and stronger. Still, it is not very strong. Still, it is not efficient. However, we are building culture now. The culture, for sure. It takes time... **The**

objective is having the Emiratis working in the labour sector participating in that, let's say, a new system. So here where we are trying to all of us, private sector, government, education systems, to put **the right messages** in order to reach to the different segments. In order to convince them with the new culture, not convince even, let's say, speaking with them in order to try **changing the culture that they used to live in for decades**. (S10-policy maker/director MOHRE)

This is an interesting comment because it acknowledges that the implementation of the government's strategy, noticeably Emiratisation, will take time and requires a change of mindset from all parties concerned. Changing the mindset or culture of how people used to interact with each other 'for decades' indicates a gradual, iterative process.

In 4.3.5, one issue that could be addressed in future iterations of policy is the visibility of policymakers when communicating their intentions with HE and employers.

4.3.5 Absence from the debate

In 4.3.1. I highlighted how UAE employment policy is driven from the top and both HE and employers understand that Emiratisation is central to the government's strategy. Changes to the strategy, of which there have been many, are often communicated through press releases. How HE and employers should go about implementing those changes are usually debated in forums at a local level.

One issue is the lack of involvement of policymakers at the local level:

In terms of policymakers, I think they are a bit **absent from the debate**... They [policymakers] could add some, you know, sort of **additional support** for both employers and universities on how to help them, to help graduates transition to the labour market. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

Meetings at the local level to discuss policy implementation appear to be taking place but policymakers do not always attend:

They [policymakers] are **trying to do meetings**, but again some meetings that will have two party, and **one party is missing**, you know, who is making policy. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

S09-HE/director careers was more forthright in their opinion on policymakers not attending forums to discuss graduate employability:

We have **never had a policymaker present** at one of those sessions...not a representative ministry. Not for a lack of wanting one, there was **never an interest**. But it wouldn't be off the table at all. (S09-HE/director careers)

Another HE stakeholder mentioned that, while meetings with all three stakeholders are not held, there is involvement from local HE regulatory bodies such as ADEK:

Well, no **we don't sit together on a single table** about the development. Okay but one way if discussing the employability in my university have a specific **advisory board**, external advisory board. And in that advisory board the corporate and the policymakers...from the policymaker's organisation, like for example ADEK. (S07-HE/university dean)

ADEK is the HE regulatory body for Abu Dhabi, and is responsible, in part, for the implementation of ministerial directives that impact graduate employability. Advisory bodies are used at many HEIs but there is no unified structure to the way they operate. Essentially it is left to the individual HEI to determine the format and operations of such bodies.

There is consensus across all three stakeholders, however, that the relationship between the three parties, policymakers, HE, and employers, needs to improve. Better lines of communication would facilitate a deeper understanding of the concerns of all three stakeholders, improve HE work-relationships and ultimately advance the objectives of policymakers.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has addressed research question 1 by providing a unique overview of UAE employment policy and how this policy is viewed by policymakers, HE, and employers. Findings are represented in Table 4.3 below.

RQ 1: What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?

Approach used:

- National Policy, Role of MOHRE, Multiple Players
- Head Start, Reserved Sectors, Emiratisation, Quotas/Point System

Stakeholders' perspective:

- Top Down
- Party Line, Doubters
- Good intentions/building relationships
- Absence from the debate

RQ 2: What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?

Factors driving UAE employment strategies:

Factors affecting graduate employability:

RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE?

Table 4.3 RQ1 findings: approach used

Firstly, the policy itself was considered and can be regarded as top down, driven by decision makers at the highest level of government. There is a clear strategy to put Emiratis first in the labour market and that regulatory bodies and legal measures are in place to oversee implementation. Regulatory bodies include MOHRE, DGA and a myriad of local government bodies formed to put in place legally binding steps for HE and employers. The steps taken include quotas and a point system for the number of Emiratis employed and reserved job sectors for citizens. With a clear policy of Emiratisation and prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market, Emirati graduates are put first in the government's strategy. Job portals such as NAFIS, which all employers must use when recruiting candidates, provide an exclusive route for Emiratis into employment.

Secondly, having outlined the current strategy to regulate employment, it is fair to say that the strategy has evolved considerably over decades, and we may well see further iterations. It was noted that previous iterations have not always been successful and did not produce their intended results. As with any policy that impact peoples' lives, there will be those who support it, those who have mixed feelings and those who doubt the direction taken. Stakeholders' comments indicate that all three stakeholders can be grouped in this manner. With the latter group of doubters, it may well be that their experiences with previous iterations of employability strategy implementation, have coloured their opinions of the current strategy.

Another opinion voiced was the desire to see more involvement from policymakers at meetings to discuss strategy implementation. I maintain that the way the strategy is communicated from the top down needs some refinement, so that all parties are on board and understand the intent of policymakers and for HE and employers to have their concerns heard. Statements on policy are often communicated via the national media and not always widely distributed to those whose task it is to enact the strategy within HE and employers. This is another area where improvements could be made.

Finally, despite any concerns that stakeholders may have, there is general agreement that all parties have good intentions and want to see the success of the government's strategy for Emiratis and expatriates alike. There is also agreement that both Emiratis and expatriates stand to benefit from closer alignment and a shared understanding of policymakers' intent and the underlying factors driving the strategy.

Understanding the factors that both drive the current strategy and affect the efficacy of implementation, is addressed by answering RQ 2 in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion – RQ 2

What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?

As discussed in chapter 4, several iterations of employment policy have been tried in the UAE. Each iteration, however, promotes one central theme, namely prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market. Chapter 5 now moves on to discuss the factors that drive employment policies. Also considered are the factors that affect graduate employability.

This chapter is divided into two distinct sections. 5.1 highlights the factors that may be driving the approach taken by policymakers. 5.2 covers the factors that could have an impact on graduate employability and the efficacy of this approach.

A number of themes and sub-themes were identified from the interview data. These are presented in Table 5.1 below and are followed by examples of comments made by stakeholders.

| Theme | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Factors driving government approach 5.1 | Economic reassessment 5.1.1 |
| | Demographic imbalance 5.1.2 |
| | Creating a competitive knowledge economy 5.1.3 |
| Factors affecting graduate employability 5.2 | Student choices - family/peer pressure 5.2.1 |
| | Oversubscribed courses 5.2.2 |
| | Emirati graduate expectations 5.2.3 |
| | Wasta 5.2.4 |

Table 5.1 Factors driving and affecting UAE employment strategies.

5.1 Factors driving government approach

As seen in 4.3, the UAE is pushing for Emiratis to gain a stronger foothold in the private sector. Given that prioritising employment for Emiratis has been a

legal requirement since 1980, it is puzzling why little was done to push Emiratisation of the workforce in the private sector with any serious intent until the turn of the century. This begs the question of what changed to bring about such a shift in government focus and why Emiratisation became a greater priority.

There were three main factors that pushed UAE policymakers to reassess their approach to employment and graduate employability policies. The first factor was economic, the second, demographic and the third, was the need to create a competitive knowledge economy. While these three factors are treated separately in 5.1, they are intrinsically linked and the order presented does not suggest a sequence of events.

5.1.1 Economic reassessment

Considering first the economic factor, S04-HE/university dean's comments shed some light on the changes that have steered policymakers to a more proactive stance.

here's how the **market is changing**. The market was changing anyway, prior to the COVID situation. **The price of oil was low** and it probably will never recover to the levels before. If you look at natural gas prices, it **hit rock bottom** in the early 2000s and never has really recovered and with this glut on the market, all of a sudden that energy sector **impacts on revenues**, jobs and all that kind of stuff. It starts to change the weight a little bit. (S04-HE/university dean)

The 70% drop in oil prices in 2009, reported by the European Central Bank (2012) impacted the UAE heavily and led to a rethink on government budgets. One key area of such a rethink is the issue of continuing to employ Emirati graduates in state-controlled industries. S06-HE/university dean reiterated this point:

I think with the **decline of oil prices**, placing significant **pressure on public sector budgets**, directly and indirectly. And of course, that's **constraining** the ability for governments to continually employ nationals. So, they would hope that

nationals and employers would explore the opportunities for private careers instead, to take some of that pressure off the public sector. (S06-HE/university dean)

This comment describes quite aptly the issue facing UAE policymakers and the need to rethink the unhindered recruitment of Emirati graduates for the public sector. Traditionally, Emiratis would be employed in government jobs, as seen in a report by the Khaleej Times (Maadad 2003) which indicated that in 2003, over 74% of citizens were employed in public sector jobs, in contrast to almost 9% in the private sector. The main attraction for Emiratis in the public sector was the significantly higher salaries and shorter working hours than those in the private sector. An Emirati employed in the public sector works a 08:00 to 14:00 day, as opposed to a 07:30 to 17:00 day in the private sector and is paid approximately three to five times that of an expatriate in a similar role.

HE stakeholders commented on the shift taken by policymakers to steer Emiratis away from the public sector, where jobs are increasingly unavailable. Graduates in the quote below, refers to Emiratis only.

Other than the obvious that they [policymakers] are keen to **encourage graduates** to think about careers in the **private sector**. They [graduates] don't need to be taught about careers in the government sector - everyone wants to go to the government sector. But increasingly, the government sees, at the highest levels of policymaking, sees that the needs and the **future needs of the economy are driven by the requirements of the private sector** and that is where the gap is in terms of graduate employability, graduate aspirations. (S05-HE/university dean)

Reference to the 'future needs of the economy ...driven by the private sector' is significant at this point. I would argue that it illustrates that policymakers see the private sector as driving economic change. Despite the importance given by policymakers for Emiratisation in the private sector, the disparity in working hours and salary for Emiratis working in the private sector, compared with the public sector, acted as a barrier for many Emirati graduates. This was

highlighted by the Khaleej Times (Sebugwaawo 2019). FNC member, Afra Al Basta, commented:

There is still a big **problem in the private sector** where there are **more working hours** and **fewer benefits**. This makes the private sector jobs less attractive to UAE nationals.
(Sebugwaawo 2019)

Following the 2009 global recession and drop in oil prices, the UAE could no longer afford to employ large numbers of its citizens in the public sector. The traditional public sector route for Emirati graduates was unsustainable economically. I believe that the economic necessity for Emiratisation in the private sector provided the catalyst for various iterations of employment policy that would see more Emiratis taking up positions outside the public sector.

5.1.2 Demographic imbalance

A key objective of Emiratisation is to address the labour market imbalance discussed in 2.3.2. In part, this market imbalance stems from a ‘two-tiered’ labour market (Thompson and Wissink 2016), itself a result of a demographic imbalance, where 88.5% of the population are expatriates. The second factor, driving employment strategy is the growing population of UAE citizens.

In this vein, S06-HE/university dean pointed out:

I think if you look at the population pyramid of the Gulf, and a population pyramid of the Emirati community here in the UAE as well, which is very similar to that of the Saudi population, Qatari, Omani, there’s a **widening base**. So, what we’re seeing there since about the 2000, there has been a fairly significant **increase in birth rates** in the Gulf, encouraged by government policies and other things. So those young people who were born around the turn of the millennium come into that age now 20/21, where they are now in higher education and seeking to have a career. And we’re seeing real growth in terms of, almost double digits there...the number of 18-year-olds in the UAE Emiratis is increasing between say six and 10%. It’s a growing issue and **they need to be accommodated** in terms of their career aspirations, work aspirations. (S06-HE/university dean)

The UAE, as with the aforementioned Gulf countries, has an increasing population due to very high-quality health care and a low death rate. According to the GMI Research Team (2025), over a quarter of the Emirati population is under 24 years old. The Emirati population is estimated to be at 1.44 million, representing 11.5% of the total UAE population of 12.5 million, with expatriates making up 88.5% of the total population.

GMI Research Team (ibid) also reported that the UAE population in 1980, the year that UAE labour law came into effect, was just over 1 million. The increase from 1 to 12.5 million is largely caused by an influx of expatriates, in response to the UAE's need for workers. Similarly, Maadad (2003) reported on the population of the UAE in 1968 as only 210,000 with Emiratis making up 63.5% of the total population.

Given these statistics that show rapid economic development was coupled with the influx of expatriates, it would not be surprising for some Emiratis to feel subsumed by the much larger expatriate population. From the policymakers' perspective, it would also not be surprising for policymakers to argue that since Emiratis are now vastly outnumbered by expatriates, they acted accordingly by prioritising Emiratis in employment policies.

Policymakers are aware that the preferred option for Emiratis has historically been the public sector, because of the shorter working hours and higher salaries. Similarly, policymakers are aware of the aspirations of a growing number of Emirati graduates in terms of salary expectations that allow Emiratis to maintain a lifestyle they have grown accustomed to. I would argue that societal cohesion depends on stability and continuity of the high standard of living that Emiratis expect and are accustomed to. As fewer government jobs are available for Emiratis, initiatives have been put in place to make the private sector more attractive to Emiratis and employers alike. It is the private sector that the policymakers wish to see shaping not only graduate employability but also the economic makeup of the country and its future needs. One key strategy, central to the UAE's economic development, is reducing its dependency on oil revenue and developing a knowledge-based economy.

5.1.3 Creating a competitive knowledge economy

As seen in 4.2.5, certain 'knowledge-based' job sectors are reserved for Emiratis and as a result, the HE landscape has seen a surge of HE programmes such as artificial intelligence (AI), space science, and other subjects seen as central to government strategies. One HE stakeholder reported that:

we are offering programmes that are really kind of tuned towards this **knowledge economy**. (S02-HE/director employability)

The trend to offer technology-based programmes in HE extends to both state and private HEIs. Increasingly the focus is on HE programmes that would support the national goal of a knowledge economy. This goal is one of the pillars of the UAE Cabinet's National Agenda ([UAE Cabinet](#): N.D).

The National Agenda also aims to transform the UAE as one of the **best destinations in the world** in the field of entrepreneurship by unlocking the potential of **its nationals** and making them a driving force in the UAE's economic development through their active participation in small and medium enterprises in the private sector. Furthermore, the Agenda strives to instil an entrepreneurial culture in schools and universities to foster leadership, creativity, responsibility, and ambition in the new generation. This will allow the UAE to be among the **best in the world** in ease of doing business, innovation, entrepreneurship, and R&D indicators... Therefore, the National Agenda seeks to place the UAE among the **top countries in the world** in terms of per capita income and ensure **high levels of national participation in the private sector workforce**. (UAE Cabinet N.D)

The UAE wants to compete to be in the top tier of knowledge economies, to be the country of choice for entrepreneurs and with Emiratis at the forefront of the country's development (We the UAE: Future Peaks:2023). The National Agenda's view of the job market in the UAE as a knowledge economy was identified by S10-policy maker/director MOHRE:

The future object in the knowledge economy is to have United Arab Emirates as one of the 10 leaders in the knowledge economy across the world. How that can be? That can be by retaining the, let's say high skill labours ***Retaining the high-level minds*** within the UAE, ***having the Emirati, the national Emirati also participating in that knowledge economy*** where to become UAE as one of the worldwide distributors for minds of people minds, as Emirati minds. (S10-policy maker/director MOHRE)

The notion of shifting the economy from its reliance on oil revenue to a knowledge economy is central to the UAEs strategy. Every government employment policy puts the goal of a sustainable knowledge economy centre stage, and the aspiration is to see the UAE ranked globally as one of the top knowledge economies (UAE Cabinet: N.D). This would explain the UAEs shift in focus to knowledge-based industries such as artificial intelligence (AI), space exploration etc.

What is interesting about the above comments though is the reference to *retaining the high-level minds and having the Emirati, the national Emirati also participating in that national economy*. The retention of 'high level minds' or top talent refers to expatriate residents, who the government regards as important to its goals of a competitive knowledge economy. I see this as significant, as it reflects the UAE National Talent Attraction and Retention Strategy illustrated in Figure 2.3. It is an open acknowledgement that recruiting and retaining expatriate talent, alongside Emiratis, is a pragmatic but necessary approach. This would also explain the UAEs approach launched in 2021/2022 of expanding and liberalising its visa options for expatriates, specifically aimed at those people who can contribute to the knowledge economy.

Until recently expatriate graduates had a limited period of one month to find employment after the cancellation of their student visa and to secure a work permit that would allow them to stay in the UAE. Further to what S10-policy maker/director MOHRE mentioned about valuing talented expatriates, the grace period for expatriates to find employment after a visa cancellation was extended in 2022 from one to three months. Previously, male students could

not be sponsored by their families in country once they had reached the age of eighteen. This was raised in 2023 to twenty-five years old and allows male expatriate graduates the opportunity to stay in country and look for employment. Unmarried female graduates of any age can be sponsored by their families.

S14-policymaker/director industry partners, also commented on the changing landscape, where more expatriate graduates choose to remain the UAE after graduation:

So how I see it, the **graduate [expatriate], they used to fly out of UAE** and go back to their home countries or go other places to seek for job opportunities. But nowadays, I see them [expatriate graduates] **staying in the UAE** and having opportunities or exploring the job opportunities here. And they get those kinds of opportunities. (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

That is to say, expatriate graduates are finding more opportunities in a knowledge economy, where skilled talent is appreciated. It is, however, still a challenge for companies who, as S16-employer/CEO points out, find it easier and cheaper to import expatriate workers:

because a lot of the technology that is applied in the knowledge economy, it's just much cheaper **much easier to bring somebody in**. (S16-employer/CEO)

S16-employer/CEO goes on to say, however, that the mandate of industry is to be both productive and to recruit Emirati job seekers, as an alternative to the previous trend of importing talent.

equally a mandate is going to have to be make sure whatever we do, provides employment [for Emiratis]. (S16-employer/CEO)

The goal of putting Emiratis first in the labour market is understood by HE and employers, as is the objective for the UAE to become a leading knowledge

economy. The next section (5.2) looks at the factors that may impact graduate employability and the efficacy of the employment strategy.

5.2 Factors affecting government policy and graduate employability

5.2.1 Student choices - family/peer pressure

How employable a UAE graduate is, regardless of whether they are Emirati or expatriate, does depend on the choices made by students, in terms of the subject(s) chosen for HE and the type of work they seek after graduation. Graduates are impacted by their perceived 'usefulness' to the national knowledge economy and current labour market trends. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider the factors involved in the subject choices made by students entering HEIs.

Although students are responsible for their own choice of subject to study, S01-HE/faculty dean voiced concern that:

a group of students, for example **insist** on going into a field that we think don't have work for, they **won't find job easy** after they graduate. And it is **not something that a government is looking for**. They keep insisting you know, and they create all that fuss in the community, **parents, peer pressure** etc. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

There is therefore a perception that students, regardless of nationality, are choosing to study things that are *not* deemed part of the government's plan. S01-HE/faculty dean indicated that this insistence to choose subjects that might not match labour market requirements, was the result of peer pressure and the influence of parents. Parental influence was also mentioned by S12-policymaker/CEO advisor:

Local government will tell us that there's **subjects that nobody's interested in**. So, we [the country] need urban planning, for example. Right? But the family is like, no, we don't want to, why we're studying urban planning, we all want to be doctors and engineers. And even when employers communicate, you know, we need psychologists, there are a lot

of like, vacant spaces right where anyone who had a decent degree could get a job. But there's such a **resistance from** not just Emiratis, but also any expat Arab, Asian **families**. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

The status of the profession also plays a part in student choices and some professions, particularly medical doctors, and engineers, carry more weight than others. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor goes further in their comments on the issue:

Here in the UAE, many **students do not choose** their degrees and so the **parents choose** them for them, and I've been in conversation with the parents, and it's like, no, I'm not allowing them to switch and the child's like, I'm not good at it. I don't like it. And they're like, well, I don't care..... So, like one father wants his daughter to be an architect, but she's failing miserably. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

This pressure from parents may well not be unique to the UAE, as indicated by Angwaomaodoko (2023), but it is an issue when UAE students are ill suited to their chosen studies. This issue of UAE parents influence having a negative impact when making degree choices for their children was raised by Daleure et al (2014): *“Coming from different economic environments, family elders may influence students to make program study choices in areas that do not match their skills and aptitudes”* (Daleure et al 2014:23). Daleure et al (2015), in a later iteration of their study, qualifies this statement by indicating that: *“Elements of Emirati family structure and social life may affect student academic achievement negatively or positively”* (Daleure et al 2015:99). The positive and negative influence of familial and tribal affiliations on employment opportunities is revisited in my discussion on social influence or ‘wasta’ in 5.2.4.

It is also an issue when course selection leads to large numbers of graduates in subject areas that the labour market cannot absorb. The issue of oversubscribed courses is discussed in the next section.

5.2.2 Oversubscribed courses

Given that students may opt for courses that are fashionable or based on family/peer pressure, it is not surprising that these do not always line up with government plans or are not in sync with current or future labour market trends. S01-HE/faculty dean highlighted an issue of the number of graduates from certain subject areas that may struggle finding employment.

Like we have for example, 200 graduates from the IT programme, but **we don't have that capacity for the market to absorb all of them**. So, we'll end up with the problem of unemployment or that. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

This pattern was corroborated by S12-policymaker/CEO advisor who was particularly animated and commented:

And then then just again the preponderance of students **studying bloody business** I mean what are **useless subject**, sorry? It just sets them up for nothing, you know..... these generalist business degrees are **just money makers** for the universities and do not set the students up with any kind of actual skills that they need, in the workforce. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

Business courses are seen in the UAE as revenue generating courses, easier to set up with minimal investment when compared to more technology-based degree courses. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor went further and highlighted the mismatch of some courses offered by private HEI with the government's objectives for the economy:

the private education system which is here. **They see their own benefit**, they are, the matter of the **revenue that they are going to generate** by the end of the year. They are **not looking strategically** for three, four, ten years down the time. So, not everyone is really participating in that strategic objective. (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

We have to remember that private HEIs have investors who want to see a return on their investment. Similarly, S14-policymaker/director industry partners

referred to graduate business courses as quite common at private HEIs because of the ease with which they can be set up:

Everybody offers business programs, everybody offers MBAs and why, because that's an easy, quick setup, as well as a **quick return** in terms of a business model. (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

The government has, however, put measures in place to counteract this perception that they have of some private HEIs. S11-policymaker/manager ADEK commented on the steps taken in Abu Dhabi to regulate HEI course portfolios.

they [government] **want to stop or minimise commercial indication**, where you just fill up classes for the sake of a degree and sell it to whoever we want with a very low quality of education. Fill your class, **make it feasible** and make it like another private school. So, this is what the ministry or the department education came up with, is that they really want to see that if the **university have put an effort** of linking their case to that industry. (S11-policymaker/manager ADEK)

The criteria for new HE programmes in Abu Dhabi is regulated by ADEK (2023) whereby HEIs must provide a sound business case for any new programmes to show that they have done their market research. HEIs are required to show that their proposed new course enhances graduate employability and that the socio-economic objectives are met. HEIs carrying out market research to make sure that graduates, regardless of nationality, can find work in the local labour market, is a positive and necessary step.

Another factor that can influence a students' choice of careers is a student's expectations of the labour market. Given that the government's focus on Emirati graduates is a major factor in UAE graduate employability policy, it is appropriate to look at the expectations of Emiratis. None of the stakeholders interviewed referred to the expectations of expatriates and could be a topic for follow up research.

5.2.3 Emirati Graduate Expectations

Despite the reduction in availability of public sector jobs, Emiratis have grown accustomed to a relatively high standard of living. Maintaining a relatively high standard of living for Emiratis is one of the factors driving schemes such as the NAFIS programme, where the state subsidises Emiratis' wages in the private sector. When choosing jobs in the private sector, however, many Emiratis continue to have high expectations of both salary and job title, mirroring the salaries and position that the public sector offers.

S15-employer/director training was quite cynical about the factors driving the job choices of Emiratis and linked this to expectations:

The prevailing initiative of Emiratis seeking employment seems to be based upon two things: 1) compensation (**money**), and 2) **popularity of the industry**. Individuals are not pursuing education nor employment based upon passion, eagerness, love of knowledge, the industry, or growth of the country. Rather, Emiratis tend to seek employment based upon what is available, **popular** and **how much money** they will accrue.
(S15-employer/director training)

Popularity is mentioned here, and this goes back to the influence of friends, family, and societal perceptions. Remuneration is seen as another factor in their choice of employment. For instance, a study of Emirati expectations in a state HEI was reported by S03-HE/director industry partners:

You see here around 40% of the graduate they need more than 20,000 dirhams salary. They don't want to work on it, only when you find a job for me. (S03-HE/director industry partners)

That is a monthly salary of more than £4,000 for a fresh graduate which the private sector would find hard to match without government subsidies available through the NAFIS programme.

S01-HE/faculty dean saw the societal perception of the job status as important as salary, particularly for Emirati graduates:

And one last thing that just came to my mind - expectations, and they [Emiratis] expect when they finished, they all got that kind of like salary. **They want that position.** A reality? Not like that, you need to grow in position.....And this is why we are struggling with our graduates joining the work sector because they don't see okay, I'm ready to start now and then grow and be further updated. They say like okay we go to a job, I can be **ready to be a manager**, head sector, to lead. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

The comment refers to Emirati graduates who expect to be in managerial or leadership roles almost immediately. Status or the perceived status of a job and the position held within a company, is an important aspect in Emirati society.

With the government's push for Emiratis to pursue a role in the private sector, it is also worth noting that Emirati graduates could well find themselves as a minority group amongst a majority of expatriate workers. S20-employer/director HR referred to the cultural alienation of some Emirates in the private sector.

I think some **companies struggle** with that [cultural alienation]; if you're the minority and you're coming into a company, it's hard enough, joining the company when you're new, and when you feel **like an outsider**, it's even harder... Regardless of what you're going to pay, not everybody wants to be joining an organisation where they feel like they're the only Emirati that's there. (S20-employer/director HR)

It is perhaps a natural thing to want to be around people who are similar to you and for Emirati graduates, this relates to how you perceive your status within a group. Choosing a company based on the predominant nationality of the workforce could also be a factor at play. When seeking out jobs in sectors where there is a significant group of citizens, Emiratis will use their social connections to both secure and maintain employment and to leverage these connections for other Emiratis. It is this influence that is now considered.

5.2.4 Wasta

Forstenlechner (2013) raised the issue of 'wasta' and called it a '*potent factor*' in hiring and for Emiratis in particular, 'wasta' often takes the form of tribal

preference. Forstenlechner (2013) reinforced the notion that 'wasta' is very much based on family ties and is often used to recruit UAE HE graduates. Al Subaihi (2013) described 'wasta' as a nuisance in promoting qualified candidates. However, I see this as quite simplistic; yes, 'wasta' can be misused and perhaps it has led to some instances of unqualified candidates being hired. I have personally seen 'wasta' used successfully in recruiting candidates in some of the UAE organisations I have worked for. I therefore agree with Forstenlechner, (2013), who holds the view that 'wasta' can be a useful tool in recruitment.

'Wasta' is perhaps strongest within the public sector, a point highlighted by S12-policy maker/CEO advisor:

In the public sector where it's just you know, more around Emiratis, it's **still very 'wasta' based** the hiring, you know, especially local government. You know like, I **know someone who knows someone**, and my uncle works there. (S12-policy maker/CEO advisor)

The influence of family connections does extend to the private sector and, according to employers, can play a bigger role than a graduate's ability to do the job and is often viewed negatively. This negative notion of 'wasta' was conveyed by S15-employer/director training:

Common thinking throughout the country is that universities do what they can, people graduate, and **they [Emiratis] are entitled** to a job. Employers are **routinely forced** to hire people **not based on knowledge, skill or ability**, but rather on the individual's **family connections** and personal friendships within the organization. (S15-employer/director training)

The mention of entitlement to a job is interesting and refers again to the expectation of Emirati graduates, as citizens of their own country. 'Wasta' may not be exclusive to Emiratis and although derided by some stakeholders as the antithesis of meritocracy, 'wasta' is a reality in the UAE and the wider region. S16-employer/CEO comments on this and is of the view that all expatriates will

also try to use whatever social capital they have to seek employment after graduation.

The **expats**, if they're graduates, they come in, they look for a job, **same as anybody** anywhere else in the world. Maybe their uncle **knows a guy who knows a guy** guidance that they become employed somewhere. (S16-employer/CEO)

'Wasta', influence or social capital and elements of Bourdieu's framework are developed further in chapter 6 to better understand UAE employment strategies from a societal perspective.

5.3 Chapter summary

Findings to address research question 2 are represented in Table 5.2 below.

| |
|--|
| <p>RQ 1: What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?</p> <p>Approach used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Policy, Role of MOHRE, Multiple Players• Head Start, Reserved Sectors, Emiratisation, Quotas/Point System <p>Stakeholders' perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Top Down• Party Line, Doubters• Good intentions/building relationships• Absence from the debate |
| <p>RQ 2: What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?</p> <p>Factors driving UAE employment strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Economic reassessment• Demographic imbalance• Creating a competitive knowledge economy <p>Factors affecting UAE graduate employability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student choices – family/peer pressure• Oversubscribed courses• Emirati graduate expectations• Wasta |
| <p>RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE?</p> |

Table 5.2 RQ2 findings: Factors influencing policy

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the socio-economic factors that may be driving the current iteration of UAE employment policy. Factors that can influence graduate employability and the efficacy of employment policy have also been considered.

Firstly, employment policies are a response to the changing socio-economic factors that impacted the UAE from 2009 onwards. The global economic downturn of 2008/2009 can be seen as a determining event for UAE policymakers. Although labour law enshrined the employment rights of Emiratis since 1980, it was the economic downturn that focused policymakers' attention to the private sector. Government jobs, long regarded as the route that Emiratis would take, upon graduation, were no longer readily available due to the drop in oil revenue. From 2010 onwards, employment for Emiratis in the private sector became a key focus of UAE government, alongside a clear policy to develop the country into a knowledge-based economy and reducing the UAE's reliance on oil revenue. Emiratisation of key skilled job sectors and the aspiration of becoming a global knowledge economy are key pillars of UAE government strategy.

The strategy of putting Emiratis first in the labour market and providing incentives for private sector employers and Emirati graduates, maintains the lifestyle that Emiratis expect. With a growing Emirati population, many of whom are under 25, this strategy can be seen as a mechanism to maintain social cohesion within the UAE. It is worth remembering that 2011 saw several Arab countries experience the frustration of its young citizens during the so-called 'Arab Spring'. The UAE has a balanced approach, however, in that the aspiration to be a leading global knowledge economy requires the retention of talented expatriate graduates and for the country to offer career opportunities for both Emiratis and expatriates.

Secondly, having outlined the factors that may be driving employment strategy, I also considered the elements that can impact the implementation of this strategy. One such element is the programme choices made by HE students. With a HE system of state funded and private, fee paying HEIs, there is not

always a match between programme offerings and labour market requirements (Reynolds 2019b). Another, closely related element, is the social status of HE programmes and the jobs they can lead to. Parental and peer influence plays a significant role in programme choices and graduate career paths. Social capital or 'wasta' is also an important factor that pervades the UAE labour market for both Emiratis and expatriates alike. It can be argued, however, that given the prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market, competition for skilled jobs is rigged in favour of Emiratis, who can leverage their social status and social capital to good effect.

It is these power dynamics and associated societal factors that are considered in Chapter 6, using social practice theories to better understand UAE graduate employability strategies. Using social practice theories in this way, offers a unique opportunity to view the *relative* aspects of UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies.

Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion - RQ 3

What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE?

This chapter draws upon Bourdieu's conceptual framework and Brown's Positional Conflict Theory (PCT) to view the case of UAE policy and approach to graduate employability. What my study offers and this chapter in particular, is an alternative view of employment policy and graduate employability in the UAE that moves away from the oft reported *absolute* dimension of skills and abilities of graduates in employability research. The alternative viewpoint put forward in my study, positions the focus on the *relative* dimension of employability. My personal standpoint is that a graduate's prospect of finding work is not only shaped by their skills and abilities, but also by labour market dynamics, political-economic factors, and social structures.

The UAE is unique, given its distinctive demographic makeup, and ongoing state led interventions to reshape the labour market, primarily the focus on knowledge based industries and Emiratisation. As seen in chapters 4 and 5, the UAE promotes employment and graduate employability, with a clear focus on Emiratis. The focus on Emiratis is central to the government's mandate and prioritises its citizens over expatriates in the labour market, and more specifically, the private sector. By examining these dynamic changes within Bourdieu's notions of fields, habitus, forms of capital, and doxa, and Brown's rigging and ranking, I interrogate the ways in which employment is structured not only by skills and qualifications but also by the relative social positioning, interventions from policymakers and how these interventions alter the relative social positioning of Emiratis and expatriates. Whilst Bourdieu's concepts are well known they are not widely used in employability studies to date, or at least at the macro level. Using these concepts to look at UAE policies and practices provides a unique view from a societal perspective. The second lens is Brown's Positional Conflict Theory (PCT). with its concepts of rigging and ranking, which is reused and expanded on, beyond Brown's original research.

Bourdieu's concepts of fields, habitus and forms of capital have been used in some employability related studies such as Clark and Zukas (2012), Tomlinson (2017) and Bui and Nghia (2022). What these studies have in common though, is that they focus on the micro level of graduate employability. Clark and Zukas (2012) focus on the relational aspects of graduates applying their skills and knowledge in the workplace; Tomlinson (2017) puts emphasis on graduates acquiring forms of capital through lived experiences. Bui and Naghi (2022) advocate for the use of Bourdieu's concepts in the development of graduates' lifelong learning through a more nuanced career development process.

What makes this study different and unique is that Bourdieu's framework is used at the macro level, to understand the bigger picture of UAE employment and graduate employability strategies from a socio-economic perspective. This chapter uses Bourdieu's framework alongside Brown's PCT to explore the findings/discussion chapters 4 and 5, that address RQ1 approaches used by stakeholders to regulate employment and support UAE graduate employability and RQ2 about UAE government policy drivers. When issues from chapters 4 and 5 are discussed, I use selected stakeholder quotes and refer to the relevant section in my thesis using square brackets at the end of the quote.

Table 6.1 below highlights the structure of this chapter. First I outline the application of PCT's rigging and ranking to the UAE labour market (6.1). I then focus on the interventions used by UAE policymakers to restructure the labour market via its employment policies and the underlying socio-economic drivers (6.2). After, I examine how such interventions reshape the HE (6.3) and labour market fields and habitus for both Emiratis and expatriates (6.4). Next, I focus on Bourdieu's forms of capital, how the standing of specific forms of capital have changed and the influence of 'wasta' on graduate employability (6.5). I also address the concept of doxa to illustrate how the assumptions people make about employment and the relative position of Emiratis and expatriates are both reinforced and challenged (6.6). Finally, I present a summary of my discussion on the relevance of Bourdieu's framework and PCT to better understand the societal aspects of UAE labour market interventions (6.7).

| Research Question | Theoretical Lens |
|---|---|
| RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE? | PCT – Rigging and ranking 6.1 |
| | Government policies 6.2 |
| | Changing HE field 6.3 |
| | Changing labour market and habitus 6.4 |
| | Forms of capital 6.5 |
| | Doxa 6.6 |
| | Summary 6.7 |

Table 6.1 Policies through the lens of social practice theory

6.1 PCT – Rigging and ranking

In answering RQ1, the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability was shown to favour Emiratis over expatriates. The policies in place reflect the National Employment Strategy 2031, discussed in 4.2, where Emiratis are prioritised in the labour market. This is achieved through a clear policy of Emiratisation. Emirati only labour sectors and legislation with rewards and penalties are designed to encourage employers to meet national targets for hiring Emiratis.

Brown's PCT views the competition for academic credentials and jobs at a global level, where social elites influence markets. The PCT concept of rigging the labour market to favour one group over another is evident in the National Employment Strategy 2031. The rigging that takes place in the UAE does favour Emiratis over expatriates but is a clear national strategy to reshape the labour market. Since everyone in the UAE is aware of this strategy, and works to adjust accordingly, I do not concur with Brown, who sees rigging at a global level by nefarious actors in a global power play. Brown's concept of rigging is a useful one, but my study argues that rigging in the UAE can be regarded as balancing socio-economic priorities. As S10-policy maker/director MOHRE pointed out, the UAE labour market is shaped by talented expatriates and Emiratis:

Retaining the high-level minds [and] having the Emirati, the national Emirati also participating in that knowledge economy. [5.1.2] (S10-policymaker/director MOHRE)

Retaining ‘the high-level minds’ or skilled expatriates with Emiratis ‘participating’ is a significant comment from a policymaker. It is noteworthy because, in my opinion, it is an acknowledgment from policymakers that the goal of becoming a leading knowledge economy is best achieved through Emirati-expatriate collaboration. Similarly, S14-policymaker/director industry partners commented on the fact that expatriate graduates are now choosing to stay in the UAE after graduation:

Nowadays, I see them [expatriate graduates] staying in the UAE and having [job] opportunities. [5.1.2] (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

Findings from my study suggest that expatriates and Emiratis occupy their own circles of opportunity in the UAE labour market. This is further corroborated by the graphic used by the MOHRE’s website, which illustrates Emiratis and expatriates, reproduced in Figure 6.1. The caption ‘Competitive labour market that enables Emiratis and attracts global talents’ is a clear illustration of current policy.



Figure 6.1 Graphic from MOHRE website illustrating Emiratis & expatriates

Turning to the second PCT concept of ranking, there are similarities and differences between ranking in the UAE and Brown’s model. Ranking is where hierarchies are created based on credentials and how individuals can leverage their social, cultural and economic capital to gain an advantage over others in

the labour market. In the UAE, other than the national strategy used to prioritise them by rigging the market, Emiratis have significantly more social, cultural and economic capital than expatriates within the UAE context. As S06-HE/university dean mentioned in 4.2.4, Emiratis have a 'free ride' when it comes to access to state funded HEIs that are courted by major employers who are keen to meet their Emiratisations targets. Free HE for Emiratis, together with access to Emirati only career fairs, puts Emirati graduates at a higher ranking than expatriates, who must fund their own education.

While Brown sees that such differences create an environment where only those with a higher ranking are rewarded, my study argues that expatriates are not excluded but compete within different spheres or fields. In 6.4, Bourdieu's notion of field is considered in more detail, where the labour market can be considered as a series of interconnected fields, or social arenas where the different communities in the UAE interact and compete for resources.

PCT therefore illustrates how employment outcomes in the UAE are shaped not only by the attributes and qualifications of individuals, but how government policies influence the employment opportunities for Emiratis and expatriates and how the two groups are positioned relative to one another. It is appropriate at this stage to review the government policies and the underlying socio-economic factors.

6.2 Government policies

The government strategy and the policies to regulate employment and support graduate employability, in their current iteration, has three underpinning objectives. These objectives are 1) economic diversity, 2) Emiratisation in the private sector and 3) for the UAE to become a world leading knowledge economy. Together these objectives are designed to have a knowledge economy led by Emiratis, but one that attracts and retains talented, skilled expatriates.

Prior to more recent iterations of Emiratisation policy, expatriates and Emiratis worked in distinct labour fields, expatriates in the private sector and Emiratis in the public sector. This distinction that separated Emiratis from the private sector has changed with the current iteration of Emiratisation policy and the National Employment Strategy (NES). NES highlights the critical sectors reserved for Emiratis in the private sector, a point also made by S10-policymaker/director MOHRE:

We have the National Employment Strategy 2031 which focused on what would be the **vital sectors** required. [4.2.1] (S10-policymaker/director MOHRE)

Emiratisation policy, discussed in 4.2, illustrates a national strategy that reserves the critical labour market sectors for Emiratis, sets out quotas and clear Emiratisation targets for all private sector employers. Several incentives are in place to encourage employers to recruit Emiratis, alongside penalties for those who circumvent the policy.

Following the economic crisis of 2008/2009, discussed in 5.1.1, the need to diversify the economy from its reliance on oil revenue became more urgent in the UAE's objective to become a leading knowledge economy. The push for diversification led to major changes in the labour market and, concurrently, in the HE sector. In my study, I argue that the impact of economic diversification on labour market and HE fields, impacts both Emiratis and expatriates. In 6.3, I highlight three significant changes affecting the HE field in the UAE.

6.3 Changing Higher Education field

I consider fields as the structured arenas where people vie for position and resources, in this case employment opportunities, drawing upon their capitals. These structured arenas are part of social life and, as the focus of my study, include higher education, the public sector and private sector labour markets. When considering the HE field, HEIs can be considered as sites where employability practices are shaped but also where employment policies are

reinforced and enacted. The HE field, as integral part of UAE society, has undergone significant changes.

The first change in the HE field is the number of HEIs now found within the UAE. As seen in 1.3, the UAE had one university in 1977 but now boasts over 100 HEIs. Such a growth in HE has had an impact on the HE field, to cater to the demand from the influx of expatriate families. The economic downturn of 2008/2009 reduced the opportunities for Emiratis to find government jobs. State funded universities previously reinforced these employment pathways into the public sector for Emiratis. With the emergence of Emiratisation as a central government objective, UAE HEs are also part of this Emiratisation process, where it is thought that having more Emirati faculty and staff in HEIs will enhance the government's employability approach. S01- HE/faculty dean commented:

We see for example they [policymakers] are trying to reach a category now...government they have targets for each organisation they need to achieve. For university, it's [Emiratisation] that they are ranked on and they need to report about it to the government. (S01-HE/faculty dean)

This is significant in that HEIs are ranked in the eyes of policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, on the number of Emirati faculty and staff. This is particularly true of state funded HEIs, as S05-HE/university dean pointed out:

All federal universities [state funded HEIs] required to submit plans about how we'll achieve the overall Emiratisation targets [in state funded HEIs] – sixty percent Emiratis in universities in ten years. (S05-HE/university dean)

S05-HE/university dean added that this is a rather ambitious target. If achieved, however, this would go part way to changing the way Emiratis are viewed, and counter the predominance of expatriate faculty and staff in the HE sector. S03-HE/director industry partners, an Emirati, added that:

they need to get out of the stereotyping of the UAE national.(S03-HE/director industry partners)

Emiratisation within the HE sector addresses concerns of dependence on expatriates that government strategies are looking to address. Similarly, government strategy has shifted its focus to the private sector labour market. Such a shift has changed the focus of attention for HEIs and the programmes and courses required to meet the needs of the private sector. Previously, the focus for state funded HEIs would be to prepare graduates for government jobs. Similarly, private funded HEIs catered to expatriate with less oversight than their state funded counterparts. This has now changed, highlighted by S05-HE/university dean for the private funded HE sector:

We are taking more focus on the Emirati students...there's always government regulations, so maybe we can have some special programmes for Emiratis. (S05-HE/university dean)

It is this change in the offerings within the private HE sector that are now considered.

A second change within the HE field addresses the concerns discussed in 5.2.2, of oversubscribed courses. Private, fee paying HEIs had free reign to offer programmes that may or may not have served the UAE labour market. In part, these programmes catered for expatriate students who generally left the UAE upon graduation. As S11-policymaker/manager ADEK commented:

...you just for the sake of a degree and sell it to whoever [5.2.2]
(S11-policymaker/manager ADEK)

Similarly, S12-policymaker/CEO advisor remarked that private HEIs focussed too closely on revenue:

...They see their own benefit....the revenue that they are going to generate [5.2.2] (S12-policymaker/CEO advisor)

As mentioned in 1.3 and 4.2.3, HEIs are subject to more stringent controls by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), and by ADEK in Abu Dhabi

and KHDA in Dubai. There is a more focussed approach to ensure that HEI programmes are tailored to UAE labour market needs and directives given by MOHRE. An additional caveat is the government approach to balance the prioritisation of Emiratis with the retention of talented expatriates, highlighted in 2.3.3.9. Changes to residence visa rules and long term visas offered to talented expatriates has had the effect of more expatriate graduates staying in the UAE to take up employment. This point was highlighted by S14-policymaker/director industry partners:

Nowadays, I see them [expatriate graduates] staying in the UAE and having [job] opportunities. [5.1.3] (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

Tighter regulation to match HEI programmes to the perceived market requirements and the retention of more expatriate graduates in the UAE labour market, impacts HEIs offerings and in turn, the HE field. As the focus of the labour market shifted to advanced technologies, so do the programmes on offer at UAE HEIs. This is discussed in more detail below.

A third change to the HE field stems from the drive for economic diversification. This has led to a surge in demand for advanced technologies in sectors such as energy, communications, finance, health, artificial intelligence (AI), space, digital transactions and advanced science. This shift introduced new forms of cultural capital that graduates need, to succeed in a changing labour market field. In tandem with this shift, the habitus of employees has also evolved where fields and habitus influence each other over time. These changes are discussed in more detail in 6.5 and 6.6. In this dialectal relationship between field and habitus, the findings from my research imply that people will adapt their dispositions or behaviours to focus on the skills needed in the aforementioned job sectors. The demands for adjustment of cultural capital to meet the needs of economic diversification also impacts the HE field.

In essence the definition of valuable capital has changed in the labour market and the HE sector has adapted to match the new demands. The UAE is no exception in the global trend that puts the focus for HEIs to prepare students for

employment, as shown by studies carried out by RCEP (2022) and Areepattamannit (2024). The education sector has responded to the increased demand for graduates in advanced technologies with significant investments. This has seen investment in technology subjects that equip students with the skills needed in a knowledge economy. One example of this is the launch in 2019 of the Mohamed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence, a university offering the artificial intelligence programmes seen as essential for the UAE as a knowledge economy. The education field itself has been transformed by advances in technology and impacts the way students interact with HEIs. Such changes in students' digital literacy and focus on technology based cultural capital have influenced the habitus of younger generations as expatriates and Emiratis vie for position in the labour market. The NAFIS programme is a key component of the government's Emiratisation strategy reviewed in 2.3.3.7. NAFIS provides training for Emiratis seeking employment in the private sector. NAFIS does not offer this support for expatriates, and I revisit this point in 7.2.3.2. NAFIS has influenced both the habitus and economic capital of Emirati job seekers by providing them with opportunities to develop the skills, attitudes and behaviours required in a knowledge economy. Economic diversification and changes that focus the education sector to support diversification are both integral components of the government's policy to regulate the labour market and bring about societal change.

6.4 Changing labour market field and habitus

The labour fields for expatriates and Emiratis were quite distinct before the more recent iterations of Emiratisation, with Emiratis working in the public sector and expatriates in the private sector. The interaction between these fields and the people in them, was limited. Whereas the state regulated the public sector, control of graduates in the private sector was through market forces, supply and demand. As S14-policy maker/director industry partners mentioned, in the previous model, expatriate graduates would not stay in the UAE after graduation:

They [expatriate graduates] used to fly out of UAE and go back to their home countries [5.1.3] (S14-policymaker/director industry partners)

Jabeen et al (2018) identified features of a dual labour market in the UAE, likening the employment of Emiratis in stable, well paid government jobs as the primary market and more insecure, lower paid jobs for expatriates as the secondary market. If we consider the public and private labour markets as distinct fields, this describes the UAE labour market before the early 2000's. In 2001, the UAE population had soared from 210,000 in 1968 to 3.3 million (Maadad:2003). The rapid development of the UAE since independence in 1971 attracted large numbers of expatriate migrants in response to huge demand from a market economy. Essentially, Emiratis and expatriates were competing for work within their own distinct markets or fields. The labour fields and the associated habitus for expatriates and Emiratis alike have evolved over time, influenced largely by unique socio-economic factors and government policies in the form of strategies to reshape the labour market.

As mentioned, the UAE labour market was often considered as two distinct fields, one for expatriates and the other for Emiratis. While these two fields may overlap, as more Emiratis join the private sector and compete together, the opportunities available to both groups of graduates is shaped in part by the rules of access to the labour market. Expatriates require employment visas and Emiratis are given priority by the National Employment Strategy 2031 and NAFIS programme described in 2.3.3.

Previously, when expatriates and Emiratis each had their own distinct labour market fields, they had distinctly separate habitus with their own distinct cultural experiences, access to capital and social conditions. Emiratisation in the private sector changed this and both groups now interact in the same workplaces more frequently than ever before (The National:2024c). My study shows that this interaction has impacted expatriates and Emiratis alike and a blend of cultures influences the habitus for both groups.

Expatriates, who previously dominated the private sector, are adapting to these hybrid workspaces. The disposition of expatriates adapts through collaborating, mentoring and working with Emiratis who may well replace them. This can and has created a sense of precarity for some expatriates. For Emiratis, they also adapt to the private sector, which requires new skills, professional norms and attitudes, while balancing these with traditional customs. I believe that hybrid workplaces alter the power dynamics between Emiratis and expatriates. Traditionally, private sector industries were led by expatriates, but Emiratisation policies specifically target leadership roles in the private sector. S17-employer/manager Emiratisation commented on this point and illustrates current practice:

Emiratisation is tied now to **Emiratising critical positions**, decision making decisions. (S17-employer/manager Emiratisation)

There are some expatriates who may question the fairness of such policies, where some perceive that it favours Emiratis because of their nationality rather than merit. 4.3.3 highlighted those who doubted the success of Emiratisation where:

Emiratis are being placed in job positions simply to **fill a quota**. (S15-employer/director training)

Toledo (2013), in a study of the issues facing Emiratisation policies, reported that policymakers viewed Emiratis as productive as expatriates, whereas private sector employers considered Emiratis as less productive. This perception of Emiratis as being less productive was referred to as an unfair stereotype by S03-HE/director industry partners:

they [private sector] need to get out of the **stereotyping of the UAE national**. Like any person in the world there is a good UAE national and there is UAE national who need improvement. (S03-HE/director industry partners)

There is a recognition that both expatriates and Emiratis are adjusting to the new norm, but it is worth remembering that not everyone adapts to the hybrid workplace in the private sector at the same pace. Some expatriates may feel insecure and question their long-term future and some Emiratis will have their concerns about the changes in their habitus. For example, Emiratis who previously worked in the state sector would be accustomed to shorter working days, compatriots as coworkers with shared culture, language and economic capital. On moving to the private sector, these Emiratis may have to adjust their habitus to the demands of a corporate environment with a different work etiquette and coworkers who do not share the same experiences, heritage or language. S20-employer/director HR referred to the cultural alienation felt by some Emiratis in the private sector:

I think some companies struggle with that [cultural alienation]; if you're the minority and you're coming into a company, it's hard enough joining the company when you're new, and when you **feel like an outsider**, it's even harder. [5.2.3] (S20-employer/director HR)

Cultural adaptation for both expatriates and Emiratis is part and parcel of Emiratisation. As the fields and habitus of both groups change, it is important to understand these changes, the shift in power dynamics brought on by Emiratisation and the way this might impact on the forms and distribution of capital for expatriates and Emiratis.

Habitus or the ingrained habits and dispositions take time to form and longer to change. Previously, I would also consider the habitus of expatriates and Emiratis as separate because the ingrained habits, dispositions of both are shaped by different life experiences, education and social position. Expatriates come from different countries with diverse backgrounds and live and work as migrants where their status and rights are governed by their visa and employment status. In contrast, Emiratis grow up in a socio-cultural environment where they have privileged access to state resources and support and have a great pride in their national identity. As expatriates stay longer in the UAE through long term visa options and interact more frequently with Emiratis

in a hybrid workplace, so do the experiences that both groups have and these can influence the habitus of Emiratis and expatriates alike. Conscious that such changes in habitus could erode national identity, 'We the UAE 2031:Future Peaks' (2023:21), was published by the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, and puts national identity front and centre:

A nation, proud of its identity, that supports the prosperity of its citizens... A well-preserved national identity, culture and unwavering values. (Ibid 2023:21)

Emiratis represent 11.5% of the UAEs population and it is therefore not surprising that policymakers want to preserve their national identity. So much so that in Abu Dhabi, the education regulator ADEK introduced the National Identity Mark (2023) to evaluate schools in delivering a programme that promotes UAE identity and culture. I consider this to be an initiative to reinforce the norm, so that Emiratis behave in ways 'consistent' with their habitus. This need to preserve identity/culture is designed to go hand in hand with policies to retain skilled expatriates who contribute to the knowledge economy. Skilled expatriates stay longer in the UAE and put down roots through long term residency such as [Golden Visa](#) (2024) options launched in 2019. This launch was at the same time as Law 19 of 2005 governing real estate (2019) amended to allow expatriates to buy their own homes.

HE and labour market fields have changed over time and, more slowly, the habitus of Emiratis and expatriates. These societal changes are brought about by government strategies to reshape the economy, the labour market and the focus on knowledge based industries. Such changes have impacted the importance of certain forms of capital and it is this impact that is now discussed.

6.5 Forms of capital

I argue that Emiratis and expatriates have distinct forms of capital which have changed, because of UAE employment policies and Emiratisation of the private sector. The changes in each group's capital are discussed below.

6.5.1 Economic capital

Economic capital or the resources that graduates can access, differs between expatriates and Emiratis. Emiratis are given a 'head start' over expatriates, as seen in 4.2.4, with access to free education. As S06-HE/university dean puts it:

Where HE in a financial sense is a free ride [for Emiratis]...no fees, even receive free textbooks (S06-HE/university dean)

The welfare system of providing free education, social housing, high salaries subsidised through the NAFIS programme, puts Emiratis in a privileged position. Access to well paid jobs in the private sector boosts Emiratis' economic capital. Employability policies discussed in 4.2, such as the National Employment Strategy 2031, grant Emiratis privileged access to key job sectors and enhances their access to well-paid employment, boosting their economic capital.

Expatriates, on the other hand, do not have the same advantages such as access to subsidised housing, access to Emirati only career fairs or industries reserved for Emiratis. I would imagine that these affect some expatriates' sense of job security, economic stability or 'fairness'. Given that Emirati graduates, by and large, have more economic capital, it is not surprising, therefore, that differences exist between Emirati and expatriate graduates in terms of their cultural capital.

6.5.2 Cultural capital

Cultural capital or the social assets of individuals plays a role in how expatriates and Emiratis engage with the labour market. My study suggests that just as labour market changes impact economic capital, the same can be said for cultural capital.

Bourdieu (1986) posited three forms of cultural capital, embodied, objectified and institutionalised.

6.5.2.1 Embodied cultural capital

The embodied cultural capital or dispositions that people acquire through their lives will differ for expatriates and Emiratis. As seen in 6.2, 'We the UAE 2031', illustrates the importance given to national pride in Emirati heritage, language and Islamic values by policymakers. Expatriates bring their own, very different embodied cultural capital such as multiple languages and professional skills. While some expatriates from neighbouring Gulf countries can align with Emirati heritage, many have distinct cultures that limit their interaction with Emiratis. At a societal level, Emiratis are given land grants, social housing in districts where few expatriates live. Expatriates can buy property but not in the districts that have been gifted to Emiratis. While this would normally limit the interaction between the two groups, I contend that Emiratisation of the private sector has changed this to some extent and the hybrid workplace offers both groups the opportunities to acquire new cultural capital. For expatriates, acquiring familiarity with Emirati culture and values helps them to navigate the changing workplace and to maintain relevance with their Emirati managers. For Emiratis, integration into the private sector involves the acquisition of new cultural capital and global workplace norms and skills.

6.5.2.2 Objectified cultural capital

Objectified cultural capital or objects that hold cultural significance are ever present in the UAE and linked to the concept of national identity and status. Even though the UAE has a thriving luxury goods market and is a global financial hub, national identity is considered important. In many workplaces, Emirati men for example, are required to wear the traditional dress for Emiratis.

Figure 6.2 below is an example of the dress code of one private sector employer.

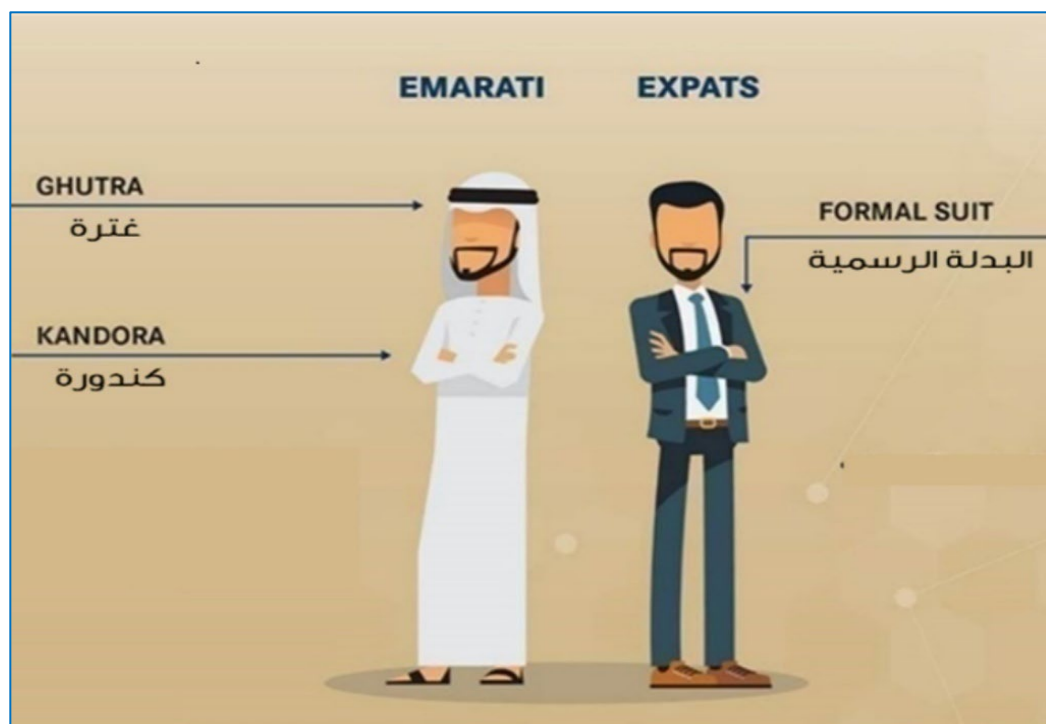


Figure 6.2 Dress code for Emiratis and expatriates

I believe that this not only reflects the differences between expatriates and Emiratis in hybrid workplaces but reinforces the distinct cultural identity of the latter.

6.5.2.3 Institutionalised cultural capital

Institutionalised cultural capital, such as academic credentials or professional qualifications is also a factor in the UAE labour market. Emiratis have government funded education, access to generous scholarships and graduate with qualifications sought after by private sector employers keen to meet Emiratisation targets. I argue that this bestows Emiratis with advantages over expatriates. However, expatriates have more internationally recognised qualifications and professional credentials. Despite the privileged status of Emiratis, the language skills of some Emirati graduates are seen as an issue for employers. Communication in the state labour sector is predominantly carried out in Arabic, but the lingua franca of the private sector is English, as S11-policymaker/manager ADEK pointed out.

And, you know, business in the UAE is dominated by English language. (S11-policymaker/manager ADEK)

Private sector employers acknowledge that English language skills are an issue for some Emirati graduates and S19-employer/director HR commented on this:

there's a big gap that they [Emiratis] just don't know the language that they have to use to present themselves. (S19-employer/director HR)

Recognising this gap, several HEIs have foundation programmes that address this issue, a point made by S02-HE/director employability:

support needed is language. So, there are still times when the Emiratis, their English is maybe not that good. (S02-HE/director employability)

Similarly, the NAFIS programme provides training opportunities for Emiratis to develop not only their language abilities but the professional skills that they might need to compete with expatriate graduates in the private sector.

6.5.3 Social capital or *Wasta*

Social capital, accrued from networks of relationships, both personal and professional is better known in the UAE and GCC region as *wasta*. Gold and Naufal (2012) describe *wasta* as the “other invisible hand”, as an approach used to gain favour in the Middle East. Alsarhan et al (2024) see *wasta* as having an influence on decisions taken by Human Resource (HR) managers.

As seen in my earlier discussion on in 5.2.4, social capital or *wasta* is seen as important by expatriates and Emiratis and is often used to gain influence on employment decisions. With a diverse labour market comprising Emiratis and expatriates from all over the world, the social capital, networks a graduate can leverage, are important in finding work. Forstenlechner (2013) views *wasta* used by Emiratis, in particular, as a potent factor in securing employment. In the UAE, these networks tend to operate within specific cultural or national groups. For Emiratis, my study indicates that tribal affiliations remain strong and play a

significant role in finding work through familial connections. Similarly, expatriates leverage their cultural or national group connections but also through professional networks.

To really appreciate and understand what *wasta* is, it is relevant to look at *wasta* from a societal perspective. The word *wasta*, in Arabic, derives from the word 'wasat' or middle. The UAE, as with GCC countries, is a tribal society that has developed exponentially since gaining independence in 1971. With a deep rooted tribal culture, *wasta* was primarily a tool used to resolve conflict and navigate social structures. Familial and tribal affiliations remain strong with Emirati families and personally, I see this as a form of social cohesion or 'glue' that still retains importance. The UAE has evolved into a wealthy society that has both attracted large numbers of expatriates and built a robust knowledge-based economy. With these socio-economic changes, *wasta* has evolved from social spheres to other fields, including the labour field.

Historically, the influence of *wasta* on the labour field was focussed on the public sector, where Emiratis competed with each other for coveted, government jobs, with high salaries and short working hours. The economic reassessment described in 5.1.1 accelerated the need to focus on Emiratisation in the private sector. Emiratisation in the private sector has changed many of the labour market dynamics and its influence on social capital is no exception. My study suggests that in hybrid workplaces, there is an increase in the influence that Emirati networks have, as Emiratis take on key positions. S17-employer/manager Emiratisation, highlighted this focus on key positions in the current iteration of Emiratisation:

Emiratisation is tied now to Emiratising critical positions, decision making positions. (S17-employer/manager Emiratisation)

Having Emiratis in key positions or positions of influence, enhances the positional use of *wasta*, as more Emiratis join those organisations by leveraging their social capital and legitimised by government set Emiratisation targets. For Emiratis who leverage their *wasta* to secure a private sector position, this eases

the integration process for Emiratis, when navigating the complex and novel structures of the private sector with its different business norms, culture and language. In 5.2.3, S20-employer/director HR, pointed out the struggle that some Emiratis feel when joining a company with few compatriots.

Regardless of what you're going to pay, not everybody wants to be joining an organisation where they feel like they're the only Emirati that's there. (S20-employer/director HR)

Emiratis also benefit from enhanced social capital as they form networks within private sector industries and companies that previously did not have a significant number of Emiratis. Emiratis who are mentored by expatriates also gain valuable professional skills and access to useful professional networks.

For expatriates, on the other hand, there is a reduction in their social capital as more and more Emiratis join the private sector, notably in key technology based sectors. This can and does lead to a sense of insecurity, but some expatriates, however, who find themselves mentoring Emiratis, will gain social capital from their Emirati connections.

In essence, Emiratisation policy with formal quotas of the number of Emiratis the private sector should employ has the effect of restructuring the labour market field. *Wasta*, however, reconfigures how the labour market rules are implemented. Wherever Emiratisation targets are reliant on *wasta* to recruit Emiratis, this can lead to feelings of unfairness among expatriate coworkers or with Emiratis who do not have strong networks. Given that Emiratisation in the private sector is high on the government's agenda, I feel that a pragmatic approach is required when viewing the way policy, the labour market field and *wasta*, all intersect.

6.5.4 Symbolic capital

As discussed in 2.4.1, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital confers recognition or prestige on an individual or groups. Economic, cultural and social capital all contribute to a person's symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is a relational concept, where its value only has meaning, when others or the society ascribe

value or importance to it. In countries where nationality, language, familial connections are given prominence, symbolic capital can be an important factor for graduates entering the labour market. My study has shown that in the UAE, the privileges granted to Emiratis and the focus of policymakers on national identity, bestows considerable symbolic capital on Emiratis for being Emirati. That is to say that Emirati graduates, therefore, begin their careers with ascribed symbolic capital, due to their nationality. Public narratives and Emiratisation initiatives, serve to reinforce the prestige of hiring an Emirati graduate. Emiratisation enhances the symbolic capital of Emiratis in the private sector by the same virtue.

The employment policies detailed in 4.2 provide clear targets for private sector industries and outline that Emiratisation is managed and enforced by MOHRE. Hiring Emirati graduates not only satisfies legal requirements but elevates the image of the organisation hiring them. Given that Emiratisation targets specific knowledge based industries, the symbolic value of being Emirati is selectively enhanced in those industries. The demand for Emirati graduates amplifies the value of being Emirati and, also enhances the symbolic capital of state funded HEIs, whose population is almost entirely Emirati.

For expatriate graduates, English proficiency and international qualifications retain symbolic value. English remains the lingua franca of the private sector. However, as more Emiratis occupy senior positions, an expatriate who does not speak Arabic may face a reduction in their symbolic capital. Expatriates' symbolic capital may or may not be influenced by linguistic abilities but often depends on their professional expertise and perceived contribution to the UAE economy. Expatriates, who previously dominated the private sector as experts in technology-based industries, find their symbolic capital diminishing as Emiratisation develops. I believe that as Emiratis become more visible in their contribution to the private sector, their symbolic capital is elevated, and they attain the symbolic status of representing the nation. The shift in symbolic capital for Emiratis and expatriates is most pronounced in those industries identified in the National Employment Strategy 2031 as critical sectors for economic development.

Symbolic capital in the UAE labour market is not static. It changes, has changed and will continue to change with fluctuations in employment policy, labour market changes and graduate employability practices. As symbolic capital changes, so do the taken for granted assumptions about Emiratis and expatriates alike. It is these assumptions that are now considered.

6.6 Doxa

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of doxa, described earlier in 2.4.1, are the taken for granted beliefs and assumptions, that societal actors rarely question. The presumption that Emiratis worked mainly in the state sector and expatriates in the private sector, has been disrupted by Emiratisation initiatives.

The 1980 labour law was the foundation for later initiatives and policies that bestowed Emiratis with the legal basis to be prioritised in the workplace. It is taken for granted by Emiratis and expatriates alike, that the social stratification of UAE society puts Emiratis in a higher position than expatriates. This doxa, or taken for granted belief, influences policy design and implementation, and, in turn, is influenced and changed by those same policies. A manifestation of this doxa that Emiratis should occupy a higher status than expatriates was given by S01-HE/faculty dean, when referring to the expectation of Emirati graduates who say:

I'm ready to start now and then grow and be further updated.
They say like okay we go to a job, I can be ready to be a
manager, head sector, to lead. [5.2.3] (S01-HE/faculty dean)

My study implies that the pre-2000 doxa, where Emirati graduates would find work in the state sector, has been challenged by the economic reality and the subsequent iterations of Emiratisation policies. Traditional values, national pride and the taken for granted belief that the UAE has a duty to provide for its citizens, drives the prioritisation of Emiratis in the labour market in this period of rapid economic diversity and modernisation. This need for diversification drives Emiratisation in the private sector and in turn, shapes the doxa of what types of jobs and skills are valued.

Economic diversification and the goal of becoming a leading knowledge economy has put the UAE on the global stage, and the UAE as a global financial hub is but one example. My view is that being a player on the global stage has led to policies and regulations that meet international standards of the global market and has affected those taken for granted assumptions. Previously, expatriates working in the UAE operated under the assumption that their presence in the country is temporary. My study indicates that while residence is still tied to having a visa, long term residency and the right to buy property, challenges the doxa that the UAE is a short-term transactional country for expatriates. Embracing the need for skilled expatriates manifests itself in the UAE adopting international standards. The need for skilled expatriates while also prioritising Emiratis in private sector roles manifests itself in changes to employment regulations. One example is article 4.1 of Federal decree No 33 (2021), which aligns with international standards and makes it illegal for employers to discriminate based on sex, colour, religion or nationality. As my review of literature shows in 2.3.3.8, however, embracing international standards is balanced with one caveat to not derail Emiratisation policies. Article 4.2 is clear that policies that prioritise Emiratis over expatriates (Emiratisation) are not considered as discrimination:

Article 4. 2 Rules and regulations that aim to enhance the participation of UAE citizens in the labour market shall not constitute discrimination. (Federal Decree Law regarding the regulation of employment and its amendments 2021:14)

Clearly the National Employment Strategy 2031 has challenged and changed the widely held belief that Emiratis and expatriates work in different job sectors. The impact to the way these beliefs have changed, is felt by Emiratis and expatriates alike. The hybrid workplace is evidence of this. The doxa that Emiratis occupy a higher, more privileged position over expatriates has an impact on employment strategies. There have been many iterations of Emiratisation as the UAE responds to socio-economic challenges and there will no doubt be more, as policies are refined to meet future challenges. With each

iteration, widely held beliefs are challenged, moulded and reshaped over time, but this is a gradual process that will probably span generations.

6.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have addressed research question 3 using social practice theories to unpack the societal interplay with economic and political factors to provide a unique view of the UAE labour market. I have shown that UAE employment policy is directed at a national level by policymakers, resulting in major labour market changes. The social practice theories I selected as the lenses to understand these labour market changes, provide a unique view of societal restructuring in action. I argue that it is through such an understanding that we can posit future societal changes and suggest improvements.

While the global focus on employability studies has centred on the skills and qualities needed to succeed in the workplace, my study seeks to understand UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies from the societal perspective. Brown's PCT, together with Bourdieu's framework of fields, forms of capital and doxa, serve as useful lenses to really appreciate the direction that policymakers have taken and the impact that employment policies have had in reshaping UAE society. My findings are represented in Table 6.2 below:

RQ 1: What is the approach used in the UAE to support and promote graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?

Approach used:

- National Policy, Role of MOHRE, Multiple Players
- Head Start, Reserved Sectors, Emiratisation, Quotas/Point System

Stakeholders' perspective:

- Top Down
- Party Line, Doubters
- Good intentions/building relationships
- Absence from the debate

RQ 2: What factors drive UAE employment strategies and affect graduate employability?

Factors driving UAE employment policies:

- Economic reassessment
- Demographic imbalance
- Creating a competitive knowledge economy

Factors affecting graduate employability:

- Reality check
- Creating a competitive knowledge economy
- Distinction between state and private HE
- Wasta or social influence in recruitment
- Fashionable industries

RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE as an emerging knowledge economy?

- PCT - Rigging and ranking
- Changing labour market field(s) and habitus
- Socio-economic factors
- Government policies
- Forms of capital
- Doxa

Table 6.2 RQ3 findings: Through the lens of social practice theory

Previously, the labour market consisted of Emiratis working in the state sector and expatriates, in effect, controlling the private sector. This model was unsustainable economically and policymakers embarked on a strategy for the UAE to become a leading knowledge economy and accelerated Emiratisation of the private sector. Using PCT, I posit that Emiratisation rigs the labour market in favour of Emiratis and Emiratis are afforded a higher rank over expatriates, creating the hierarchical social structure that we see today. PCT is a useful lens to view UAE employment strategies, but I contend that PCT in the UAE context should be viewed in the context of policymakers balancing socio-economic priorities. UAE policymakers balance the need to preserve national identity and

the needs of its citizens with the need to attract and retain expatriates who can contribute to the knowledge economy.

Drawing from Bourdieu's framework, I argue that the hybrid labour market modifies the fields, habitus and forms of capital for both Emiratis and expatriates. My study suggests that with these changes, doxa or taken for granted assumptions about the UAE labour market and its stakeholders have also been changed. Given the considerable labour market changes presented in my study, I posit that further changes will inevitably happen. I argue that it is through an understanding of the economic and societal factors that policymakers, HE and employers, can navigate these changes.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

My study started from a long held personal interest in understanding the societal factors that have shaped UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies over the last twenty years, and what the implications are for policymakers, HEIs and employers.

In this chapter, I first consider my contribution to knowledge, and the potential benefits this knowledge can offer to all those who develop and implement employment policies and graduate employability strategies in the UAE. I then present the major lessons learned, encompassing the implications for policymakers, HEIs and employers, and make suggestions for all three stakeholders. I also consider some of the limitations of my study, including any potential obstacles I might face in putting forward my suggestions. Finally, I reflect on my research journey and the experience of ‘seeing’ societal changes first hand, and propose further research to expand on this contribution.

7.1 My contribution to knowledge

My study is unique in the approach that I take to researching UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies from a societal perspective. The contribution to knowledge that I make centres around three key, relevant areas.

Firstly, by using Bourdieu’s framework and Brown’s PCT, the importance of societal factors in UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies are brought into prominence when considering the unique power dynamics and hierarchies within the UAE labour market. Employability is often viewed in the literature as the skills needed to secure employment and this *absolute* dimension has dominated the employability debate thus far. Skills are important for a graduate’s success, but employability initiatives are best served by an understanding of the *relative* dimension, the societal factors at play. As pointed out in chapter 6, my use of Bourdieu’s framework at the macro level of society provides a unique opportunity to understand the bigger picture, the socio-economic and political factors at play. My position as an expatriate with

over 25 years living and working alongside expatriates and Emiratis, with my Emirati familial connections, put me in the exceptional position of being an outsider and insider, with access to key stakeholders.

Secondly, the uniqueness of the UAE context of employment policies and graduate employability strategies is in stark contrast with studies in western contexts. Labour markets in western settings are relatively liberal, whereas in the UAE, policymakers have a direct and active role in employment and employability policy creation and implementation. My study is a rarely seen application of Bourdieu's framework and PCT to the UAE context. This contributes to knowledge by expanding these lenses beyond western perspectives and offers valuable insights to policymakers, HEIs and employers in the UAE and GCC. As discussed in 3.8, GCC countries are all at various stages of reshaping their labour markets through a process of nationalisation, my research approach and the lenses I used would be of value to GCC employability researchers.

Thirdly, my study contributes to policy discourse around employability by highlighting the discursive and iterative nature of policy development and enactment. As Ball (2015) and Ward et al (2016) contend (1.7.3), focus tends to be on the text itself and how policy decisions can be implemented. My study, using social practice theories, contributes to the debate on how policies are best understood by recognising the connections between policy, social structures, the political system and the issues that policymakers seek to address. Changes in UAE employment policy and employability that I have presented are reflective of a *policy change in action*, and underscore the importance of the *relative* dimension of employability when researching policy discourse around employability.

My study has shown that the employment policies and Emiratisation in particular, are changing UAE society, changing the fields, habitus and capital of Emiratis and expatriates. The suggestions I make in the subsequent sections are cognisant of these changes. Being mindful of societal change, implies that my study can not only enrich the global employability policy debate but also

have relevance for UAE stakeholders as they navigate labour market changes. I argue that looking at UAE graduate employability from a *relative* or societal perspective, can guide policymakers when crafting future policy iterations.

7.2 Major lessons learned and suggestions.

A summary of the findings for the 3 research questions, taken from my findings/discussion chapters, is represented in Figure 7.1.

I then present the major lessons learned when answering my research questions and use **bold** text to emphasise key aspects. I then propose enhancements to the way policymakers, HEIs and employers interact with each other. I also suggest how HEIs and employers might better interface with employment policies and graduate employability strategies in the wider context of societal change.

My suggestions for all three stakeholders centre around three concepts, namely *building relationships* (RQ1-7.2.1.2), *working to a common goal* (RQ2-7.2.2.2) and *preparing graduates for labour market changes* (RQ3-7.2.3.2). I make a total of five (5) suggestions and list them numerically and in bold, italicised text. A summary of my suggestions is provided in Table 7.2 in 7.2.4.

| |
|--|
| <p>RQ 1: What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?</p> <p>Approach used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Policy, Role of MOHRE, Multiple Players • Head Start, Reserved Sectors, Emiratisation, Quotas/Point System <p>Stakeholders' perspective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top Down • Party Line, Doubters • Good intentions/building relationships • Absence from the debate |
| <p>RQ 2: What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?</p> <p>Factors driving UAE employment strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic reassessment • Demographic imbalance • Creating a competitive knowledge economy <p>Factors affecting UAE graduate employability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student choices – family/peer pressure • Oversubscribed courses • Emirati graduate expectations • Wasta |
| <p>RQ 3: What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE as an emerging knowledge economy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PCT - Rigging and ranking • Changing labour market field(s) and habitus • Socio-economic factors • Government policies • Forms of capital • Doxa |

Table 7.1 Summary of findings for RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3

7.2.1 RQ1 Policymakers Approach

What is the approach used in the UAE to regulate employment and support graduate employability, incorporating the views of policymakers, HE, and employers?

The first part of this question was answered from interviews with twenty stakeholders, representing policymakers, HEIs and employers, in conjunction with a review of the national employment employability policies outlined in chapter 2, sourced from publicly available documents. The interviews I conducted also addressed the second half of the question and provided insight into stakeholders' perspectives on the current employability strategy. These

interviews and my review of employment policies in the public domain, detailed previous iterations of employability policies and how the labour market has adapted to these changes.

7.2.1.1 RQ1 Lessons learned

Findings for RQ1 highlighted consensus between policymakers, HEIs and employers, that **collaboration between stakeholders is key**. My study provided an insight into the intent of government policy, its ideology, what its plans are and what is expected from HEIs and employers. I believe that the language used in UAE employment **policies reflects the power dynamics within UAE society**, when **priority is given to Emirati graduates** through **mandatory reserved sectors and quotas**. A further indication of the power relationship between stakeholders is the **top-down approach to communication** about policies.

UAE graduate employability is situated within the wider context of employment, priority given to Emiratis and **rigorously enforced Emiratisation targets set for the private sector**. The HE work-relationship landscape in the UAE is complex and is changing as government policy changes. All three stakeholders have vested interests to ensure that the relationship works to the benefit of all, not least for UAE graduates.

My study showed a **mixed reaction from HEIs and employers** to the current iteration of employment policy. I observed that there was general agreement on a **need for more forums for policymakers to engage** with HEIs and employers. Some HEIs and employers felt they **need more clarity about the policy** itself and the direction that government wants to take. This suggests that more needs to be done to build a closer relationship between all three stakeholders.

7.2.1.2 RQ1 Suggestion - Building relationships / Clarifying policy

The UAE clearly has policies in place to regulate employment and drive Emiratisation in targeted sectors, backed by legislation. Implementation by HEIs is mixed, as is their understanding of MOHRE's strategy. Given the hierarchical, top-down nature of policy decision making in the UAE, MOHRE is best suited to coordinate a formal information sharing forum on UAE employment and employability strategy. This would bring together representatives from other government entities, HEIs and major employers. MOHRE are best placed to assume such a coordinating role, as they 'own' the application of NES strategy, are familiar with the labour market sectors and already liaise with employers on Emiratisation targets.

Suggestion 1: *MOHRE to set up focus groups in coordination with ADEK and KHDA, and to invite key HEIs, and employers in sectors targeted by NES.* Chaired by MOHRE, the goal would be for policymakers to clarify the intent behind the country's employment policies and graduate employability strategies, and to hear the concerns and opinions of HEIs and employers. The involvement of ADEK and KHDA is essential as they coordinate and regulate HEIs and graduate employability strategies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively. Clarity and transparency in the dialogue would go a long way in engaging all parties in regulating the labour market for the benefit of all.

7.2.2 RQ2 Factors influencing policy

What factors drive UAE employment policies and affect graduate employability?

This question was addressed in two distinct sections, namely the socio-economic policies that led to the current iteration of employment and employment policies and the factors that, in turn, affect policy implementation and graduate employability.

7.2.2.1 RQ2 Lessons learned

As seen in 5.1.1, **Emiratisation** or nationalisation of the labour market is pivotal to the NES. NES is driven by the economic demands of **becoming a knowledge economy**, in terms of the technology-based industries required. The UAE has made progress in **reducing its dependency on oil revenues** and recognises the need to attract and **retain talented expatriates** who can support the economic goals, while putting **Emiratis at the centre of labour market changes**. My study showed that the current iteration of Emiratisation policy targets **Emiratisation in key private sector industries**, has more robust incentives and penalties, and is widely reported in UAE media. Given that all media releases are vetted by UAE Media Council, I believe that this media attention is an indication of the importance Emiratisation to policymakers.

In 5.2, I highlighted some of the factors that may be affecting the efficacy of the NES and graduate employability. These factors include the menu of HE courses on offer at HEIs. A common thread with stakeholders was the need for **alignment of HE courses with the labour market needs**. I have shown that private, fee paying HEIs do not always align their course offerings with the labour market.

The other factor at play is the **choices that students make** when selecting their HE degree courses. My study showed stakeholders were in agreement that family and friends played a big role in students' choices. **Parents can exercise considerable influence** and the **prestige and popularity** of the profession that students aim for can override what the market needs or even the students' academic capabilities.

7.2.2.2 RQ2 Suggestion - Working to a common goal

Linked to building relationships, and enhancing communication through focus groups, I have two additional suggestions for stakeholders.

Suggestion 2: Ministry of Higher Education to draft and mandate that all HEIs publish the employment rates for their programmes using a common format. This would provide school career advisors, students and parents with some measure of the likelihood of employment after graduation. Additionally, it provides useful data to all parties on how each programme is contributing to the nation's economy.

Suggestion 3: Ministry of Higher Education and MOHRE to develop common employability key performance indicators (KPIs) Having clear KPIs that all HEIs and employers use would clarify the goals that stakeholders are expected to work towards. The unified, common approach I have suggested would provide more consistent and useable data for policymakers, HEIs, employers and future graduates.

7.2.3 RQ3 Through the lens of social practice theory

What can social practice theories tell us about employment policies and graduate employability in the UAE as an emerging knowledge economy?

This question was answered by using Bourdieu's framework of fields, habitus, forms of capital and doxa, in conjunction with Brown's concept of rigging and ranking. It was through these theoretical lenses that I viewed UAE employment and graduate employability policies from a societal perspective.

7.2.3.1 RQ3 Lessons learned.

The UAE labour market has changed considerably from when Emirati graduates worked mainly in the public sector and the private sector was left to expatriates. The NES objective of a diverse knowledge economy, led by Emiratis, has seen great societal changes. I chose to view these changes through the lenses afforded by Brown's PCT and Bourdieu's framework.

The prioritisation of Emiratis can be seen as **rigging the market and ranking them over expatriates**. Rigging and ranking are two central concepts of PCT, but I have argued that the UAE context is dissimilar to a western context. The

balancing act of positioning Emiratis at the front of the queue while promoting expatriates who can support the economy, is better represented as one of socio-economic balance.

The hybrid labour market affects Emiratis and expatriates differently. As Emiratis adapt to the demands of global professional norms expected in the private sector, their fields and habitus change. Emiratis gain more forms of capital and balance pride in their national identity with the modernity of a hybrid workplace. For Expatriates, their fields, habitus and forms of capital also change with the new norm, as they balance job security concerns with the need to adapt to changes in the workplace. **As fields, habitus and capital change for Emiratis and expatriates alike, so has the taken for granted view or doxa**, and the view of Emiratis being confined to the public sector.

Societal changes affect Emiratis and expatriates differently and an honest acknowledgment of these differences would benefit all stakeholders.

It is through a better understanding of the effect of current labour market changes that stakeholders can plot a course of action that supports both Emirati and expatriate graduates.

7.2.3.2 RQ3 Suggestion - Preparing graduates for labour market changes

For Emiratis and expatriates to navigate labour market changes, I propose two additional initiatives that would empower graduates.

Suggestion 4: Ministry of Higher Education, with HEIs, to design courses for undergraduates, providing clarity on UAE business culture, the NES and UAE labour laws. Nationally coordinated professional development (PD) programmes that capture the UAE's business culture, strategic goals and legal framework governing employment, would help students navigate the labour market before graduation. For Emiratis, they would benefit from more experience and targeted training that align with the goals of a knowledge economy and global business practices. For expatriates, a similar alignment with labour market expectations would be beneficial, alongside programmes to

foster an understanding of UAE business etiquette and local cultural norms and business practices.

Suggestion 5: MOHRE and Ministry of Higher Education to develop and mandate nationally coordinated professional development programmes for Emirati and expatriate graduates in key sectors. While NAFIS does offer PD programmes for Emiratis, no such national programmes exist for expatriates. If nationally coordinated PD programmes were available to all graduates, this would benefit all stakeholders and would support the goals of the NES to develop Emiratis and attract and retain skilled expatriates.

7.2.4 Summary of suggestions

My suggestions for all stakeholders are presented below in Table 7.2. These suggestions represent a roadmap for policymakers, HEIs and employers to build on their relationship and work collaboratively as all parties navigate the labour market changes described in my study.

| Suggestion | Who | With | Benefit |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1) Form focus groups | MOHRE | ADEK/KHDA, HEIs & Employers | Clarifies policies; Shares concerns. |
| 2) Publish rates of employment for all HE programmes | Ministry of Higher Education, & MOHRE | HEIs | Informs students & their families when making programme choices. Enhances alignment of HE with economy |
| 3) Develop and publish common KPIs for employability | Ministry of Higher Education, & MOHRE | HEIs & Employers | Enables more agile response to labour market changes. |
| 4) Design UAE specific business culture, NES and labour law PD programmes for HE students | Ministry of Higher Education & HEIs | HE students | Improves the preparation of students for the UAE labour market. |
| 5) Employers to offer PD programmes for Emirati & expatriate graduates | MOHRE & Ministry of Higher Education | Employers | Improves alignment with NES goal to support Emirati & talented expatriate graduates |

Table 7.2 Summary of suggestions

7.3 Limitations of my study and risks for implementing suggestions

Discussing the limitations of my study is an integral part of the research process. It also demonstrates the self-reflective approach I used when interpreting data. I recognise that given the scope and size of my study, with only 20 research participants, I did not include all stakeholders who are impacted by UAE employment policies and graduate employability practices. My research did not include students, their families, career advisors or a wider range of HEIs, and employers. I intend to present a summary of my findings and suggestions to MOHRE initially and then to a selection of HE and industry leaders to garner support for the suggestions I made in 7.2. It is possible that the use of a limited number of research participants from only three groups of stakeholders, might draw critique in terms of transferability across the UAE. I would counter such an argument by highlighting the unique nature of my study and the potential benefits. My proposals would have practical, measurable outcomes, and would make them more attractive to policymakers eager to bring HEIs and employers on board with the NES.

Another area of my research that could be questioned is the social constructionist approach I used. I acknowledged in 3.6 that a different researcher studying UAE employment policies and graduate employability strategies, could interpret my interview data differently. There are those who may see this as subjective and flawed. I accept that another researcher's understanding of the data may well be different to mine and be equally valid. However, the bedrock of my study sits on the premise that the unique fields, habitus and forms of capital that everyone has, will impact on how stakeholders construct knowledge and form opinions on employment policies and graduate employability practices.

My openness to accept different interpretations and opinions, puts me in a position to reflect on what other things I could have done and to plan for further research.

7.4 Final reflections, and future research

My interest in UAE employment policies and graduate employability practices stems from my experiences in the UAE HE and corporate sectors, together with personal and familial links with Emirati culture. This has put me in a unique position to see the changes in the UAE labour market from the Emirati and expatriate perspective. I have witnessed the rapid growth of the UAE, as it transforms from an oil dependent nation to a knowledge economy competing on the global stage.

My personal involvement with different iterations of employment policy has shaped my interest in UAE policies to regulate employment and to support graduate employability. I was intrigued by the way skills and meeting market needs has dominated the employability debate, with little or no reference to the societal factors that play such an important role. As previously mentioned, skills and labour market requirements are important factors in employability, but it was important for me to explore the societal factors at play. Bourdieu's framework and Brown's PCT offered an opportunity to see beyond the skills focus and to better understand the tremendous changes that have taken place in the UAE labour market over the last twenty years.

My research has piqued my interest in UAE employment policy and approach to graduate employability even further. I intend to offer my suggestions to policymakers, HEIs and employers and to build on this study with additional research. I envisage this consisting of two components.

Firstly, I intend to present a summary of my findings and recommendations to my research participants and, in the same way that I leveraged my reputation and experience to secure participants (3.4.1), I will invite all for follow up discussions. This will initially be done with individual stakeholders and then as focus groups, and each group will include a policymaker, HE representative and employer. This serves two purposes: it provides me with the stakeholders' perspective on my findings and suggestions, and garners support for employability to be viewed outside the *absolute* dimension of skills and abilities.

Secondly, I am aware that there are other stakeholders with a vested interest in employment policy and employability, such as the students themselves, their parents and HEI career advisors. My intention is to understand their perspective on graduate employability by gathering data from each, using surveys and interviews. On a practical level, this would be done with the support of the HE research participants from this study and their institutions.

Notwithstanding my plans to build on my research, I am pleased that I had the opportunity to shed light on the societal aspects of UAE employment policies and the approach to graduate employability. What appeared at first glance to be an unequal labour market, rigged in favour of Emiratis, is far more complex. This is best described as a carefully choreographed plan by policymakers to create socio-economic balance. Emiratis and expatriates are both navigating a changing labour market, each seeking to position themselves within the hybrid workplace. Policymakers are driving societal change but also balancing the needs of Emiratis and the economy, with the aspirations of expatriates, who are seen as important for the growth of the UAE as a leading knowledge economy.

7.5 Postscript

Since submitting my thesis, I have taken several steps to follow up on my research, the suggestions I made in this chapter and to promote meaningful discussions on graduate employability with key stakeholders. Gaining traction for stakeholders to see employability from both the *absolute* and *relative* dimensions is not going to happen overnight. It is through these first steps that I am promoting an alternative, more holistic view of graduate employability in the UAE. The steps I have taken to date include:

- I prepared a white paper in the form of a discussion paper which outlined the purpose of my study, the findings, and recommendations for policymakers, HEIs and employers.
- I sent this discussion paper to all twenty participants, with an invitation to have follow up discussions on my suggestions. I have had discussions with 4 participants. These include a HE director with responsibility for

employability, a HR director, a HE director of career development and a director at a policy institute. All 4 have agreed to disseminate my research within their organisation. I have an invitation to attend a networking conference at the same policy institute, where the theme is UAE employability.

- I have expanded circulation of my discussion paper to include the Abu Dhabi and Dubai Chambers of Commerce since they have extensive link with employers.

UAE graduate employability is a topic that I am passionate about and I have every intention of publishing aspects of my research, notably the *relative* aspect of employability and the influence of *wasta* on graduate recruitment.

Appendix 1 –Themes, codes, stakeholders’ quotes used & extracts from publicly available documents

Listed below are the themes, codes, stakeholders’ quotes and document extracts used chapters 4 and 5. Square brackets are used to cross reference to the relevant section.

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|---|----------------------------|---|
| Defining graduate employability [4.1] | Right skills [4.1.1] | <p><i>Do they have the right skills, the right competencies as a fresh graduate? (S14–policymaker/director industry partners)</i></p> <p><i>Employability anywhere is simply defined as you have the skills that the job demands. (S04–HE/university dean)</i></p> <p><i>What factors make them employable to companies and what are companies looking for in candidates. (S20–employer/director HR)</i></p> <p><i>The employer seeks for skills, more than this and this worldwide by the way. It’s not only in the UAE ...Now the labour markets, either the government labour market or the private labour market, they are seeking for skills. (S10–policymaker/director MOHRE)</i></p> |
| | Usefulness [4.1.2] | <p><i>How the knowledge that they’ve learned, how that transfers to the workplace and is useful (S12–policymaker/CEO advisor).</i></p> <p><i>It’s how you make somebody useful in the economy – that’s employability. (S03–HE/director industry partners)</i></p> <p><i>Employability would be how useful they are to a business when they graduate. (S19–employer/director HR)</i></p> |
| The UAE government approach to regulate employment [4.2] | National policy [4.2.1] | <p><i>...the 11 critical sectors critical economic sectors have been identified. That document is called the National Employment Policy (NES) S08-HE/director employability</i></p> <p><i>We have the National Employment Strategy 2031 which has focused on what would be the vital sectors required. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE</i></p> |

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|--|--|---|
| | | <i>In UAE [we] are fortunate to have the government summit every year. A government summit gives us an indication where people are moving. S03-HE/Director industry partners</i> |
| | Role of MOHRE [4.2.2] | <i>industry when they need to bring employees, they go to MOHRE, that's where they get their employees from. S03-HE/director industry partners</i> <i>And we are subject to the Tawteen system. So, we have to go through the Ministry of HR and through the portal... we need to have at least one Emirati national S19-employer/director HR</i> |
| The UAE government approach to regulate employment (continued) [4.2] | Multiple players [4.2.3] | <i>we [ADEK] try to conduct continuously market study about the seven sectors. S11-policymaker/manager ADEK</i> <i>we have a local authority called HRA Human Resources Authority. S18-employer/manager Emiratisation</i> <i>[DGE responsible for] identifying, recruiting, and deploying talent, facilitating career development and training opportunities for Emirati employees. Website</i> |
| | Priority for Emiratis – providing a head start [4.2.4] | <i>the UAE for Emiratis is one of the very few jurisdictions globally where [Education/HE] in a financial sense, at least, is a free ride. S06-HE/university dean</i> |
| | Reserved sectors [4.2.5] | <i>The UAE Government trains Emiratis in various fields, provides life skills, reserves jobs for them. Website</i> <i>these roles were being given to [Emiratis], S09-HE/director careers</i> |
| | Emiratisation [4.2.6] | <i>Increase Emiratisation in the private sector 10 times. Website</i> <i>[Government] has required all federal universities to submit plans about how we'll achieve the overall Emiratisation targets. S06-HE/university dean</i> <i>we at X we fully support the Emiratization policy,we need to adhere with certain rules and regulations S07-HE/university dean</i> |
| | Quotas/Point system [4.2.7] | <i>it's a mandate for certain organizations having certain number of employees that they have to have certain number of UAE nationals working. S14-policymaker/director industry partners</i> <i>for every 50 [employees], we need to have at least one Emirati national. S19-employer/director HR</i> |
| | | |

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|---|-----------------------|--|
| Stakeholders' perspectives [4.3] | Top down [4.3.1] | <p>We get no end of directives from above us, directives, making sure we engage with initiatives S05-HE/university dean</p> <p>it's a kind of, I would say, top-down approach. S01-HE/faculty dean</p> <p>a lot of those conversations are probably a bit above my pay levelBut the policy itself does tend to be generated within government entities. And we're more the recipient of that. S06-HE/university dean</p> <p>that's [policy] been mandated.... from the top down...This is from the senior executive council. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</p> |
| Stakeholders' perspectives (continued) [4.3] | Party line [4.3.2] | <p>The point system is working very good and you can ask MOHRE about it. S03-HE/director industry partners</p> <p>one of the KPIs that I would judge on is Emiratisation, and how many...Emirati employees in my faculty area. S01-HE/faculty dean</p> <p>need to get inside those employers to see what is their pinpoints to hire Emiratis, what are the policies and incentives that will convince them to hire. S11-policymaker/manager ADEK</p> |
| Stakeholders' perspectives (continued) [4.3] | Doubters [4.3.3] | <p>we will receive direction from ministry and act upon it. Sometimes I feel like 'Are they in the field? S01-HE/faculty dean</p> <p>I haven't come across any policies.... to be honest, I doubt if there is anything as such. S17-employer/manager Emiratisation</p> <p>My personal knowledge about the quotas, quotas are not working. S13-policymaker/director policy institute</p> <p>most of the strategies that we work on made the success. But we cannot still say that the success is as planned. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE</p> <p>...just because you Emiratised and you've got more nationals working, how is that impacting productivity? ... create a bit of a welfare state...it's all well and good to put the percent target, but what are you positively impacting the workplace productivity. S04-HE/university dean</p> <p>I do not believe the intent of Emiratisation is being successfully implemented...Emirates are being placed in job positions simply to fill a quota. S15-employer/director training</p> |

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|--|---|---|
| | | <p><i>But the problem that came with that quota was we started recruiting UAE nationals, regardless of their competencies. S17-employer/manager Emiratisation</i></p> <p><i>I think at one time it was largely reactive...I think there's a lot of good faith work going. S16-employer/CEO</i></p> |
| Stakeholders' perspectives (continued) [4.3] | Good intentions & building relationships [4.3.4] | <p><i>I think all three parties are genuine. S08-HE/director employability</i></p> <p><i>The intention is good because...I think the intention is there, but probably the application, implementation is not there. S13-policymaker/director policy institute</i></p> <p><i>the whole government in relationship with the private sector partners, we see that the relationship is becoming better and stronger. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE</i></p> <p><i>The relationship between employers and universities needs to be very strong. S15-employer/director training</i></p> <p><i>This is the challenge we have; can we work together? S16-employer/CEO</i></p> <p><i>See for the last two to three years, the relationship becoming better and stronger. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE</i></p> |
| Stakeholders' perspectives (continued) [4.3] | Absence from the debate [4.3.5] | <p><i>In terms of policymakers, I think they are a bit absent from the debate. S12-employer</i></p> <p><i>They [policymakers] are trying to do meetings, but again some meetings that will have two party, and one party is missing, you know, who is making policy. S01-HE/faculty dean</i></p> <p><i>We have never had a policymaker present at one of those sessions. S09-HE/director careers</i></p> <p><i>...no we don't sit together on a single table about the development. S07-HE/university dean</i></p> |
| Factors driving government approach [5.1] | <p>Economic reassessment [5.1.1]</p> <p>Demographic imbalance [5.1.2]</p> | <p><i>The market was changing anyway, prior to the COVID situation. The price of oil was low. S04-HE/university dean</i></p> <p><i>...the decline of oil prices, placing significant pressure on public sector budgets. S06-HE/university dean</i></p> <p><i>everyone [Emiratis] wants to go to the government sector. But increasingly, the government sees...the</i></p> |

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|---|--|---|
| | | <p><i>needs of the economy are driven by the requirements of the private sector. S05-HE/university dean</i></p> <p><i>This makes the private sector jobs less attractive to UAE nationals. Website</i></p> <p><i>It's a growing issue [increase in Emirati population] and they need to be accommodated in terms of their career aspirations, work aspirations. S06-HE/university dean</i></p> |
| | Creating a competitive knowledge economy [5.1.3] | <p><i>we are offering programmes that are really kind of tuned towards this knowledge economy. S02-HE/director employability</i></p> <p><i>The National Agenda also aims to transform the UAE as one of the best destinations in the world ... unlocking the potential of its nationals. Website</i></p> <p><i>Retaining the high-level minds within the UAE, having the Emirati... participating in that knowledge economy. S10-policymaker/director MOHRE</i></p> <p><i>...nowadays, I see them [expatriate graduates]staying in the UAE and having opportunities. S14-policymaker/director industry partners</i></p> |
| Factors affecting government policy [5.2] | Student choices: family & peer pressure [5.2.1] | <p><i>a group of students...insist on going into a field that we think don't have work for....it is not something that a government is looking for. S01-HE/faculty dean</i></p> <p><i>...all want to be doctors and engineers. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</i></p> <p><i>many students do not choose their degrees and so the parents choose them for them. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</i></p> |
| Factors affecting government policy continued [5.2] | Oversubscribed courses [5.2.2] | <p><i>...we don't have that capacity for the market to absorb all of them. S01-HE/faculty dean</i></p> <p><i>the preponderance of students studying bloody business I mean what are useless subject. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</i></p> <p><i>Everybody offers business programs...because that's an easy, quick setup...a quick return in terms of a business model. S14-policymaker/director industry partners</i></p> <p><i>the private education system which is here. They see their own benefit, they are, the matter of the revenue. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</i></p> <p><i>they [government] want to stop or minimise commercial indication, where you just fill up classes for the sake of</i></p> |

| Theme | Code | Quote |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| | | <i>a degree and sell it to whoever we want with a very low quality. S11-policymaker/manager ADEK</i> |
| Factors affecting government policy continued [5.2] | Emirati expectations [5.2.3] | <p><i>Emiratis tend to seek employment based upon what is available, popular and how much money they will accrue. S15-employer/director training</i></p> <p><i>They don't want to work on it[looking for work]. S03-HE/director industry partners</i></p> <p><i>They say like okay we go to a job, I can be ready to be a manager. S01-HE/faculty dean</i></p> <p><i>I think some companies struggle with that [cultural alienation for Emiratis]</i></p> |
| Factors affecting government policy continued [5.2] | 'Wasta' [5.2.4] | <p><i>In the public sector where it's just you know, more around Emiratis, it's still very wasta based the hiring. S12-policymaker/CEO advisor</i></p> <p><i>Common thinking throughout the country is...they [citizens] are entitled to a job. Employers are routinely forced to hire people not based on knowledge, skill or ability, but rather on the individual's family connections and personal friendships within the organization. S15-employer/director training</i></p> <p><i>The expats, if they're graduates, they come in, they look for a job...Maybe their uncle knows a guy who knows a guy guidance that they become employed somewhere. S16-employer/CEO</i></p> |
| Chapter [6] | Changing Higher Education Field [6.3] | <p><i>We see for example they [policymakers] are trying to reach a category now...government they have targets for each organisation they need to achieve. For university, it's [Emiratisation] that they are ranked on and they need to report about it to the government. (S01-HE/faculty dean)</i></p> <p><i>All federal universities [state funded HEIs] required to submit plans about how we'll achieve the overall Emiratisation targets [in state funded HEIs] – sixty percent Emiratis in universities in ten years. (S05-HE/university dean)</i></p> <p><i>they need to get out of the stereotyping of the UAE national.(S03-HE/director industry partners)</i></p> <p><i>We are taking more focus on the Emirati students...there's always government regulations, so maybe we can have some special programmes for Emiratis. (S05-HE/university dean)</i></p> |

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