Education in the United Arab Emirates and Ras Al Khaimah

Historical Background of Education in the United Arab Emirates

The earliest forms of schooling in the Sheikhdoms of the Arabian Gulf, now known as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), occurred in the 1820s and were religious in nature: young boys were taught by the local imam, the speaker of the mosque. As merchant families in the region became wealthier, particularly from the nineteenth century’s booming pearling industry (Davidson, 2008), they hoped to develop better schools for their children. As a result, the first formal schools in the Sheikhdoms were set up in the early twentieth century. These schools were run both by Emiratis who were educated abroad and by Arab expatriates, who were predominantly from Egypt and Palestine. With the collapse of the pearling industry in the 1930s, which was due largely to restrictive maritime agreements with Britain, maintaining schools and paying teachers became increasingly difficult, and formal education in the UAE declined drastically (Davidson, 2008).

Formal, western-style education was not introduced in the Emirates until 1953 when the first Kuwaiti educational mission opened a school in the emirate of Sharjah. Following that, schools flourished across the Emirates with funding mainly from Kuwait (Davidson, 2008), but also from Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Typically, the countries that funded these schools also staffed them, using the texts and curricula of the home countries. Not only did this trend lead to an educational system that was fragmented across the Emirates, it also concerned the ruling sheikhs, who mistrusted foreign Arab involvement (Davidson, 2008).

Although many curricula were in use in the Emirates, the Egyptian model played the most significant role in shaping the UAE’s early educational system for several reasons. First, there were a large number of Egyptian teachers employed...
early on. There were also numerous educational advisors from Egypt working with the rulers of each emirate. Consequently, teaching styles in the UAE came to reflect those in Egypt and the wider Middle East, in which teachers transmitted information in the style of formal lectures and expected students to memorize facts from these lectures.

After the creation of the UAE in 1972, the newly established Ministry of Education (MoE) began to make the eclectic mix of schools more uniform. Standardization efforts gradually launched the country’s national curriculum project, designed to create a single Emirati curriculum. This project gained momentum in 1985. Since then, education has become compulsory for all children through grade 12, the end of secondary school.

Today, the education system and its improvement remain key priorities for the UAE as it seeks to move toward a knowledge-based economy. The nation has prioritized its education-related endeavors and has begun many improvement initiatives to prepare secondary students for further studies and higher education students for the work force or graduate studies.

Structure of Kindergarten to Secondary Schools in the United Arab Emirates

The school system in the UAE consists of both the public and private sector. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are the two emirates with the most private schools, with
the number of private schools in Dubai exceeding that of public (government) schools. (see Figure 1, which illustrates the number of public and private schools in the UAE and within each emirate. See Figure 4, under Education in Ras Al Khaimah, for the number of public and private schools in Ras Al Khaimah.)

Public schools

The public sector primarily serves Emirati students (see Figure 2). For most subjects, the language of instruction is Arabic.

- Public schools are divided into a four-tier system covering 14 years of education: kindergarten (KG1 through KG2), elementary (Grade 1 through Grade 5), preparatory (Grade 6 through Grade 9), and secondary (Grade 10 through Grade 12) (Oxford, 2012).
- In public schools at the intermediate and secondary levels, boys are taught by male, mainly expatriate Arab teachers, while girls are taught by female Emirati teachers (Ridge, 2010).
- While there are 11,070 female Emirati teachers,
percentages of Emirati students in relation to their total enrollments (see Figure 7 for a breakdown of university students by gender in Ras Al Khaimah in 2010).

• The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) is responsible for overseeing the tertiary education and scientific research policies in every emirate, including the licensing of higher education institutions.

• Currently the UAE boasts 75 institutions recognized by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (National Admissions and Placement Office (NAPO), 2013), and these offer more than 600 accredited programs of study.

The UAE has three distinct types of universities:

Public sector

The UAE public sector has three federal public universities for Emirati students:

• **UAE University** opened in 1976 and is the country’s oldest higher education institution. Located in Al Ain (Abu Dhabi emirate), it consists of nine colleges and enrolls over 14,000 men and women (UAE University, 2012). UAEU was also the first college to institute a Ph.D. program (NAPO, 2013).

• **Zayed University** opened in 1998 and currently serves over 7,000 students on its Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses. Originally open only to women, the university expanded admission to men in 2009 (Zayed University, n.d.)

• **Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT)** serve both men and women and enroll around 18,000 total students. HCT’s campuses are spread across the country, making it especially popular among female students, who often live at home while undertaking their studies (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2013).

Structure of Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates

Higher education in the UAE is comprised of public, semi-public, and private sectors, which offer various degrees at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. Public universities are open to only Emirati students at the undergraduate level, but may also serve expatriates at the graduate level. Courses at both levels are conducted in English. While private universities primarily serve expatriates, several institutions have relatively high percentages of Emirati students in relation to their total enrollments (see Figure 7 for a breakdown of university students by gender in Ras Al Khaimah in 2010).

Private schools

• There are over 17 curricula in numerous languages being used in the network of private schools; however, British and American curricula are among the most popular.

• The UAE’s private sector emerged in response to the needs of the expatriate population and caters to nearly 60% of the country’s student population (see Figure 2).

• The private sector is currently growing at a faster rate than the public sector, especially in Dubai, where private schools outnumber public schools (see Figure 1).

Semi-private, emirate-level

The second variety of university could be considered emirate-level, semi-public. These universities are owned by private and state shareholders, and typically do not operate as non-profit institutions. Most of their students are expatriates. Institutions in this category include **Abu Dhabi University**, **Khalifa University**, **American University of Dubai (AUD)**, **American University of Sharjah (AUS)**, and **American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK)**.
Private sector

The UAE private sector includes a broad range of higher education institutions, many of which operate in "free zones" and involve cross-border collaborations between Emirati and international higher education providers. Free-zone institutions are typically situated in geographical areas specifically designated for international collaborations. They include international branch campuses as well as independent institutions. Free zone institutions may or may not be accredited by the MOHESR. Well known branch campuses include universities such as University of Wollongong in Dubai, Middlesex University, Murdoch University, and New York University Abu Dhabi.

Funding

The federal government is the major financier for all public education in the country (from kindergarten through university). Emirati citizens can attend government schools, colleges, and universities without cost to them (Oxford, 2012). In terms of funding for public education:

- The federal government funds the building of schools, teachers’ salaries, textbooks, the transportation of students, and, in theory, all other capital and recurrent expenditures on education.
- The percentage of federal funds devoted to education in the UAE is much higher that of many developing and developed countries, as an impressive 22% of the 2013 national budget was allocated to education (Reuters, 2012).
- The private sector has two primary funding models depending on a school’s structure, for-profit and government-subsidization/sponsorship, and these create a continuum of revenue patterns:
  - Most private primary and secondary schools are for-profit and derive their funding through tuition (although there are a handful of non-profit and charity schools).
  - The semi-public universities and some free zone institutions may receive partial or full financial backing from the federal or local emirate governments. Such financial arrangements vary considerably as do the levels of government involvement and oversight, which may be included in such agreements.
  - Universities operated in the free zones (especially international branch campuses) and those that do not receive backing from a local emirate are nearly all for-profit institutions that rely on tuition as their primary revenue stream.

Figure 4: Public Schools in Ras Al Khaimah

![Public Schools in Ras Al Khaimah](source)

Figure 5: Students of Public Schools in Ras Al Khaimah by Nationality 2010/2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Stage</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>2010/2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>3,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-citizen</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 1</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>10,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-citizen</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 2</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>8,472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-citizen</td>
<td>1,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (Cycle 3)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>5,553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-citizen</td>
<td>1,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-citizen</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>28,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Citizen</td>
<td>3,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>31,592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Education in Ras Al Khaimah

The structure of Ras Al Khaimah’s education sector is largely identical to those of the other emirates. Schools in Ras Al Khaimah follow the standard MoE curriculum, and the language of instruction is Arabic. Most of the emirate’s private schools follow the American, British, or Indian curriculum models. However, there are a few private Arabic schools that also follow the MoE curriculum.

Public and private schools in Ras Al Khaimah

- Ras Al Khaimah is home to 25 private and 90 public schools (including pre-schools), making the vast majority of its schools government schools (see Figure 1).
- The number of female Emirati teachers in Ras Al Khaimah is high compared to the number of female instructors in other emirates (see Figures 3 and 6 for data about Ras Al Khaimah).

- The majority of students in government schools in Ras Al Khaimah are UAE citizens, who constitute over 90% of the total number of public school students (see Figure 5).
- While the emirate’s public schools, especially boys’ schools, often employ high numbers of expatriate teachers (see Figure 6), as do the schools of other emirates, most of these expatriate teachers have been in Ras Al Khaimah for 10 to 20 years. This longevity provides a strong base for continuity in school initiatives and increases the likelihood that teachers are committed to the broader Ras Al Khaimah community and its wellbeing. Additionally, Emirati teachers, who are commonly natives of Ras Al Khaimah, tend to have a strong commitment to the community.
Figure 6: Teachers by Educational Stage, Gender, and Nationality in Ras Al Khaimah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Stage</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Non-citizen</th>
<th>Citizen</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Education</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,036</td>
<td>1,841</td>
<td>2,877</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 7: Students at Colleges and Universities by Nationality and Gender in Ras Al Khaimah, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College/University</th>
<th>Citizen</th>
<th>Non-citizen</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher College of Technology/</td>
<td>1,316</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>1,866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men and Women’s</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Ittihad University</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ras Al Khaimah Medical &amp; Health Sciences</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal College</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American University RAK</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Universities in Ras Al Khaimah

There are a number of universities located in Ras Al Khaimah. The most prominent include the local Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) men/women campuses, RAK Medical and Health Sciences University, and the American University of Ras Al Khaimah. HCT is the only public or federal university in the emirate. The others are predominantly private and may be located in free zone areas or across the city.

Ras Al Khaimah’s university population reflects the wide gender discrepancy in higher education across the UAE, in which female university students outnumber their male counterparts considerably. For example, the Higher Colleges of Technology in Ras Al Khaimah enrolled 1,321 female and 504 male students during the 2009/2010 year. This reverse gender gap begins at an earlier stage of students’ education. For instance, according to a study on male secondary school dropouts in the UAE (Ridge, Farah, Shami, 2013), in the academic year 2007/2008, 11.2% of males in secondary school in the emirate dropped out of school. Additionally, as students transition into tertiary education, females are more prepared than males (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011) to function in the English-speaking environment of federal higher education institutions.
Challenges and Opportunities

The structure of Ras Al Khaimah’s education sector is largely identical to those of the other emirates. Schools in Ras Al Khaimah follow the standard MoE curriculum, and the language of instruction is Arabic. Most of the emirate’s private schools follow the American, British, or Indian curriculum models. However, there are a few private Arabic schools that also follow the MoE curriculum.

With its interest in becoming a knowledge-based economy, Ras Al Khaimah has undertaken numerous education initiatives and reforms, as has the UAE (Oxford, 2012). These efforts seek to develop the quality of the educational system and focus on supporting innovation and student success. Areas of emphasis include:

• Determining and increasing the effectiveness of different school and curricula models
• Improving the English language proficiency of Emirati secondary school graduates given that English is the language of instruction at all public universities
• Promoting the academic success of male Emirati students
• Recruiting and retaining male Emirati teachers
• Effectively using technology in educating students
• Advancing research at the higher education level and incorporating its contributions into successful decisions and policies

Addressing these challenges and opportunities requires collaboration that includes local partnerships, working across institutional boundaries, sharing best practices, and piloting new ideas. To these ends, the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research seeks to foster collaboration and conduct research with government entities and other organizations that share similar goals. For instance, the Foundation’s Doctoral and Faculty Research Grants facilitate and sponsor research that seeks to inform and guide educational policies and practice. The Foundation also offers a series of professional development courses for Ras Al Khaimah teachers in order to enhance their skills and effectiveness in the classroom.
Additional Resources

Organizations & Websites

UAE Ministry of Education

UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

Ras Al Khaimah Education Zone (Arabic)

Ras Al Khaimah Teachers Network


Gulf Comparative Education Society

Sheikh Saqr Program for Government Excellence (Arabic)

Suggested Readings


References


