



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education and employment are key pillars to the United Arab Emirate's Vision 2021 and National Agenda, in part based on a competitive knowledge economy. To better support policymakers regarding the complexities surrounding education and career related topics, this study explores the roles of parents, and in particular, fathers, in their children's education and career aspirations. Research has shown that both academic achievement and career success are influenced by the involvement of parents throughout their child's education; in fact, quality parental involvement in a child's academic and non-academic life can impact self-esteem, as well as learning outcomes and long-term career success. Based on existing research, and with the nation's future in mind, this study was carried out using a survey instrument to collect responses from upper secondary students, along with semi structure interviews for additional insights from students, teachers, and school administrators. We find Emirati parents to be extremely supportive and encouraging of their child's education, despite fathers not being regularly involved in students' education. Other findings indicate that students are interested in pursuing careers that align with their father's. Policy recommendations relating to these and other findings include creating father-specific events in schools; addressing barriers to parental involvement and lifelong learning; engaging families to improve the level of education amongst parents; and providing comprehensive education and career counseling guided by research.

Parental Involvement and the Impact of Fathers on the Education and Career Aspirations of Emirati Youth

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COVID-19 and Parental Involvement

It bears mentioning that this study was conducted approximately 1 year prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, and the ensuing global pandemic that has shaken the policy worlds of education and employment. That being said, the findings from this report serve as a pre-pandemic indicator of the real challenges facing the UAE when it comes to parental involvement. The authors of this study believe these findings and subsequent policy recommendations, to be as relevant today as they were prior to pandemic. While there are opportunities for follow-up reports, and in this case, specific to measuring the impact of school disruption, this report remains focused on its original areas of concern.

Introduction

As part of Vision 2021, the National Agenda of the UAE seeks to foster a competitive knowledge economy driven by entrepreneurship and a diverse private sector. Education plays a key role in preparing Emirati youth for a competitive knowledge economy. In addition to schools and state actors, research shows that parents have a key role to play in supporting their children's education journey and career trajectory. To better understand the role of Emirati parents in their children's education and career aspirations, we surveyed 405 upper-secondary students across the UAE and conducted 80 interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators. Our study finds that Emirati students have high educational aspirations, but that the majority of them see themselves working in the public sector. Connected to that, we also find that students have a lack of knowledge and understanding of a broad range of education and career paths, which is further compounded by a lack of a robust education and career counselling system in their schools. Although students reported very little parental involvement in their academics, we find that their higher education and career decisions are heavily influenced by their fathers' experiences in particular. We propose that if the UAE wishes to develop a citizenry that has a diverse range of skills and career preferences outlined in the National Agenda, it is crucial to improve the extent and nature of parental involvement, and father involvement in particular, in their children's education.

Background

Student academic achievement and career success are significantly shaped by the involvement of parents throughout their education. Research on parental involvement suggests that quality involvement in their children's academic and non-academic life impacts self-esteem, learning outcomes, standardized testing, and career success.¹ This involvement can meaningfully shape both students' personal and academic development. Studies indicate that early parental engagement with young primary school students is strongly related to higher reading performance in secondary school (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). Positive parental involvement can also develop higher effective learning strategies, including tactics for understanding, summarizing and remembering content, which are reflected in standardized tests such as PISA, TIMMS, and PIRLS (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012, 21, 53; OECD, 2010). Furthermore, parental involvement in non-academic settings, such as discussing social and political issues, sharing about the events of the parents' day, and learning enrichment activities, correlates with higher PISA scores and reading skills; and in some nations, this makes a difference on the PISA test equal to about a year of formal schooling.² As students advance from primary to secondary school, direct parental involvement tends to decrease and shift toward academic socialization, achievement expectations, valuing education, and discussing future plans and goals.³ Although parental involvement in secondary school looks different than in primary school, it's important that parents remain connected as their children become young adults, as parental involvement continues to impact their academic achievement. Within parental involvement, Father involvement is of particular interest, as research has shown that while mother involvement is important, societal values and expectations of what a mother is, often mean that her involvement goes unnoticed unless it missing; whereas father involvement is not expected to the same degree and thus a more actively involved father tends to have a more influential and positive impact on their child and especially during adolescence.⁴

Looking specifically at the status of parental involvement in the UAE, trends in the country point to the importance of family in higher education choices, career aspirations, and the particular influence of fathers on children's academic success (Labib, 2019). Studies on the UAE have identified family expectations as extremely influential in identifying job positions and occupations deemed appropriate for Emirati students (Wiseman et al., 2014;

Kemp & Zhao, 2016). To this end, fathers who are perceived as encouraging and good providers are correlated with children having more years of education in the UAE.⁵ More broadly, however, while fathers from the GCC have been found to be good providers and encouraging of their children's education, they have scored relatively low in regard to their engagement in their children's education such as helping with homework and reading to their children (Ridge, Jeon, & Asad, 2017).

Examining the role of parental involvement in education in the UAE is central to understanding the reverse gender gap, in which female students consistently outperform their male counterparts and persist longer in education. This pattern is reflected in standardized test performance including PISA and CEPA, with women obtaining higher scores in every subject.⁶ Dropout rates can also pose a problem as male students tend to obtain a full year less of schooling than female students in the UAE, as the expected years of schooling for a female are 13.9 years and 12.9 years for a male (Human Development Report, 2014). Until 2016, the dropout rate for boys, ranged from 8-25% and clustered around grade 10, indicating particular significance in the transition from secondary to tertiary education; currently, male students continue to show lower rates of enrollment and higher dropout rates in higher education as well (Ridge, Kippels, & Chung, 2017). Part of this reverse gender gap can be explained by socio-economic status (SES), as boys with low SES are most likely to be negatively impacted by the current educational system (Buckner, 2018). In Buckner's (2018) study, she finds that low SES male students are the most likely group to repeat a grade, score lower than their peers on PISA assessments, and tend to lack parental support in terms of educational and career aspirations (Buckner, 2018).

With this literature in mind we designed the current study to better understand the extent and nature of parental involvement in the UAE, particularly the role of the father who is absent from much of the existing research.⁷ This study seeks to address 4 key questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of Emirati parental involvement?
2. What are the education and career aspirations of Emirati students?
3. How does father involvement impact the education and career aspirations of Emirati students?
4. What other factors may be influencing the education and career aspirations of Emirati students?

¹ Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Trautwein et al., 2006; OECD, 2010; Ridge & Jeon, 2020; Alsuwaidi, 2012

² OECD, 2012; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Hampen-Thompson et al., 2013, 246; Ho, 2010

³ Hill & Tyson, 2009; Al-Taneiji, 2013; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Spera, 2005

⁴ Coltrane, 1989; Lam et al., 2012; Maslow, 1987

⁵ Ridge & Jeon, 2020; Ridge et al., 2018; Fecht, 2017

⁶ MOHESR, 2015; OECD, 2014, 2016; Ridge, Kippels, & Chung, 2017

⁷ Although existing literature has argued that fathers in fact draw lines, we do not negate a mother-father relationship in which red-lines are developed and/or negotiated. That said, we encourage additional research that explores this critical space, and how policymakers can best support the optimal outcomes for families, communities, and the nation as a whole.

Methodology

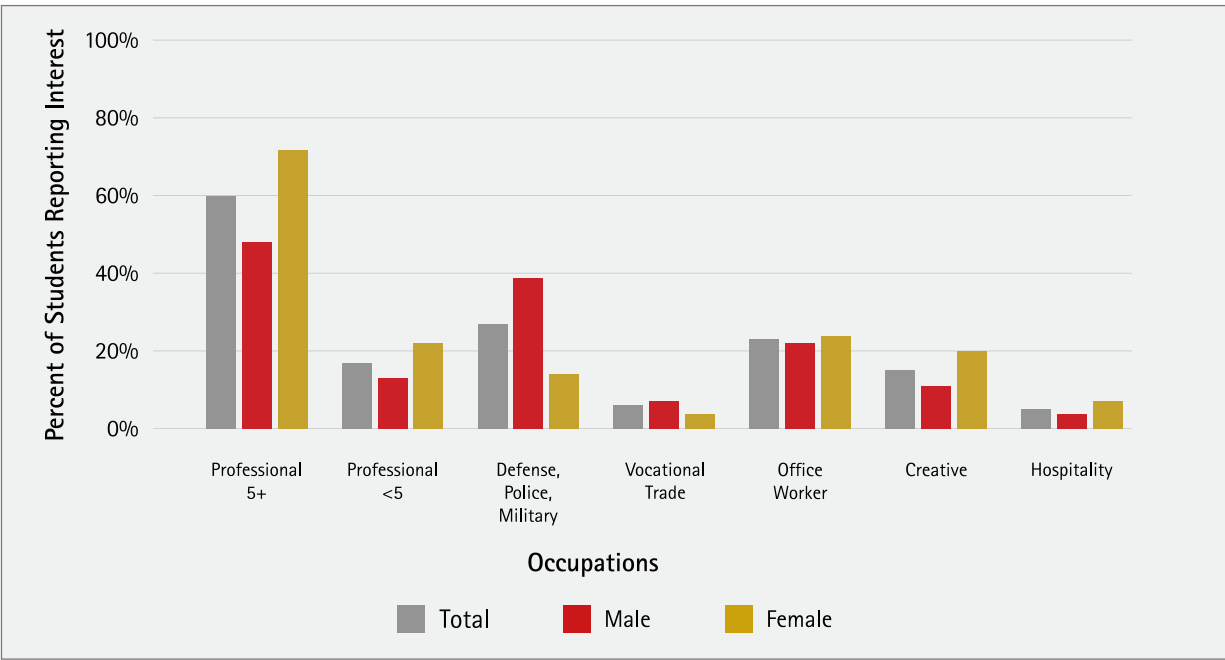
To ensure relevance to the entire UAE, this study sampled 405 upper-secondary students across 19 schools in the 3 emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah. The study used a bilingual survey questionnaire to capture a range of variables related to education and career aspirations, parental involvement, as well as demographics. The impact of father involvement was especially focused on⁸ using Dick's (2004) Fatherhood Scale.⁹ The selected 19 schools were specifically chosen to capture the experiences of Emiratis, of both genders, across a diverse spectrum of backgrounds, geographic regions, and both public and private schools. To achieve this, six schools were surveyed in Dubai, six in Ras Al Khaimah, five schools in Abu Dhabi and two schools in Al Ain. The sample consists of eight boys' schools, eight girls' schools and three co-educational schools. Five of the schools were private and 14 were public. The resulting dataset was then cleaned, prepared, and analyzed using statistical software to generate descriptives and cross-tabulations, and regression analysis¹⁰ was conducted.

In addition to the survey questionnaire, at least four students, two teachers and one administrator participated in semi-structured interviews in their preferred language at each school resulting in a total of 80 interviews conducted. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English when necessary. The interviews were then reviewed and analyzed to identify cross-cutting themes and to contextualize the quantitative data.

Findings

Within the sample, 81% of the students reported that they aspire to obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher and 53% said a master's degree or PhD. These students also see their future selves as highly educated professionals working in the government, and 39% of male students envision themselves in defense, which encompasses federal and emirate-level security forces, as shown in Figure 1. On the other hand, 35% of female students and 24% of male students report aspiring to careers in the private sector, illustrated in Figure 2. Overall, young Emirati students' career aspirations tend to align with previous generations' career choices.

Figure 1: Student Occupational Aspirations

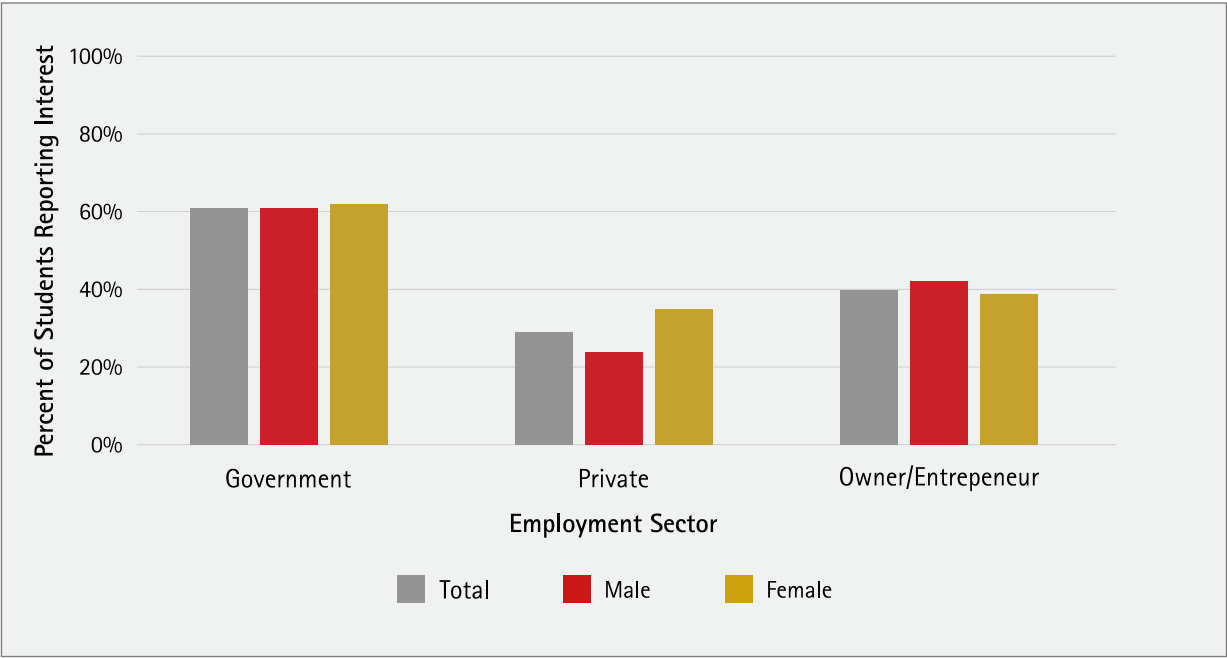


⁸ Due to concerns of survey fatigue and in the interest of brevity, father involvement was focused on in this study given that existing literature has demonstrated its importance on self-esteem and education outcomes compared to mother involvement. See for example: Coltrane (1989), Fecht (2017), Lam et al. (2012), Maslow (1987), Ridge & Jeon (2020), and Ridge et al. (2018).

⁹ Dick's (2004) Fatherhood Scale is a 64-item instrument, composed of Likert-scale questions that ask respondents about their relationships with their fathers across nine subscales. These were then analyzed using factor analysis and organized into 8 categories. The resulting types of father involvement include: Nurturing, Psychological Control, Androgynous Role, Access, Quality Time, Academic Involvement, Good Provider Role, and Moral Role Model. A thorough explanation of this analysis can be found in Ridge & Jeon (2020), and Ridge et al. (2018).

¹⁰ The regression model was conducted using several dependent variables that capture the different education and career aspirations of the students. Variables of interest include: the fatherhood scale, a scale for parents' level of support and encouragement in education, as well as the education and career outcomes of the fathers when applicable. Variables for the mothers' education and career outcomes were investigated but were either non-significant or the sample size was too small and thus excluded from the final analysis. The control variables include socio-economic status, father's presence, school environment, mental health, physical health, media consumption, grades, attendance, parents' level of education, and the father's age. School dummy variables to control for school-level differences, such as curriculum, location and administration, were also included but this does not facilitate an explicit analysis of these factors due to the sample size within each of these categories.

Figure 2: Student Employment Aspirations by Sector



Given the importance of parental involvement in influencing students' education aspirations and career trajectories, we have analyzed the results of this study to understand which factors may be driving these outcomes. In the following section, we first look at parental involvement, and then examine the impact of father involvement on education aspirations, followed by career aspirations.

The Nature and Extent of Parental Involvement in the UAE

Parental involvement plays an influential role in students' educational aspirations and academic achievement, making a measurable difference on standardized test scores and significantly shaping career decisions. Looking at the dynamics of parental involvement,

including the types and quality of engagement and influence on educational aspirations, we find that Emirati parents are highly supportive of and influential in their children's education.

Emirati parents are extremely supportive and encouraging of their children's education. From our survey results, we see that over 80% of the students reported both their mothers and fathers as supportive and encouraging of their education. As shown in Figure 3, the largest difference between mothers and fathers was in terms of their interest in school activities with a seven-percentage point difference placing fathers at 86%. Overall, the students in our sample reported extremely high levels of support and encouragement from both of their parents.

Figure 3: Father and Mother Support in Education

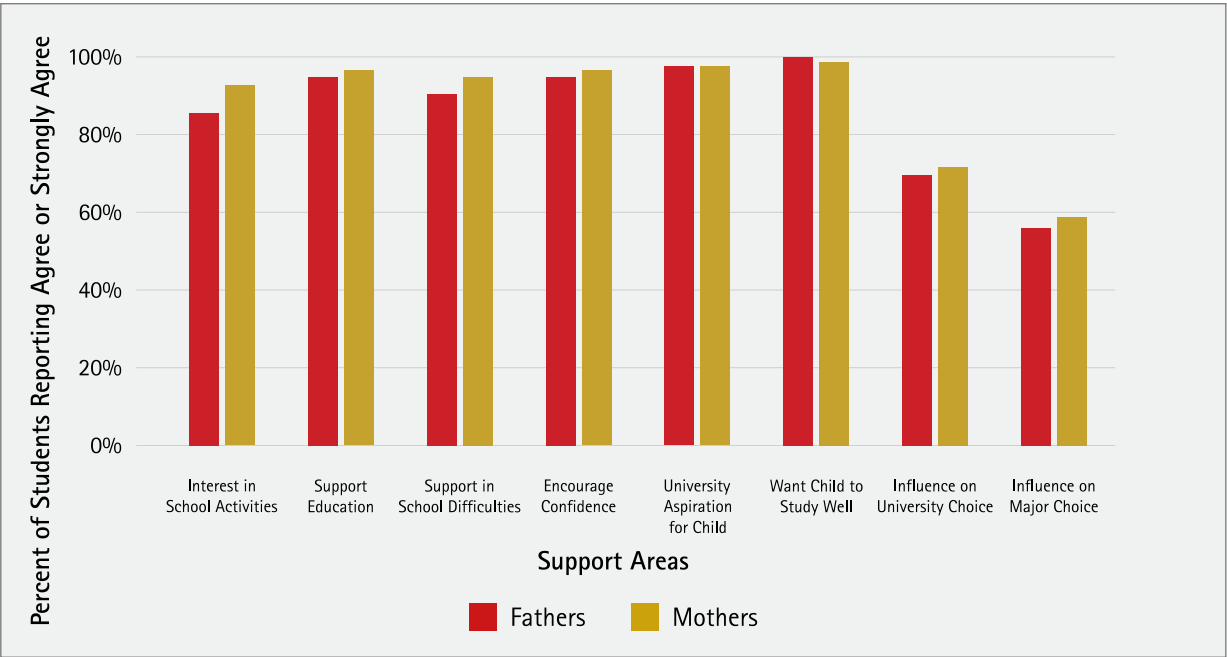
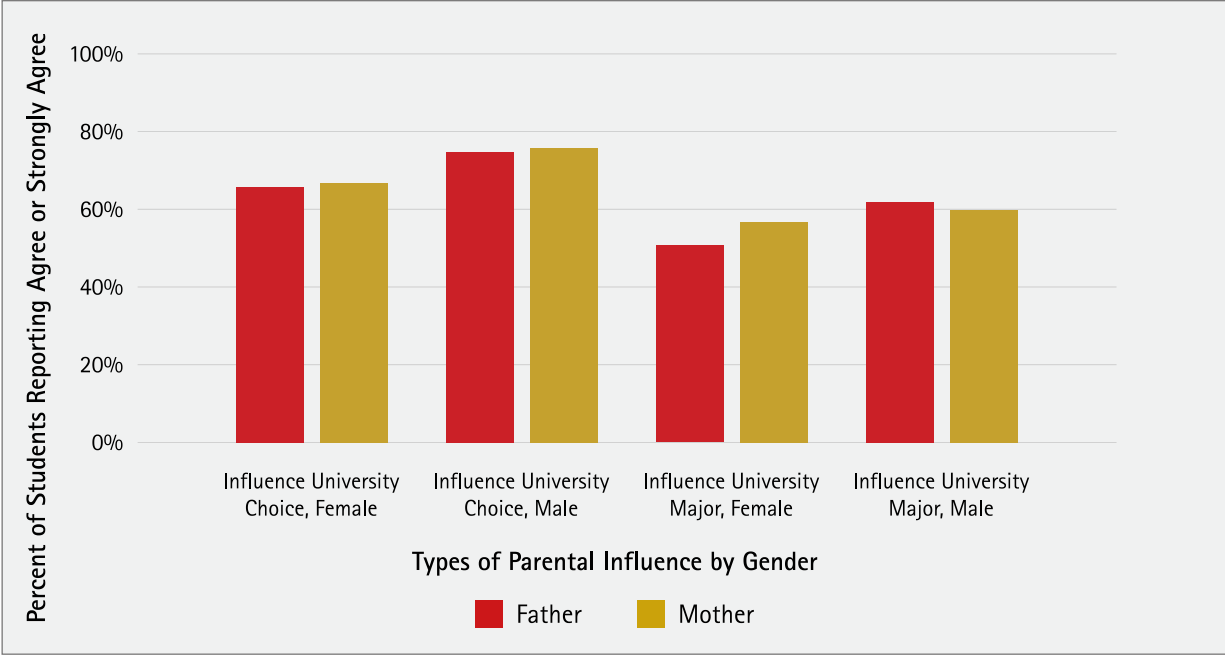


Figure 4: Parent Influence in Higher Education, by Parent



Emirati parents have a high-level of influence on their children's university and major choices, especially their sons'. Although the reported values for the parents' influence on university and major choice at 71% and 57%, respectively, are the lowest values in this set of response items, these values remain quite high. When breaking down the influence of parents' influence on university and major choice by the gender of the students, we see that male students reported slightly higher levels of influence than female students (Figure 4). With fathers' influence on female students' university major choice being the lowest value at 51%. None the less, these values also remain relatively high, and more importantly, underscore the influence of parents on male students' university and major choice.

The Role of Father Involvement on Education in the UAE

Fathers have a particularly influential role in their children's education. Notably, research on the UAE has shown a correlation between Emirati fathers who were perceived as encouraging and good providers with more years of schooling (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). Based on these trends, part of the data collection instrument focuses on assessing 8 types of father's involvement, looking at characteristics and descriptives of father involvement, and the impact fathers have on the education aspirations of their children. Our analysis indicates that although consistent involvement of fathers is lacking, they still have the ability to strongly shape their children's education aspirations.

The majority of students report that their fathers are not regularly involved in their studies. While

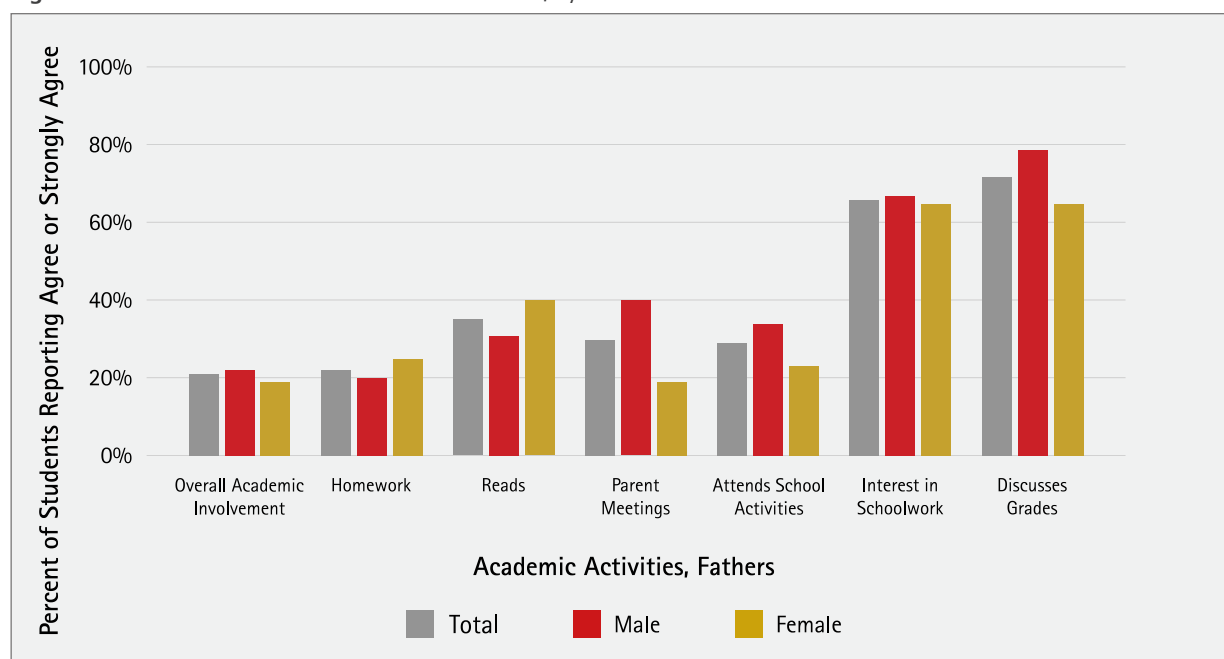
66% of male and 72% of female students report that their father shows an interest in their schoolwork or discusses their grades with them regularly, we found that father involvement is non-significant in predicting the educational aspirations of their children.¹¹ Some of the reasons for this may be that only 20.5% of students report that their father is often or always involved with their education. In addition, the majority of students reported that their father is not regularly involved in helping with their homework, attending parent meetings, reading to them, or being involved in school activities as shown in Figure 5 and illustrated in Archetypes 1 and 2.

Two key differences, however, emerge if we look at boys and girls separately. First, we see that 39.71% of female students report that their father often or always reads to them, compared to only 30.65% of male students. Second, fathers are less likely to attend parent meetings, or the school activities of their daughters compared to their sons. However, this is most likely driven by the fact that schools are generally gender segregated spaces in the UAE, especially girls' schools (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). Overall, these findings indicate that fathers are not perceived as deeply nor as consistently involved with their children's education.

The education level of the father is an important factor in predicting educational aspirations of the students in our model. We find that the educational aspirations of Emirati students are highly correlated with their father's level of education. 91% of the students whose father has a master's degree also aspire to having a master's degree and 87% of students whose father has a bachelor's degree also aspire to having a bachelor's degree. This is further confirmed in our regression analysis where the

¹¹ Our analysis included the 8 categories of father involvement shown in Figure 5, which were derived from Dick's (2004) fatherhood scale included in the survey. Although our analysis resulted in mostly non-significant relationships, this can in part be attributed to the low rates of father involvement reported by the students and we argue that this is a key finding in of itself.

Figure 5: Father Involvement in Academic Activities, by Student Gender



father's education level has a positive and statistically significant association with the educational aspirations of these students ($b=.144$, sig 5%) but the mother's level of education was non-significant. This relationship is even stronger for the boys in our sample ($b=.162$, sig 1%), which suggests that boys are influenced by their fathers when making their own life choices.

However, in interviews, students demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the requirements for achieving their education aspirations and the demands that would be placed on them. For example, students did not clearly understand what was required to be a doctor or lawyer and many students said they would pursue a PhD even though it was not typical for the job they are interested in. Similarly, a female student who expressed interest in forensic science, cited the requirements of this career path as needing skills in English and the courage to speak to people. When asked what degree she aspired to obtain, she responded, "Maybe the highest degree" (Female student 1). Additionally, during interviews, no student mentioned receiving any guidance or information on deciding which education path is best for them, the requirements of those pathways, or how they could get support. These findings suggest that many students may have a mismatch between expectations and self-evaluation due to a lack of information and individualized support from their parents and their schools.

Students who perceive that their father is a good provider also tend to have greater aspirations for higher education. Our study finds that students with a father who is a good provider are more likely to have higher education aspirations ($b=.235$, sig=5%), and this is especially important for boys ($b=.327$, sig 5%). These findings suggest that it is important for students, and boys in particular, to feel that they are well provided for by

their fathers and that students who do not feel this way, may have to overcome this potential barrier if they are to envision themselves with high education outcomes.

The Role of Father Involvement on Career Aspirations in the UAE

In addition to influencing educational aspirations and outcomes, father involvement is an important factor in shaping their children's potential career. Our analysis looks at the role of fathers as not only providers and academically involved parents, but also as influences in career aspirations, modelling possible career pathways and outcomes.

Male students with fathers who are more academically involved and good providers are more likely to aspire to working in the private sector and less likely to aspire to public sector jobs, in particular in the security forces. In our regression analysis, students with fathers who are more academically involved are more likely to aspire to working in the private sector ($b=.157$, sig 1%). In addition, students who perceived their fathers as good providers, are less likely to aspire to working in defense ($b=-.151$, sig 5%). These findings suggest that coming from a household that is well provided for combined with increased father involvement, and academic involvement in particular, may lead to more Emiratis aspiring to work in the private sector.

However, if more students are to seek careers in the private sector, they will need to understand and have information on the career opportunities available and their requirements, illustrated in Archetypes 3 and 4. But in interviews, students consistently demonstrated a lack of knowledge. For example, when asked about the requirements to pursue medicine, one female student listed unspecialized characteristics, including soft skills of empathy and problem solving, a high school degree,

and passing the EmSAT, the general national standardized test necessary for general university admission in the UAE (Female Student 2). Another student displayed a similar lack of specificity when describing the reasons for his interest in studying nuclear engineering, explaining, "I feel it would be easy and something I would enjoy doing" (Male Student 1). Again, during interviews, no student indicated that they had received any support, information or mentoring to explore possible career paths from their family or school.

Students are more interested in pursuing careers that align with their father's. When examining the factors that might be predictors of these aspirations, we find that 72.5% of the students with a father who works in government, also want to work in government. Our regression analysis also confirms this finding where we find that controlling for the father being a government employee is the strongest predictor of a student also wanting to work in government ($b=.344$, sig 0.1%).¹¹ This association is weaker for occupations in defense, where we find that 37% of students whose fathers work in defense also want to work in defense. However, when looking at only the boys in our sample, we find that this relationship is much stronger for boys ($b=.323$, sig 1%). Moreover, we find that 76.4% of students with a father who works in a professional role requiring 5 or more years of post-secondary education also aspire to a role that requires a high level of education, which is also confirmed in our regression analysis (sig. 1%). This finding again confirms that students, and boys in particular, tend to aspire to careers in government like their fathers, but it also indicates that students aspire to similar levels of education and challenge in their careers as their fathers.

Helping Emirati students overcome the limitations of their backgrounds will be key in addressing the challenges in youth employment. Overall, more of the female students interviewed are considering multiple fields and possible career paths than the male students who tend to only consider one specific field and career. Students with a family member, especially a father, in a specific field, usually had more focused interests and more accurate expectations for the requirements of that job/sector and the educational pathways to get there. For example, one student expressed his desire to imitate his father's career choices, saying, "My father has always been a military man, so I was raised to love the military and I want to follow the steps of my father" (Male Student 2). He described his intent to study law or political science, and after obtaining the highest degree possible, work at the Dubai Police, a sector requiring discipline, flexibility, and the ability to work well under pressure. Another student described her inspiration for aspiring for civil aviation, saying "I met many female Emiratis flying airplanes especially the Airbus

A380. The youngest female Emirati pilot is Alia Al Muhairi. She flies the same type of airplane, and that gave me the motivation to be like her" (Female Student 3). She had clarity regarding the requirements for this career, including a high school degree, medical exam check, TOEFL, being over 17 years of age and then 4 years of specialized study, or 3 with distinction.

Additionally, students' expectations of what their lives will look like once they are working are heavily influenced by their family and not necessarily representative of most jobs. One student described his father's balance between work and family and his own ideal balance as a future aerospace engineer, saying, "Between 8am and 2pm, it is work time" (Male Student 3). Multiple students expressed their expectation to balance their family and career exactly equally with "half of the time at work and half of the time at home" (Male Student 4; Female Student 4), and one student explained that he imitates his father's time management, saying, "I try to learn from him, to balance myself between life and work. There is a time for work, for life, for studying, and a time for anything" (Male Student 5). Overall, although many students have ambitious expectations for their future, there is a danger that they will not follow through if they do not have realistic expectations of what will be required of them. This not only has the potential to dissuade them from achieving their aspirations, but also to continue to seek careers in the public sector as previous generations have done.

¹¹ In our analysis, we also looked at the impact of mothers; however, there are too few observations and not enough variation (most work in government) to facilitate a robust analysis. In the sample, 122 students reported their mother as employed, 76 in the public sector, 27 in the private sector, and 19 as entrepreneurs.

Archetypes

Archetype 1 – Yousef: Male student Low support, low aspiring

18 years old, Grade 11

His father and mother are divorced, and he now lives with his mother who is a homemaker and his older sister. His father is retired from the military but lives in a separate house and occasionally comes to take him out. When he sees his father, his father advises him to prioritize school because it is most important. He thinks he will probably work for the military or police after graduating like his father. His mother does not visit or call the school because the administration and his teachers are all men.

For the first semester, his mother was sick in the hospital and he missed school to accompany her to appointments, so he does not understand what is happening in most classes and now he zones out, falls asleep, or skips. When teachers tell him to pay attention or take his phone, sometimes he ends up in detention where he has to sit for an extra hour after school without anything to do. He rides the bus to and from school and after school, he sits with his mother and watches TV or goes out with friends in the evening.

He misses school every few weeks if he misses the bus, is travelling, sick, or tired. Sometimes he misses because it does not seem so important. The school has tried to contact his parents about his absences and invited them to visit the school to talk further, but his mother cannot drive, and his father does not receive notices from school. When the teachers need contact information to WhatsApp his parents, he puts down his own phone number. He forgets paper notices in his locker or leaves them in the car, so his parents never hear about parent meetings or that he is failing most of his classes until the end of the term when his grades are posted online.

Archetype 2 – Maryam: Female student Low support, low aspiring

16 years old, Grade 11

She lives with her mother, who works part time in an administrative position, and five sisters and four half siblings. Her father works in Abu Dhabi at a government job and has another wife in Dubai, so she only sees him briefly on weekends. One of her uncles offered a prize of money for any of the cousins who obtain higher than 80% marks in their semester grades, which motivated her to improve for a while, but she struggles to understand many of her classes. If she is confused in her homework, she sometimes asks her sister who is at university, but she does not ask her mother who stopped school after grade 8. She says, "I am at an age where I have started to depend on myself, if I would ask my mother, she would say that's your studies. You know more than I do." In another school, she had some trouble with girls in her class, so she changed schools in grade 8. Her father used to check in occasionally on her behavior and grades when she was in cycle 2, but now he does not. She says, "My father sees that I won't cause trouble so it's not necessary to know what I am doing." Her parents do not visit the school, unless personally requested to attend.

Her father and mother tell her to study hard to go to university and to obtain a PhD. She says, "I don't like to discuss university studies with them as we tend to disagree, they tell me, 'Choose whatever you want,' but at the same time they are worried about me and they keep giving me advice." She wants to become a delegate, minister, or business owner, obtain a masters or PhD. She describes the requirements for these positions as "focusing on my studies and working hard." She plans to change her study habits and work hard once she is in university because she said she cares more about university than school. He misses school every few weeks if he misses the bus, is travelling, sick, or tired. Sometimes he misses because it does not seem so important. The school has tried to contact his parents about his absences and invited them to visit the school to talk further, but his mother cannot drive, and his father does not receive notices from school. When the teachers need contact information to WhatsApp his parents, he puts down his own phone number. He forgets paper notices in his locker or leaves them in the car, so his parents never hear about parent meetings or that he is failing most of his classes until the end of the term when his grades are posted online.

Archetype 3 – Ahmad: Male student

High support, high aspiring

17 years old, Grade 11

He lives with his father, mother, three brothers and two sisters. His oldest brother is married and has a separate house. His father is a business owner and his mother works as a doctor. When he faces challenges in school, he asks his teachers for additional resources or asks his parents for assistance. He also works with his classmates and does his own research to find resources on reliable educational websites. He has good attendance at school and his parents attend his after-school events including spirit days, science fairs, open houses, and award ceremonies. Once when he had an interview for a summer program, his father cancelled his work appointments to drive him to and from the interview. His family eats dinner together every evening where his father shares about how he is approaching challenges at his businesses and his mother speaks about her work in the clinic. He wants to study aerospace engineering and has talked with his uncle who is studying aerospace engineering in university and did research online to see the requirements. He describes the requirements for this as precision, focus, strong English skills and high IELTS/TOEFL scores. His parents support his aspirations and tell him to focus on physics, math, and chemistry to prepare for university. His father advises him on which universities to consider, and possibly studying abroad.

Archetype 4 – Reem: Female student

High support, high aspiring

17 years old, Grade 12

She lives with her father, mother, three younger brothers and one younger sister and is fluent in English, Arabic, and Urdu, and has taught herself Korean from watching Kdramas and Kpop. Her father works as a manager at the airport and her mother is a homemaker. Her mother is involved in the parent events at school and usually attends to hear updates on changes to curriculum and policies, talking with other parents about the school environment, hearing from the teachers about goals and expectations for her daughter. Her father calls the school every week to check on her marks and behavior at school. She says, "Their reaction when I receive good grades motivates me to keep doing well, it makes me happy to see them proud of me."

She discusses school with her parents, and they ask about her exams and various assignments, keeping track of her exam schedule asking if she needs any additional support or tutoring. She sees her mother as one of her close friends and talks with her parents about her future plans and aspirations. After high school, she wants to study medicine and obtain a PhD. Her mother helped her connect with other Emirati women studying medicine to hear about the requirements and challenges of working in healthcare.

Challenges & Opportunities

From our findings, we have identified three key challenges and accompanying opportunities that students face, which stem from parental involvement and other complimenting factors. To address these challenges, we have provided a set of policy recommendations for each challenge. These policy recommendations will ensure that parents are better able to support their children in achieving their education and career aspirations, while also developing a better understanding of what those aspirations are. In addition, they seek to increase the support available to parents and students in an effort to address knowledge gaps and to promote a broader understanding of the opportunities available.

Challenge 1: Fathers are extremely supportive and encouraging but have low levels of involvement in their children's academic lives and face barriers to getting academically involved

- **Create father specific events in schools and address barriers.** Based on our findings, fathers have low levels of academic involvement, but this could be overcome by getting fathers more involved at school. While many schools have events for parents already, they are not targeted at fathers and often mothers will attend. By having fathers' nights, instead of parents' nights, fathers would be explicitly targeted and meet with the teachers of their children. Workshops and information sessions for fathers could also be organized on how to engage in their children's education. Schools should also invite fathers to talk about their own education and career path, but these should come from a diverse set of careers, especially those that many Emirati youth might not envision for themselves. Finally, more fathers may be reached by having non-academic events at the school where fathers can meet with each other and develop a relationship with the school's staff in an informal setting. Getting fathers in schools and normalizing it will help increase their academic involvement, which we also found is linked to students being more likely to aspire to working in the private sector, and critical for the sustainability of the UAE economy. Additionally, many parents, especially fathers, cannot attend events and meetings at schools because of their schedules. This is further compounded by the gender segregation in many schools where fathers either cannot or do not feel comfortable visiting. To ensure a high level of parental engagement, schools need to create times and spaces for both parents to visit the school, being sensitive to different lifestyles (eg. father working in a different city and commuting on weekends, working mother needing to request time off to attend school events, fathers attending girls' schools, and consider the digital literacy of the parents when using digital communication channels).

Challenge 2: Students are heavily influenced by and therefore also limited by the education and work experiences of their father and family

- **Provide funding and time for professional development including certifications, diplomas, and degrees for government employees.** Families and fathers are key to helping students think about alternative education and career trajectories. Offering funding for professional development for public sector staff, not only supports life-long learning, but also equips them with the knowledge and skills to support their children financially and academically. Based on our findings, more educated parents will be more academically involved with their children and be better equipped to support their children in pursuing academic success and more likely to pursue future careers in the private sector. This will also foster the development of new skills and increase productivity. To further ensure the success of this policy, the government could mandate a set number of hours of professional development for all staff and make certain milestones required, such as earning a specific certificate or degree after a set number of years. However, this should be complemented by employers also leaving time in their staff's schedule to engage in their continued education. Having more educated and successful parents will also enable them to be better providers for their children, which we also find is a key factor in students', especially boys', education and career aspirations.
- **Enable life-long learning by establishing multiple entry points for education and a course schedule with the flexibility to accommodate adults.** Although life-long learning will also enable parents to offer better support and engage in their children's education and career success, this must also be complemented by policies that ensure parents have access to life-long learning opportunities at any age and stage of their life. Higher-education institutions should therefore be required to offer multiple entry points and systems for adults whose admissions should consider their experience as well as to cater to their professional needs, such as by offering certification programs for those already working. In addition, these programs should seek to support adults wishing to change careers, who may not come from traditional social, socioeconomic, academic, or professional backgrounds. To address any barriers faced by adults who wish to continue their education, higher-education institutions will also need to offer programs in the evenings and on the weekends, allow for at least some portion to be remote, as well as offer some degree of flexibility in the duration of courses. Being sensitive to different lifestyles, such as working adults, commuting times, family obligations,

and varying levels of digital literacy, will ensure that more adults can engage in and successfully complete opportunities to continue their education. Moreover, it is essential that these changes and the expansion of the education system are complemented by new standards of accreditation to ensure that they are evaluated and deliver the expected level of quality. This will support current parents directly in their careers, better prepare parents to support their children, as well as ensure that students today continue to grow and develop throughout their careers and are able to adapt to any change in labor market conditions.

- **Introduce an academic component to national service.** In addition to better equipping parents to support their children, young adults should also be directly supported to help them overcome any barriers they face stemming from their education and family background. Addressing barriers stemming from students' backgrounds is key to ensuring their academic and career success, as we found family background factors to be key predictors of their education and career aspirations. The time that young Emirati men spend serving the UAE and developing their skills during their national service is a tremendous opportunity to equip them with the knowledge and skills to overcome any limitations stemming from their background and foster their learning. In addition to creating a national identity with common values, this is an opportunity to specifically promote and instill the importance of education as a core national value by offering academic courses, such as English, Math, Science, and ICT, that develop young people's academic competencies. Introducing a set of high-quality courses that students are required to complete during their national service would prepare these young men to better reintegrate into their academic paths following their service and support their future success regardless of their education and family background. In addition, targeting young men through the national service would also help to close the reverse gender gap in education assessment and attainment in the UAE.

Challenge 3: Students lack information and support from their parents and their schools in exploring and understanding potential education and career trajectories

- **Provide training and continuous professional development for school counselors.** In order for school counselors to be able to support students with decisions on their education and career paths, counselors themselves will need to receive training and continuous professional development. This includes understanding options in secondary and higher education, the application process for university admissions domestically and abroad,

alternative options to university, and the opportunities in the labor market. A certification process is currently planned for 2021, but this should be examined and continuously improved to ensure that the standards capture the most up-to-date knowledge and skills needed by school counselors. In addition, a minimum number of professional development hours per year should be required to ensure that all school counselors are aware of changes and new developments in the education system and the labor market.

- **Provide comprehensive education and career counseling for students.** School counselors at every school will need to provide students with information sessions so that the students understand the opportunities, pathways, and requirements for their education and career aspirations, while also broadening their knowledge of current and future opportunities. Part of their work is to broaden students' understanding of possible career options, which can include developing networks that connect Emiratis working in various private sector jobs with schools and inviting professionals to speak with students, talking about their work, and the necessary skills, and education and career pathways. This will ensure that students have realistic expectations and that they choose pathways that are reflective of their abilities and interests. Also, school counselors will need to implement an entire system at each school that includes information sessions on how the university application process works, highlighting the requirements and deadlines, and time, space, and channels for students to get support throughout the process. This will result in schools creating environments and value systems that orient students to be successful beyond their secondary education and also help them to overcome the limitations and barriers they face based on their personal networks.
- **Implement career aptitude tests for all Emirati students.** Students demonstrated that they are heavily driven to pursue careers of their fathers or close relatives, suggesting that students do not understand their own interests nor new career opportunities as the labor market evolves. Implementing careers aptitude tests will assist students as they explore education and career opportunities. This would serve a dual purpose by helping students discover which careers align with their interests, as well as informing them of career opportunities that they did not know of and ultimately ensure that they pursue careers that are in alignment with market demands.
- **Conduct a national survey on student education and career aspirations.** Although students demonstrated a lack of knowledge of education and career pathways, the finer details of those gaps are complex and require further research. To identify and understand the gap in students' knowledge around pathways to higher-

education and careers, a national-level survey of Emirati secondary students should be conducted. This would help design efficient programming for students to support them in understanding and making critical decisions around their education and future career pathways. In addition, these results could be used to identify which areas Emirati youth are most drawn to and where there is a shortage so that initiatives can be appropriately adapted. From a policy making perspective, such a survey would –in the medium- to long-term–also provide data to design meaningful and effective policies around Emirati students' life courses that could accommodate their preferences and choices, and also common struggles and challenges better.

Concluding Remarks

Understanding the education and career aspirations of Emirati youth is essential to ensuring that the youth are prepared for and aligned with the UAE's future economy, especially regarding employment in the private sector as a knowledge-based economy. Many actors play vital roles supporting students in their education and career journey, with parents uniquely positioned to be extremely influential in determining their children's life outcomes. This study identified a number of evidence-based challenges regarding parental engagement, with greater details around fathers. In the process, it was able to draw out sound policy solutions to better utilize Emirati parents and students' ecosystems to improve short, medium, and long-term efforts towards sustainable youth and economic development.

We find that parents in the UAE are extremely supportive and encouraging of their children in their studies and career aspirations, and students report having high education aspirations. Many students continue to see themselves as highly educated professionals working in the public sector but lack knowledge of the opportunities available to them or what will be required of them. This may be in part driven by the strong influence of their parents, especially their fathers, a lack of father involvement in academics, and a lack of support mechanisms in the school. To address these gaps, we recommend that barriers of getting parents, and especially fathers, in schools, as well as any barriers parents face in pursuing their own education aspirations, need to be removed. Students also need to receive high-quality education and career counseling that can help support them along their journey, regardless of their background. This can be further supported by providing more opportunities to support students along their education and career journeys such as by integrating an academic component into the national service. Getting parents more involved with their children's academics and building out support mechanisms – for students and adults – will ensure that Emirati youth are able to adapt to the quickly changing labor market and also support their own children in their journey.

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