

National Identity, Ownership, and Cultural Implications of Student Development in UAE Higher Education

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Since its founding in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced exponential growth and development in both public and private sectors, particularly in higher education. The first university, UAE University (UAEU), was established in 1977 followed by Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in 1988, and Zayed University (ZU) in 1998, which all account for the country's three public-federal institutions of higher learning. Tertiary enrollment grew from 1.3 percent in 1979 to 30 percent in 2009 with female enrollment standing at 41.3 percent (Crown Prince Court Emirates of Abu Dhabi, 2011). Today, the UAE hosts the largest number of international branch campuses in the world (Ashour & Fatima, 2016; Wilkins, 2010). With rapid growth in education, the UAE continues advancing strategic plans to further institutionalize its education system. The UAE Vision 2021 emphasizes education is the foundation for national development and aims to develop a first-rate education system (UAE Vision 2021, 2018). In an effort to improve aspects of the college student experience, higher education professionals need to explore the confluence of national identity, ownership of contextual theoretical perspectives, and emerging cultural implications for open dialogue of student service trends in Emirati higher education.

The ambitious development of higher education in the UAE is reflected in the vision of the three federal institutions. UAEU's vision is leadership and innovation in higher education, research and community service at national and international levels (UAEU Vision, Mission, Values and Goals, 2017). HCT's vision is the leading applied higher education institution in empowering generations to contribute to the shaping of the future of the UAE (HCT Vision, Mission and Values, 2019). ZU's vision is to be globally recognized as the leading university in the region for excellence in educational innovation, research and student leadership development that serves the changing needs of the nation in economic, social, and cultural advancements (ZU Vision Statement, 2019). Contributions to national development are an interwoven theme in all three vision statements. For example, ZU designs its programmatic and curricular efforts to support student development and success through the collaborative efforts of student affairs professionals and faculty, particularly through a robust first-year experience program in general education.

An understanding of student development theory enables both faculty and staff "to proactively identify and address student needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students" (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 8). Although student development theory literature is expanding internationally, there is still a need for research regarding the applicability and relevance of many Western-based and Eurocentric student development models within other regional and cultural contexts. The challenges of defining developmental approaches in student affairs continues to cause concern

among practitioners when navigating the changing needs of today's Emirati students. Students are experiencing cultural and societal shifts shaping their identity, due to increasing globalization. The propensity for relatively young institutions to borrow educational practices, ideas, and models in order to establish its blended education system (Kirk, 2010) is also reflected within the student services field. Research is burgeoning and the establishment of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) entity of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) is helping to create a clearinghouse of resources, research, and best practices in student affairs tailored for the region, as well as a platform for regional networking. However, ownership of contextual theoretical perspectives are needed to address the idiosyncrasies of a new generation of Emirati students.

Currently, student affairs in the UAE plays a pivotal role in empowering the national identity of Emirati students. The student affairs departments oversee most extracurricular activities in the university giving them the upperhand in choosing events and programs that influence students' thinking. Student affairs takes the role of organizing events and programs that follow the national agenda of the country year-round. Conducting such events and programs allows students to participate and engage in different aspects of the national identity, which promotes an appreciation for Emirati culture and the role of the country's founders. Events organized by student affairs units often focus on National Day, Flag Day, Martyr's Day, and annual national themes - Year of Innovation, Year of Reading, Year of Giving, Year of Zayed, and Year of Tolerance. Additionally, student affairs conduct lectures featuring prominent Emirati figures to build new inspirations for UAE nationals. These departments are also delegated with generating rules, policies, and proper codes of conduct aligning and promoting national identity, such as traditional dress and etiquette. Student affairs in the UAE, as any other country in the world, hold an important role in shaping the mindset and imparting the fundamental qualities of the national agenda to the students.

The dramatic transformations of the last 50 years have changed the Emirati people, lands, and perspectives. Presently, Emirati youth are starting to confront traditional cultural and societal expectations—often in higher education contexts. Consequently, student affairs professionals find themselves carefully navigating being culturally engaging with their Emirati students' new thoughts, which might be unfamiliar in Emirati society. Through greater technology access than ever before, indigenous Emirati students witness cultural and societal discussions play out on their screens from around the world. Emirati students are eager to bring these discussions to their college campuses, despite possible misalignment with cultural and societal norms. Student affairs professionals must advise their Emirati students on how to navigate their country's past and present, attempting to organize new values, beliefs, identities, and role expectations associated with being Emirati. As the UAE looks toward its future as a nation and at the role of higher education institutions, student affairs professionals must ensure the success of this matter and that they foster these important discussions. One of the ways in which higher education institutions can further support student development is by advocating for the inclusion of these new discussions on campus to help build a stronger future together.

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