



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of one academic year, I documented the experiences of new first-year male Emirati students at a college of higher education in a rural location of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Using the metaphor of a cultural border crossing, I found that the congruency between the pre-dominantly Arabic life-world associated with Emirati families and government schooling and the largely dominant Western/English language culture in institutes of higher education was broadly related to the students' self-perceived level of preparedness for academic study and the competence of Emirati students in their second language, English. Four types of border crossing experiences were described – smooth, managed, difficult, and impossible – with easier and smoother crossing experiences associated with close congruency between the two different cultures.

Suffering from the effects of neo-indigeneity, absent parents, poor secondary school experiences, and a disempowering 'rentier effect', I found that the failure of male Emirati students to make satisfactory border crossings to college life initiated a process of departure manifested by high absenteeism leading to eventual withdrawal. This occurred more frequently with students placed in the lower levels of an academic bridge program where cultural and linguistic 'discomfort' were felt the most – 66% of the new students left college during the year with a staggering 97% drop-out rate in the lowest level alone. Mainly Western teachers who developed a classroom culture based on 'warm demandingness' and caring rapport-building appeared to have the most positive impact upon the students. The development of students' soft-skills in a new experiential learning program was assessed using a Mental Toughness Questionnaire which surprisingly produced lower post-test scores, indicating greater self-awareness and honesty. A key emerging question asks – whose interests are being served (or not) by compelling first-language students to cross cultural borders into higher education colleges and asking them to study using the dominant second-language of English?

# Cultural Border Crossings in the UAE

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## Introduction

Young Emirati male school-leavers aged around 17–19 years enter their first year in a Foundations program at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where they begin to recover their skill deficits in English, Math, Computing, and Personal Development. These skills are necessary for them to start their career program of choice in Business, Applied Communications, Information Technology, or Engineering. For too many of them arriving directly from high school, the social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, and cognitive experiences in their first year at college are very difficult and foreign, making the transition from high school to higher education an almost impossible feat for some (Hatherley-Greene, 2012).

Despite the huge investment in secondary and higher education, only 10% of the Emirati high school leavers meet the English eligibility benchmark (CEPA>180) to enter their first year career program without an expensive one to two year academic bridge program (*UAE Yearbook 2010, 2010*). Further, it has been established that only 30% of the Emirati students enrolled in the federally-funded universities are men (Ridge & Farah, 2012). Why do these two statistics matter? Due to the combined effects of its massive oil-wealth, a 'cultural tsunami' which threatens to overwhelm the local traditions, and globalization, Emiratis today live within a 'neo-indigenous' community in crisis and out of balance. The UAE is struggling to make sense of its place in the 21st Century which is manifested in the following socio-cultural issues – increasing divorce rates (Issa, 2010), neglectful parenting (Absal, 2012; Barakat, 2012; Sherif, 2012), increasing youth crime and unemployment (Hemrajani, 2010; Qabbani & Shaheen, 2011), increasing numbers of Emirati women choosing to marry much later or not at all (Salama, 2012), decreasing use of the Arabic language in formal education (Salama, 2010), over-dependence on foreign housemaids and nannies (El-Haddad, 2003; Al Sumaiti, 2012), increasing Type II diabetes and obesity rates (Kazmi, 2008), and a failing education system (Ridge, 2009; Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Hatherley-Greene, 2012). These inter-related issues illustrate the modern social conditions in which many young male Emiratis now grow up, far removed from the stable, traditional family and community environments of their grandparents. The accepted socio-cultural expectations and behaviours seem less certain in a world that has gone

from 'bedouin to banker' in just over a generation. For many students emerging from this social background and unsatisfactory high school experiences, facing four to six years in higher education using their largely weak second language of English is simply too much and they settle instead for safe, well-trodden paths to financial independence through employment in the large government ministries, the military, and the police.

In my research setting, a potentially worrying social cycle is being perpetuated as increasing numbers of young married Emirati couples live and work away from their rural home communities in other more urbanized regions for employment reasons. It is therefore important to understand the reasons why so many male Emiratis find the transition from high school to higher education to be so difficult and traumatic, and then, to identify best practices to ensure the students experience much smoother cultural border crossings in the future which will enable them to continue college, graduate successfully, and find suitable employment within their local communities.

## Background

There was a time prior to the discovery of oil in the 1950s when there were no 'cultural' border crossings in the UAE as the unified Arabic culture dominated the land strengthened by its twin pillars of a common language and a common religion. The traditional Arabic way of life centred on the tribe and family remained more or less undisturbed until midway through the 20th Century when the discovery of massive oil reserves under the Abu Dhabi sands changed everything. A 'cultural tsunami' was unleashed in the 1980s as hundreds of thousands of foreign workers arrived to help extract the oil and develop the young country's infrastructure. Despite a robust Emirati birth rate especially in the rural areas of the country, by 2012 the population imbalance between the Emiratis and expatriate workers has reached the point where local Emiratis now comprise just 11% of the total UAE population (*Emirates* 24/7, 2011).

### The rentier society

With the creation of the UAE in 1971 and the extraction and selling of oil to energy-hungry Western industrial countries returning enormous wealth to the young country, Sheikh Zayed's benevolent and generous stewardship quickly transformed 'a land that nobody wanted' (Darke, 1998) into one of the world's wealthiest countries with a GDP per capita of \$US40,760 in 2012 (compared to Switzerland \$US76,380, United States

\$US48,450, and Mali \$US610, *World Bank database*, 2012). Due to its massive wealth, the UAE has been described as a 'rentier' or distributive state (similar to other countries in the Gulf region such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar) in that, by providing a cradle-to-grave welfare system for its citizens in the form of free education, subsidized housing, guaranteed public sector employment, and free medical care, it has unwittingly created many unforeseen negative social effects in the Emirati population (Minnis, 2006; Abdulla & Ridge, 2011). The insidious outcome of the 'rentier' state lies in the breakdown in the age-old link between effort and reward in modern Emirati society.

Originally arising from Sheikh Zayed's wish to share the benefits of the country's overwhelming oil-wealth with all Emirati citizens to improve the quality of their lives, the current leadership's concern with the chaotic and unpredictable Arab Spring sweeping across the MENA region has produced rentier-style policy decisions such as unearned salary hikes (Gulf News, 2007) and the recently announced settlement by the UAE government of defaulting personal loans up to Dh5 million (The National, 2012), further weakening the link between actions and consequences, and reducing overall personal responsibility and accountability.

### Education

In the recent past, most young Emirati children traditionally attended state-funded primary and secondary schools, staffed primarily by Arab expatriate teachers from Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt (Ridge, 2010). The teaching methodology employed in the schools naturally arose from the Quranic traditions still found throughout the Arab world - an emphasis on rote memorization, to value learning only to pass the test, and a strict code of behaviour that places the teacher, not the student, at the centre of the teaching and learning process (*World Bank MENA ECD Report, 2009*; Ahmed, 2011; Al Subaihi, 2011; Nereim, 2012). Due to the failure of the government secondary school system to modernize its teaching methods and improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, many Emirati parents in Dubai now prefer to send their children to expensive private schools (Kenaid, 2011). Despite hundreds of workshops conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve teaching methods and instructional approaches, little has changed. This may result in part from the lack of mandatory teaching qualifications that should include a teaching practicum where teachers learn, practise and demonstrate modern techniques of learner-centred education (Ridge, 2010).

Arriving from a motivation-sapping and a largely uncaring and disinterested secondary school experience, the ill-equipped and ill-prepared young male Emiratis enter the colleges and universities of higher education with a strong sense of dread and an expectation of failure (Hatherley-Greene, 2012; Ridge & Farah, 2012). In comparison, if I was asked at age 18 to go to university and use my school-boy French or other barely competent second language to learn and study new subjects such as History, Geography, Economics and Maths, I am very unsure how I would have coped.

### **A priori factors – parenting, schooling and rentier effect**

In support of Ridge's findings in a series of briefing papers released since 2009, which described the negative socio-economic effects of a growing 'gender gap' in Emirati secondary schools with the boys lagging (The National, 2012) behind the girls in academic achievement and enrolment in higher education, I found three main contributory *a priori* factors:

1. Absent parents – 15% of the students in my study returned home each evening during the week to a household with either one or both parents working away in Abu Dhabi or Dubai (Hatherley-Greene, 2012). Members of the Fujairah Police confirmed social problems associated with absent parenting – truancy, drugs, and illicit relationships. In addition, the over-dependence of modern Emirati parents on foreign housemaids and nannies appears to have weakened Emirati parenting based on respect for traditional cultural and religious values (El-Haddad, 2003; Al Sumaiti, 2012). For example, in 2010, 30% of the employment visas in the emirate where I conducted my research were issued for foreign housemaids (Hatherley-Greene, 2012).
2. Poor school experiences – I interviewed many individuals involved in the government education sector, from students to high school teachers to Ministry of Education officials. Many teachers spoke of the lack of motivation among the male students. One official bemoaned other factors such as the unattractiveness of the school system and curriculum, the indifference of parents, and the interference effect of educational technology. Many students reported that the high schools simply "didn't care".
3. Rentier effect – this encourages young male Emiratis to forego higher education in favour of leaving home for high salary/low accountability starting positions with the UAE military and Abu Dhabi Police.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted at Fujairah Men's College (FMC) and involved tracking 60 new Foundations students placed in four levels based on their CEPA scores over one academic year (2011–2012). I adopted a multi-paradigmatic design that drew methods and quality standards from multiple paradigms including post-positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory in addition to postmodernism which is suspicious of all authoritative and privileged knowledge claims (St. Pierre, 2011), to create a methodology that enabled an artful, critical and interpretive exploration of complexity supplemented by a descriptive analysis of general social patterns. The latter was achieved by research methods governed by a post-positivist epistemology (surveys) and the former by an arts-based critical auto/ethnography combining methods from interpretive, critical, and postmodern research paradigms (case studies, observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, journaling, and narratives). Within my research design, I attempted to weave together the separate strands of research methods with which to address complex research problems much in the same way as that of a bricoleur who "is an artist, a quilt maker...of montages and collages" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 681). The interpretivist bricoleur seeks to construct a bricolage, a "pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (p. 4). The final representation of the research was a result of an emergent design which continuously changed, often forming new (and often contradictory) shapes as different themes, directions, and foci emerged during the study period. Finally, using a reflective journal, I critically excavated my own cultural identity and the potentially skewed cultural and emotional lenses through which I came to view these students after interacting with them over 16 years, situating myself in a place where my identity was stripped bare, exposing the distorted cultural lenses through which the 'other' (the students) was viewed.

## **Cultural border crossings**

Built upon a metaphor theoretically described by Henry Giroux (2005) and applied by Costa (1995), Aikenhead (1996), and Mulholland and Wallace (2003), four categories of student border crossers were identified – smooth, managed, difficult, and impossible – based on a Border Crossing Index (BCI) constructed from responses in the Student Survey (see Figure 1). Employing the BCI, over half of the new students were categorized as 'managed' in that they approach their

**Figure 1: Initial cultural border crossing experience categories, Semester 1, 2011**

Border Crossing Category	Class Interval Widths	Frequency <i>n</i> =60	Actual Proportion
Smooth	40-33	14	23%
Managed	32-24	31	52%
Difficult	23-16	14	23%
Impossible	15-8	1	2%

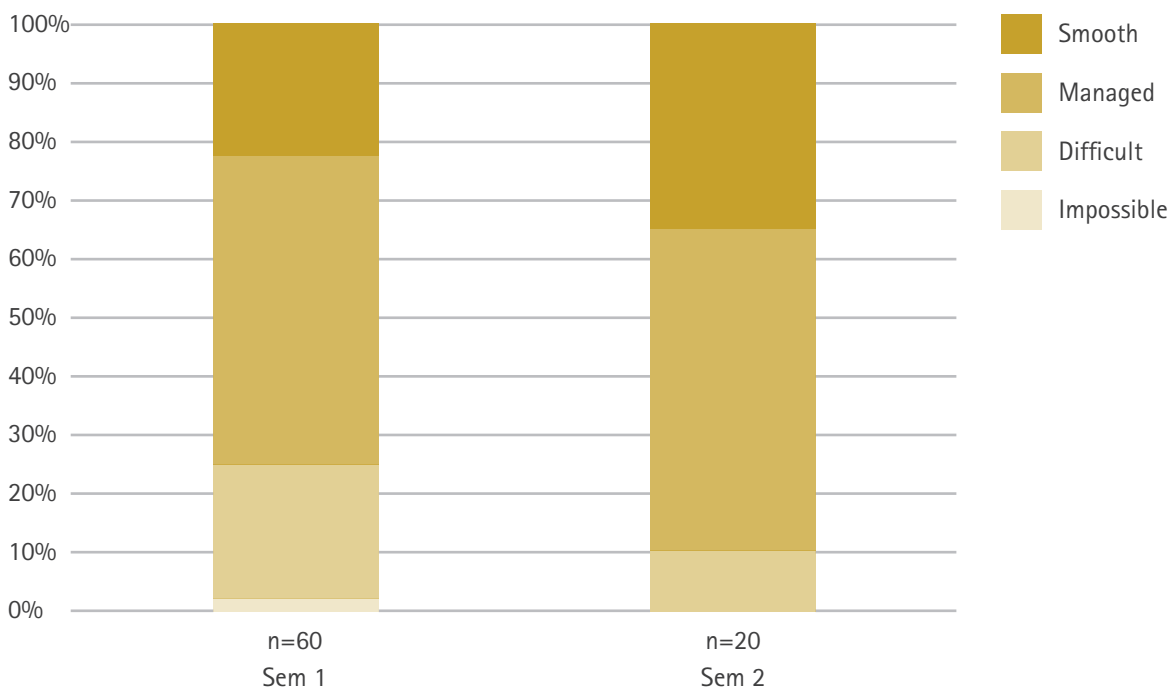
first day as they have always done at school, with a view that this new world can be 'managed' through various behaviour and attitude adjustments. Almost a quarter were each placed in 'smooth' and 'difficult' categories with only one student classified as 'impossible' (he left within the first semester). Almost immediately, the students classified as 'difficult' and 'impossible' begin to feel discomfort and begin a process of departure manifested by increasing absenteeism leading to eventual withdrawal.

In 2011, a new student orientation program attempted to settle the students into their new college home by adopting more culturally-sensitive elements such as the use of low Arabic-style cushions and mats rather than desks and chairs, and the use of Arabic speakers in each classroom. Initial activities were not

centred on learning college rules such as attendance and plagiarism but instead, they encouraged the students to learn more about themselves, their new student colleagues, and their teachers. For those new students who remain and become positively engaged in the college, the initial feelings of nervousness and strangeness begin to dissipate – in their words, they "get used to college". However, many still find the daily journey to college to be filled with concerns about time constraints and work deadlines.

Tracking the new students through recorded absences and withdrawals, of the 116 new students who arrived on Day 1 in September 2011, one quarter of them had left within the first 20 days (4 weeks) – by the end of the first semester (20 weeks later), 35% of the new students had left with most of them leaving the

**Figure 2: Border crossing categories at the start and at the end of the academic year**



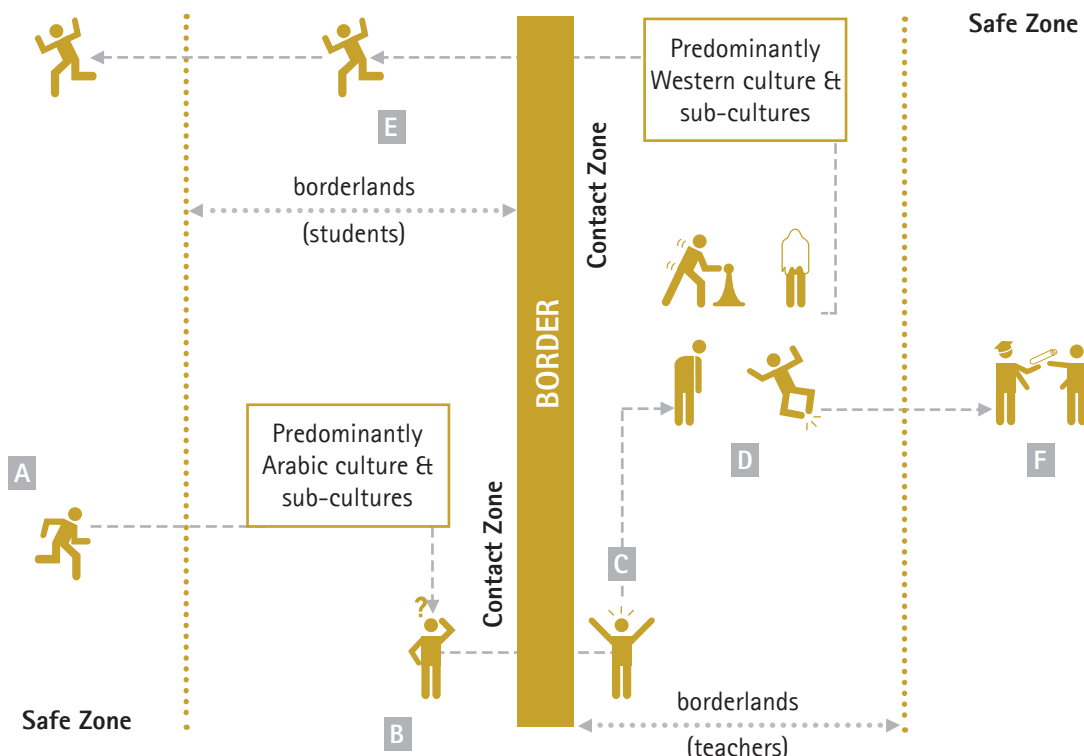
region for the high salary, relatively low accountability employment positions in Abu Dhabi with the police and military. By the end of the academic year in June 2012, only 39 new students remained—a staggering staggering loss of over 66%. In comparing the four types of border crossers between the start and the end of the year, Figure 2 illustrates that by the end of the academic year in June 2012, there were no 'impossible' category students remaining in the program and over half of the 'difficult' category had left (23% down to 10%). Those students who were originally categorized as 'smooth' saw an increase in their group size proportion from 23% to 35%, highlighting their apparent cultural congruency and ease of the border crossing experience.

A Border Crossing Model was developed to capture the gamut of student experiences – see Figure 3. First, the Emirati students (a) leave their Safe Zone (home and community lives) and approach the college through the borderland area which is both a physical (proximity to the college buildings) and a psycho-emotional entity (at first, students worry about what their teachers will be like, but soon, they worry mainly about time, something they never do at home). Staying in comforting groups and hesitantly ambling towards the main entrance door to the college, the students finally encounter the border crossing at the Contact

Zone, their side of the border wall (b). Emerging on the other side (c), they find themselves in a new landscape where almost everyone speaks English 'at them', assuming they understand almost every word. Sticking closely together with their friends, they meet other students (d) some of whom appear shell-shocked, lost and disoriented while others appear to unfathomably enjoy the experience. Most students remain quiet with only the confident (over-confident?) ones speaking loudly in Arabic to one another, oblivious of the instructions being given to them from college personnel. For most students, they approach their first day as they have always done at school, with a view that this new world can be 'managed' through various behaviour and attitude adjustments. It is usually at this point that many decide to leave (e), returning to the relative safety of their Safe Zone.

For those who remain and become positively engaged in the college orientation program, the initial feelings of nervousness and strangeness begin to dissipate. Many will still find the daily journey to college to be filled with concerns about time constraints and deadlines. And for far too few students who finally acclimatize to college life and its unfamiliar worldview, they remain and go on to complete Foundations, enter their program of study, and graduate 6-7 years after their first day of arrival in that strange new land (f).

**Figure 3: Model of the student border crossing experience at Fujairah Men's College**



The message is stark – the lowest-placed students (below 150 CEPA score which is equivalent to CEFR descriptors A1-A2 'extremely low to low English ability, beginner level') have only a 3% chance of making it through their first year compared to a 50% chance if placed in the higher levels (above 160 CEPA score which is equivalent to CEFR descriptors B1-B2 'emerging proficiency, intermediate level'). In summary, the greater the incongruity or mismatch between various factors associated with the two different cultures (cultural, linguistic, pedagogical, and emotional) as measured by the BCI, the more difficult the cultural border crossing experience appears to be felt by the students – and they eventually 'talk with their feet'.

## Students

After quantitatively analysing the surveys which measured, among others, their learning styles and multiple intelligences (VARK, LPQ, MI), mental toughness (MTQ48), and cultural dimensions (Hofstede's scenarios), I found twice as many factors that hindered student learning than enhanced it – those hindering factors include the negative effects of neo-indigeneity, parental disinterest, poor academic preparation for higher education, difficult cultural border crossing experiences, unsettled start in their first year at university with many still actively seeking employment while erratically attending lessons, low intrinsic motivation, low Mental Toughness indices of resilience and persistence, and an over-reliance on surface learning strategies (Hatherley-Greene, 2012). There also appears to be a degree of parental ambiguity

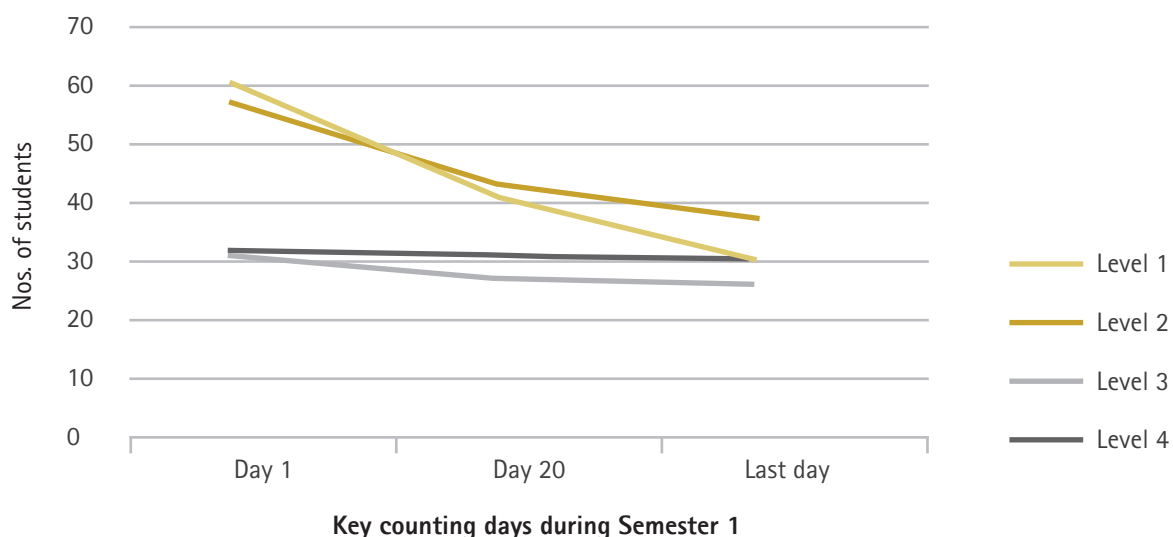
urging their sons to leave college and find full-time employment as evidenced in interviews with the students, the college counsellor and other Emiratis working at college.

Factors working in the students' favour include teachers' feedback that the students are genuine, friendly and respectful, and learning styles, Multiple Intelligences, and learning process surveys hint at untapped potential. Students did not consistently conform to expected Arab cultural and behaviour patterns as described by Hofstede (2001) – collectivist, high uncertainty avoidance, and a synchronic/short-term perception of time. I found only one cultural dimension – the ascriptive nature of family status – that conformed to the accepted Arabic cultural profile. Overall, these findings appear to highlight the existence of the neo-indigenous effects of globalization, the rentier state, and the UAE's own 'cultural tsunami'.

## Teachers

After 20 hours of lesson observations, three student and three teacher focus groups, and a correlational analysis of the students' end of semester English grades with the BCI, I found that learner-centered instructional approaches favoured by colleges of higher education appear to negatively affect lower level foundational students (Hatherley-Greene, 2012). Difficult cultural border crossings associated with lower level students means they were more likely to disrupt classroom lessons – 27.5% of lower level students compared to 15.5% of higher level students reported that they sometimes disturb the

**Figure 4: Enrollment decline during Semester 1, Foundations FMC, 2011 -2012**



lesson that is going on in class when they get bored or can't do the work, and they leave college earlier to take up full-time employment (42.5% of lower level students compared to 18.5% of higher level students withdrew from college during Semester 1) – see Figure 4.

Of the 10 teachers who taught the new Foundations study group in one or both semesters, traditional and older Western teachers appeared to fail to establish rapport especially those who have taught Arab students for over 10 years and who preferred to retain a professional distance. I observed several effective teachers adopting a style which I called 'gentle teasing' which involved teachers humorously teasing the students in order to make a point about tardiness, staying on-task, or to subtly praise them. Building rapport is an important part of the social integration of students into college life and should take place before academic integration (Tinto, 1975) – students who are already pre-disposed to leaving college may quickly reach their individual 'tipping points' due to failure to bond with their peer group, their teachers, and the college culture. Empathy is a significant success factor and is brought into the teaching environment through the teacher's personality, their world-view, and sense of their identity (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). It can also be learned 'on the job' as faculty must become more engaged and develop stronger rapport in order to become as effective as possible.

Skilled, experienced, and motivated English language teaching practitioners combine a high level of expertise with grounded knowledge of male Emiratis and an

innovative use of educational technology. However, with the lower level students, the learner-centered approach to English language teaching adopted in higher education is simply not appropriate for second language learners newly arrived from a teacher-centered and teacher-dependent high school environment (Dahl, 2010; Porcaro, 2011; Hatherley-Greene, 2012). Teachers need to gradually introduce learner-centeredness and encourage learner independence over a longer period of time, being respectful at all times of individual learner differences to this adjustment. Lower level students in academic bridge programs appear to require at least a year to adjust.

Different teacher typologies appear to influence rapport building which leads to diverse learning environments (Kleinfeld, 1975). Faculty who prefer greater student-faculty distance and had strong views about cultural differences and boundaries between teachers and students seemed less open to informal faculty-student interaction outside of the classroom environment. The analysis of the student-faculty evaluations and confirmed by classroom observations appear to support 'warm but demanding' teacher profiles – see Figure 5. Students prefer teachers who are emotionally warm and caring but set high standards of classroom management, behaviour, and academic attainment. The highest rapport scores came from faculty who professed and modelled these behaviours. In summary, I would encourage all teachers to quietly say to themselves as they walk along the corridors to their first lessons of each day – "build rapport before asking for more".

**Figure 5: HCT student-faculty evaluations – selected items associated with rapport and ranking**

Survey Item	Descriptor
7.	Respects me (1st)
13.	Respects my culture (2nd)
2.	Helps me to understand how I can do better (3rd=)
11.	Is interested in helping me to learn (3rd=)
14.	Encourages me to participate actively in class (3rd=)
4.	Motivates me to learn (6th)
10.	Helps me to take responsibility for my own learning (7th)
9.	Always lets me know how well I am doing in the course (8th)
18.	Overall I am satisfied with my teacher (N/A)

## The experiential learning program

I additionally evaluated the impact of a new experiential learning program that sought to quickly settle the new students into college life, and to begin to develop and improve students' soft-skills in self-awareness, persistence, resilience, confidence, and challenge. Experiential education began in the 1930s in the UK and then spread across to the USA and Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It has always been associated with the outdoors where most of the learning activities take place. The college needed a program that welcomed the young men into the college and then retained them by building up their self-confidence and resilience as they commenced their academic studies. The new program used elements of problem-solving and critical thinking, often conducted in small competitive groups of students. The college low and high ropes courses, specially-designed outdoor constructions where participants face and overcome problem-solving tasks, also provided a challenge for the new students as they sought to overcome their fears, learn to work together as a team to overcome physical challenges, and to set higher personal soft-skill benchmarks.

Using a Mental Toughness Questionnaire (Crust & Clough, 2005) to measure the impact of the new experiential learning program, the pre-test scores recorded in Semester 1 highlighted students with fairly low levels of resilience, confidence, life control, and challenge in the measured indices. By the end of Semester 2 (June 2012), the students repeated the same Mental Toughness Questionnaire to measure the impact of the new program. The post-test results were surprising. The scores actually *decreased*, due to a greater self-awareness and honesty. In other words, the students had become more grounded and self-aware. Student feedback on the new program at the end of the academic year was very positive – they indicated the program activities were engaging, practical, and helpful with 81.5% of the students reporting an improvement in self-confidence though they sometimes did not understand the link between the activities and their formal academic work in the classroom.

## Suggestions

The UAE needs to implement bold new policies and make difficult decisions to enable its citizens, suffering under the disempowering hegemony of the current rentier system, to achieve the vision of the country's founders, recently updated in the 2021

Vision document released by the UAE Government which foresees "knowledgeable and innovative Emiratis building a resilient economy, thriving in a cohesive society bonded to its identity, and enjoying the highest standards of living within a nurturing and sustainable environment" (2021 Vision, 2010). In addressing this need, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Restore the value of effort and labour by re-connecting the link between reward and payment through the discontinuance of rentier-style policies.
2. Through employer incentives and labour legislation, begin to equalize the salary and benefit conditions between the private and public sectors which will facilitate greater movement of public sector Emirati employees to the private sector.
3. Address the poor standard of teaching, teachers, and governance in the government high schools.
4. Encourage greater participation in parenting workshops for all Emirati married couples that focuses on culturally-sensitive and active parenting techniques.
5. Provide extra early childhood education centres and financial incentives for Emirati parents to enroll their children.
6. Reduce Emirati parents' dependence on foreign housemaids through public information campaigns encouraging active engagement and hands-on parenting by Emirati parents.
7. Re-assign federal funding away from military and police recruitment towards higher education by raising the minimum entry requirements to the military and police to include a Diploma or associate degree.
8. Fund secondary-aged Emiratis to go abroad on fieldtrips to non-Arabic countries in order to broaden their world-view as well as to develop a work ethic with stronger soft-skills. The fieldtrip should include community engagement in the destination countries.
9. Re-introduce Certificate, Diploma and Associate-Degrees, encourage more Arabic-based courses and programs, and produce a vocational curriculum (including competency-based assessment) to meet the technical needs of the country's economy, thereby reducing its dependence on foreign workers.



10. Seek the active involvement of elderly Emiratis who could provide effective mentoring and role modelling through story-telling within higher education settings to address a growing disconnection between young male Emiratis and their parents and grandparents.

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