

Career Counseling in the United Arab Emirates

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Background

Historically, people in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) apprenticed into fields through their relational networks. The primary industries of employment in the Arab Gulf region included trade, pearl diving, fishing, and agriculture in the oasis areas. The UAE is a young country, established in 1971, with a trailblazing track record of economic growth and infrastructure development since then. For the local nationals (i.e. UAE citizens) and the foreign workers that drive this economy forward, the UAE presents opportunity, potential, and promise. Against this dynamic backdrop, career services and education have become a recognized need and welcomed skillset. Today career services exist in some capacity within private and public companies, universities, as well as primary and secondary schools. The career services landscape also includes private service providers and practitioners that may consult with these organizations or work independently.

K-12

In the UAE's short history, they have progressed from only a few formal schools in the 1950s to universal primary and secondary education with more than 900,000 students enrolled (Embassy of the United States of Emirates, n.d.). Education reform focuses on better career preparation, greater accountability, and adherence to international standards. In fact, the UAE Ministry of Education *Strategy for 2010-2020* includes introducing a formal in-school career counseling structure and program as well as developing professional criteria for selecting career counselors. These reforms are being implemented by the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), the Dubai Education Council (DEC), and the Sharjah Education Council in collaboration with the UAE Ministry of Education, while still preserving the local cultural identity.

Universities

At both the secondary school and university levels, the education to employment gap has been a topic of conversation and concern, which naturally invites the question of career services. Between the three federal universities in the UAE and more than 100 private university campuses, the portfolio of career services ranges dramatically depending on the program size and scope, institutional priorities, and available resources. Dedicated career services staff range from zero to 12 people, which expectedly influences both services available and delivery.

Since the 2002 adoption of internships into the academic curriculum by the federal universities, significant attention has been placed on curating internship opportunities and managing internship programs in the university setting. Internships in this context often adhere to a placement model and may be supervised by academic faculty or by career services staff,

depending on the institution. Today, UAE university students engage in a variety of work-related learning experiences, including non-credit bearing internships, job shadow programs, and mentoring relationships.

Over time, career services provisions have grown around the internship intention to include assistance with applications (CVs and cover letters), interview preparation, professionalism orientation, job search strategy, industry awareness, and career exploration, among other things. Career service delivery occurs in the context of one-on-one advising, workshops, and large-scale events. Career fairs or expos are regularly employed on university campuses to expose students to recruiting organizations, though sometimes these are orchestrated by events professionals rather than career services staff. Most universities additionally make extensive use of online resources to augment their in-person service delivery, including contact management systems for employers, career assessments, and career exploration software.

Case Example 1: Zayed University

As a federal university with two prominent campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Zayed University serves primarily UAE national students, who make up most of their student population. Career guidance is delivered in two primary formats in support of a for-credit internship model. Firstly, students are enrolled in a career development course with the Department of Advising and Academic Development, in which they cover basic resume/CV writing, industry overviews, and interviewing. Throughout the rest of the university experience, students can upgrade their skills and build career readiness through the Student Careers Office, staffed with three career advisors between two campuses, serving more than 9000 total students. Additionally, they have a dedicated team of two staff for employer relationships and internship placement, which manages the placement of more than 1000 students per year in mandatory credit-bearing internships, many of which lead to full-time employment. These internships largely occur in the final year of study.

Case Example 2: New York University Abu Dhabi

As a private university connected to New York University (NYU) in New York, NYU Abu Dhabi serves a more international student population. With UAE nationals making up 13% of the student population, and more than 100 countries represented, they utilize a competition-based recruitment model. This involves encouraging internships early and often, beginning in the first year, but never making them compulsory. Organizations post their roles in an online career portal, and students apply based on the job description. This is followed by interviews and selection of candidates, modeled on a typical post-graduate hiring process. Throughout the university experience, students engage in individual career advising to explore their current skills and skill gaps, understand the employment market in their region of reference, and develop their marketability. Additionally, they build relationships with employers through regular on-campus events and sessions.

With seven career advisors for just over 1000 students, they rely heavily on high touch, tailored career advising to accommodate for different career development paradigms, a myriad of relevant search strategies, and a broad range of industries and regions.

Case Example 3: Khalifa University of Science, Technology and Research

As a private university with a specialization in the STEM disciplines and research, they serve over 1300 students, more than three quarters of whom are UAE nationals. While all their students engage in a mandatory internship in their final two years of study, students can choose to find an internship on their own or to be placed by the university's career and internship supervisor. They employ an online career portal to house available opportunities, and consistent with most regional schools, host a career fair that draws a robust number of organizations each year.

This event and placement driven career education model is augmented by faculty providing oversight to credit-bearing internships, thus forging regular and new connections with industry. Faculty facilitate site visits and other industry involvement in coursework, thus further solidifying the connection between industry needs and student learning.

Training and Professional Development

There is no established career services credential in the UAE at this time; however, the National Qualifications Authority (NQA) is actively working on one. Expatriate career services staff often carry foreign credentials in career guidance or counseling. Alternatively, they enter the profession with a background in employer services and program management, which often draws on a business background. Currently, there is no in-country higher education training program specifically for career guidance and counseling.

Middle East Career Development Conference

Since 2013, a Middle East Career Development Conference (MECDC) has begun to bring together a broad range of stakeholders for information sharing, skill building, and dialogue. The annual conference has expanded to include secondary school career development staff, university career development professionals, company representatives, and government stakeholders. Previous conferences to date have been hosted by Hult Business School, Canadian University of Dubai, and INSEAD Abu Dhabi.

Middle East Graduate Recruiters Association (MEGRA)

In summer 2015, a large multi-national IT company initiated the gathering of select university careers representatives and university recruiters to meet to network, learn from best practice, share stories, and hear from the experts and industry thought-leaders. To date, this association has met on an annual basis but has plans to increase meetings and gatherings.

Relevant Regulations or Policies

Emiratization

With an estimated 80 percent of UAE residents being foreign nationals, an understandable concern is ensuring that UAE citizens (Emiratis) are not overlooked for employment in favor of their expatriate counterparts. Nationalization policies are prevalent in other parts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman.

Emiratization initiatives are reflected in various government policies, as highlighted below, and enforced by the Ministry of Labor.

- Ministerial Orders No. 41, No. 42 and No. 43 of 2005 imposed a “quota” system in the private sector, requiring every company to hire enough UAE nationals in proportion to their overall staff. Quotas varied by industry and are subject to year on year increases within banking and insurance;
- *Ministerial Resolution No. (635) of 2008* on Public Relations Officers (PRO) states that any company which employs over 100 workers must employ an UAE national PRO, who brokers government-related contracts, immigration, and business for the company; and
- In 2010, *Council of Ministers Order No. 26* and *Ministerial Order No. 1187* implemented a system of classification as an incentive to those adhering to their Emiratization obligations.

Compulsory Military Service

In 2014, the UAE initiated compulsory military service for males between the age of 18 and 30. It stipulates that those with a high school diploma must serve nine months and those without a high school diploma must serve two years. Military service for female Emiratis is voluntary. Military service expands the exposure to career development concepts by ensuring that all male nationals receive feedback on their skillset and engage in an assessment process to determine their placement within the military service.

University Accreditation

The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), which accredits UAE universities, requires that an institution incorporating internships, practicums, cooperative placements, and similar experiential learning experiences into some, or all, of its curricula must:

- Have a designated office or an individual who is specifically given responsibility for internships and other forms of experiential learning. The office may be central for the entire institution or it may be departmentally or programmatically centered;
- Publish an Internship Manual that brings together institutional policies and procedures relating to internships and other experiential learning;
- Ensure that prospective internship or experiential education sites:
 - a. are safe and reputable environments for students;
 - b. provide pertinent work experiences;
 - c. provide work experiences suitable to fulfill the institution’s expectations for learning outcomes;
- Ensure that official agreements are in place for all internships and other forms of experiential education and that agreements are signed by both parties, kept current and are on file. Such agreements should define the responsibilities of the institution and the employer or placement site;
- Ensure that employers or non-institutional supervisors commit to enabling students to meet their learning outcomes, through provision of a job description and suitable assignments throughout the duration of the internship;
- Ensure that students enrolling in internships or other forms of experiential education have access to a syllabus which provides clear guidance as to the expectations for student learning, student assignments, student evaluation and faculty/employer supervision;

- Ensure that the learning outcomes are articulated and in writing;
- Provide an opportunity for students to reflect, in writing and/or through an oral presentation, on their achievement of the learning outcomes;
- Provide for an orientation for students as to the skills, behaviors and knowledge which they need to succeed in the work environment;
- Have an effective mechanism for matching students with potential employers;
- Have effective means for monitoring the employment site and gathering feedback from students and the employer;
- Ensure that there is faculty or academic supervision from the department or program offering the internship;
- Delineate the responsibilities of the faculty or academic supervisor, the employer and the student;
- Delineate the academic credit, if any, to be earned, the placement of the internship in the curriculum or program of the student, the methods used to evaluate the internship, and whether a grade will be assigned or a —pass/fail grading mechanism used; and
- Ensure that the internship or experiential learning program is regularly evaluated, in terms of both student experiences and employer satisfaction, and that the results of these evaluations are used to improve the program (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Other Service Providers

While most large firms have a career development offering within their human resources function, a significant number of private companies provide career services in the UAE, including document reviews, career coaching or counseling, and recruitment or placement services. These organizations may work with individuals or provide outsourced services to larger companies or educational institutions. At this point, there are no specific regulations for these organizations beyond the trade license to establish a company in the UAE.

Summary and Future Directions

The future is bright for career services in the UAE. As the country looks ahead to the Dubai 2020 Expo, students and other stakeholders are investing in the skills and mindsets that will set them up for success in this new economy. With a 2013 release of *Occupations and Careers Handbook for UAE Nationals* by the National Qualifications Authority, the industry knowledge gap continues to be addressed. This handbook reviews economic diversification and highlights 12 industries for local job seekers to consider. It provides an overview of strategic roles and occupational profiles within these industries based on criteria including projected job growth and security.

Career education has also developed a breadth of resources, with new regionally-normed career assessments produced by the Talent Enterprise, a 'think' and 'do' tank based in Dubai, are used along with long-established assessments (e.g. Myers Briggs Type Indicator and Strong Interest Indicator), which are readily accessible to licensed professionals through training providers in Dubai. Importantly, training and licensure to use the aforementioned assessments is also available.

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