

Factors influencing Undergraduate Students' Self-Perceived Employability in the UAE: Policy Recommendations

(Executive Summary)

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1. Introduction

The employability of university graduates is a critical issue globally and particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where higher education plays a pivotal role in economic and social development. Self-perceived employability (SPE), or an individual's assessment of their ability to secure and maintain employment, has emerged as a key factor influencing career outcomes. This study investigates the internal and external factors shaping SPE among undergraduate students in the UAE. These factors include personal demographics, family background, academic experiences, and extracurricular participation. The findings aim to inform policies and strategies to enhance graduate employability and align educational outcomes with labor market demands.

2. Research Question(s)

General Objective:

- Examine the key factors influencing self-perceived employability among undergraduate students in the UAE.
- Propose evidence-based policy recommendations to bridge the gap between higher education outcomes and labor market demands.

Specific Objectives:

- a. To analyze the influence of demographic variables, such as gender, age, and geographic location, on SPE.
- b. To investigate the impact of family background, including parental education levels, marital status, and sibling relationships, on SPE dimensions.
- c. To assess the relationship between university academic experiences, such as field of study, GPA, and academic progression, and SPE.
- d. To evaluate the contribution of extracurricular activities, such as volunteering and career counseling, to employability perceptions.
- e. To explore the role of high school academic performance, extracurricular engagement, and career counseling in shaping SPE.
- f. To provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators to enhance employability outcomes in higher education.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Data were collected via a Qualtrics online survey distributed to 646 undergraduate students at a public university in the UAE between February and June 2022. The data analysis included descriptive and inferential statistics, such as independent samples t-tests, One-Way ANOVA, and Kruskal-Wallis H tests, to assess differences across variables. The SPE was measured using the validated UAE-SPE scale, which includes dimensions of university-specific SPE (UniSPE), internal SPE (ISPE), and external SPE (ESPE).

4. Key Findings

Internal Factors

- **Family Dynamics:** Birth order significantly influenced ISPE, with middle and youngest siblings reporting higher perceptions. Similarly, students with six or more siblings showed distinct differences in ISPE.
- **Parental Background:** Maternal education level strongly impacted both ISPE and ESPE, with students whose mothers held a Master's degree reporting significantly higher perceptions.

- **Geography:** Students from remote areas reported marginally lower UniSPE than those from urban settings.

External Factors

- **Academic Background:** Fifth-year students reported higher SPE compared to first-year students, reflecting academic progression. Law students exhibited lower ESPE, potentially due to language barriers in Arabic-taught programs.
- **Extracurricular Activities:** Participation in university-level volunteering and career counseling positively influenced SPE dimensions, especially ISPE.
- **High School Experiences:** Students with strong high school academic performance and those who participated in extracurricular activities or received career counseling reported higher overall SPE.

5. Implications

The study highlights the interplay between personal, familial, and institutional factors in shaping employability perceptions. By addressing disparities in academic preparation, extracurricular engagement, and family support, educational institutions and policymakers can create more inclusive pathways to employability. These strategies align with the UAE's national priorities, including the Centennial 2071 vision, to foster a knowledge-based and resilient economy.

Policy Recommendations

1. Enhancing Academic and Career Support

- Develop bilingual programs and English language workshops for disciplines such as Law.
- Implement milestone-based mentorship programs to build employability confidence in early-stage students.

2. Fostering Extracurricular Engagement

- Introduce university-funded leadership and volunteering initiatives.
- Provide structured career counseling programs across high schools and universities.

3. Strengthening Family and Community Support

- Engage families through seminars and community education programs.

- Establish support networks for students from single-parent or non-traditional family structures.

4. Bridging High School and University Transitions

- Design transition programs that connect high school extracurricular experiences with university employability efforts.
- Include UAE-specific employability modules in secondary and tertiary education.

5. Addressing Regional Disparities

- Expand career development hubs in rural areas to enhance access to employability resources.

6. Conclusion

This research provides evidence-based insights into the determinants of self-perceived employability among UAE undergraduates. By leveraging these findings, stakeholders can design tailored interventions to enhance employability outcomes and address systemic challenges in education and the labor market. Future research should explore longitudinal trends and expand to diverse student populations to deepen the understanding of employability dynamics in the UAE.