

# Examining the Link between Country-Specific Pull Factors and International Student Mobility in the United Arab Emirates

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## Introduction

To further grow Dubai and the United Arab Emirates as a higher education (HE) destination for international students, Visit Dubai (2020) collaborated with the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) to launch the *Study Dubai* campaign. The campaign highlights Dubai as a safe, dynamic, future-forward study destination that is pioneering innovation in a *city of opportunities*. The campaign is part of a strategy to position the UAE as a leading study destination to benefit from the increasing international student mobility, which has grown substantially from 2 million in 2000 to over 5.3 million in 2017 (UNESCO, 2019). While the traditional HE markets such as the US and UK have experienced recent slowdown, emerging

transnational education hubs including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have witnessed a surge. The number of international students in the UAE has increased from 48,653 in 2011 to 77,463 in 2016 (UNESCO, 2020) along with higher education institutions (HEIs) from 5 in 1990 to over 100, including several large international branch campuses (IBCs) in designated educational free zones (Ajayan and Balasubramanian, 2020). These HEIs, especially IBCs, largely cater to international students from over 165 countries. UAE has the highest inbound international student mobility ratio in the world among major HE destinations (UNESCO, 2020).

Past studies have examined student motivation to study abroad (Nyaupane, Paris and Teye, 2010; 2011), travel behaviour at the study destination (Varasteh, Marzuki, and Rasoolimanesh, 2015), and country-specific pull factors motivating student destination choice including the culture of the host country, visa ease, cost of living, safety, employment prospects, and transportation connectivity (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012).

This research note explores the pull factors motivating international students to select UAE as their study destination.

## Methodology

An online survey was administered via email using Qualtrics to international students currently enrolled in an international university in the UAE to capture students' motivations and country-specific pull factors for selecting their international study destination. The survey included demographics and a twelve-item scale (five-point Likert scale) for country pull factors developed from previous literature (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012). Further improvements on wording/sequencing of questions were made based on a pre-test with four UAE-based experts in international higher education. A total of 163 usable responses (70 male and 93 female) representing 25 countries were obtained.

## Results

Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) of Country Factors

Items	Mean Score (1-5)	Mean Rank	Socio-cultural	Employability Prospects	Ease of Travel	Accessibility and Affordability
UAE is a safe country to live and study	4.35	1	0.755			
UAE is a pleasant country to live/study	4.30	2	0.720			
UAE provides multi-cultural experience/exposure	4.11	5	0.783			
I have friends and relatives in the UAE	3.69	11	0.864			

Pursue career opportunities in the UAE/Gulf	4.19	3	0.612	
Improve my chance of getting employment in the UAE	4.12	4	0.608	
Option to work while studying	4.08	6	0.694	
Perceived easiness of finding a job in the UAE/Gulf after graduation	3.99	7	0.699	
Availability of direct flights to my home country	3.75	10		0.821
Geographic proximity to my home country	3.65	12		0.845
Affordable cost of living	3.97	8		0.657
Ease of getting student visa	3.85	9		0.850
% Variance Explained (Cumulative=81.22)			26.08	24.48
$\alpha$			0.817	0.896
Factor Mean			4.11	4.10
N=163				3.70
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.904				3.91
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Approx. Chi-Square =1330.038, df=66, p<0.001				

The EFA resulted in four distinct factors (Table 1). Of the four factors, *socio-cultural* and *employability prospects* emerged as the most influential factors with factor mean score of 4.11 and 4.10, respectively, followed by *accessibility and affordability* (3.91) and *ease of travel* (3.70). For individual items, the mean scores ranged between 3.65 (*geographic proximity to home country*) and 4.35 (*safe country to live and study*). Six out of the 12 items received a mean score above 4.00. The top seven items belonged to socio-cultural and employability prospects.

Consistent with previous studies (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012), safety, high standard of living, and multiculturalism are important pull factors for international students to the UAE. Employability prospects, the second-most important factor indicates that international students coming to UAE may have strong intentions to live, work, and build their career in the UAE/region following graduation. While previous studies suggested this was less of a pull for international students, likely due to the regulations and obstacles to do so, recent regulatory changes implemented by the UAE government have greatly improved post-study employment prospects. For example, the government recently announced the opportunity for 5-10-year long-term student visa for outstanding students and their dependents, as well as opportunities for

part-time work in some free zones while on a university study visa. The UAE continues to benefit from its global connectedness and affordability, relative to other popular HE destinations. The Cost of Living Index by City 2020 ranks Dubai 152nd compared to New York (11<sup>th</sup>), London (28<sup>th</sup>) and Melbourne (87<sup>th</sup>) respectively.

Though the ease of travel emerged last in relative importance, it has still contributed to UAE's attractiveness with an above-average score of 3.70 out of 5.00. The UAE is strategically located midway between Asia and Europe, and is accessible to two-thirds of the world's population by air in less than 8 hours and airports serving more than 240 destinations in approximately 100 countries via direct flights.

### **Conclusion**

The UAE has strategically positioned itself as a safe, stable, tolerant, innovative and cosmopolitan country focused on transitioning to a knowledge-based sustainable economy which prioritizes the health and well-being of residents, visitors and citizens. The role of HE and tourism in the wider strategic efforts have coalesced around public diplomacy pillars of the UAE soft power strategy launched in 2017 aimed at growing the country's global reputation (Saber, Paris, & Marochi, 2018). The findings of this study along with the continued growth of inbound international students to the UAE indicates that the foundations of the UAEs place brand have been recognized abroad and will continue to attract all forms of tourists. In addition to tapping into the existing traditional flows of International student mobility, emerging HE destinations like the UAE are likely to attract more international students from South and Central Asia, Africa, MENA, and Eastern Europe due to shifting visa restrictions and political climate in Europe and the USA compounded by travel restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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