

# **Narrating Ourselves**

**TRANSFORMING EMIRATI SOCIAL SCIENCE IN AN AGE  
OF GLOBALIZATION**

**MBRSG WORKING PAPER**

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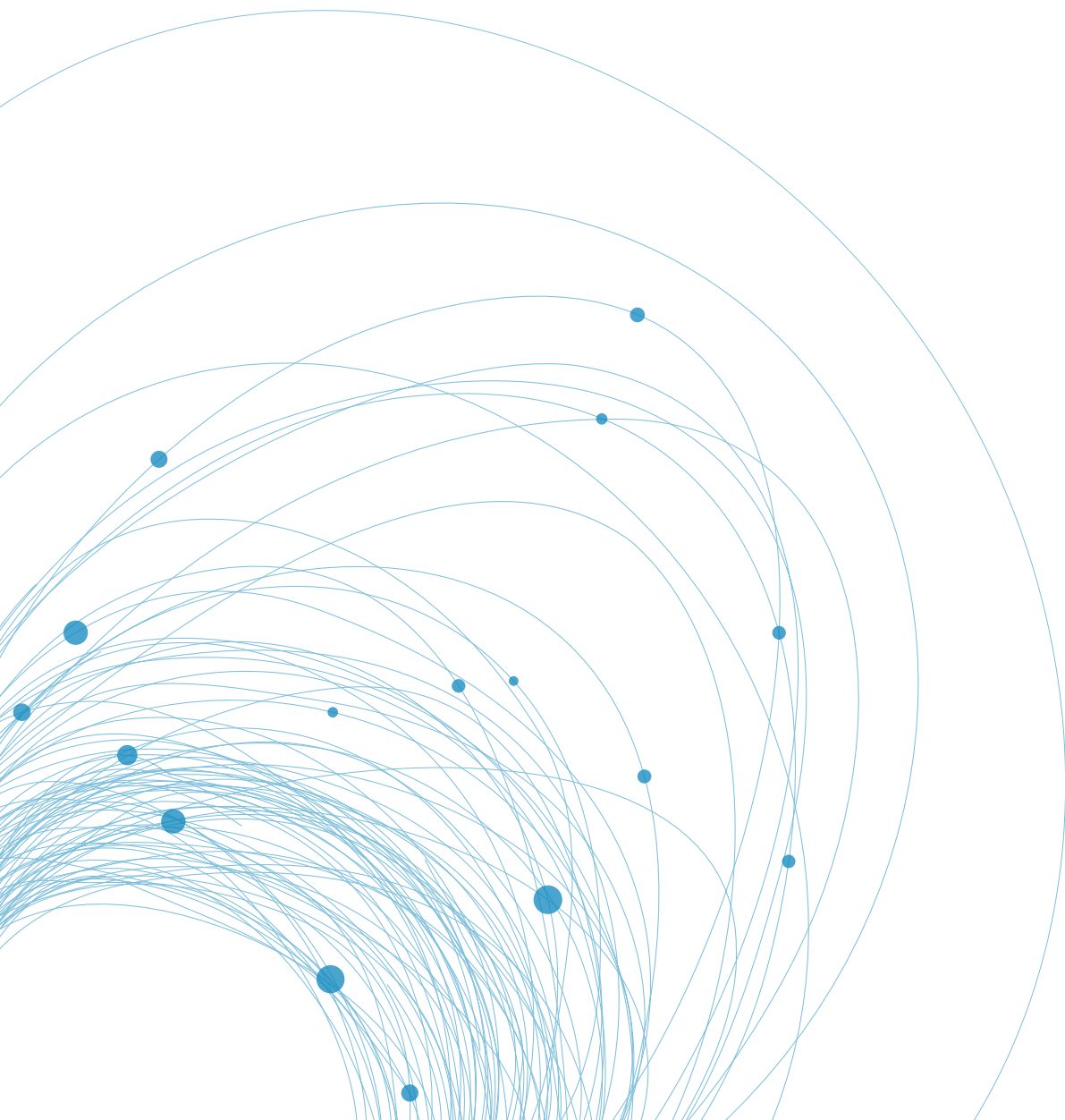
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UAE's thrust onto the global stage and its endeavor to be a player in the global knowledge economy as well as a modern state that preserves local identity necessitates that it pay special attention to social science research which aims to document and understand the everyday lives of nationals and how they are impacted by local, regional, and global changes. This is for three reasons: social science allows citizens to better understand who they are collectively as a nation— their histories, identities, and struggles; enables citizens to better exploit global and local knowledge; and allows the UAE to assert its interests globally and reshape global discourse.

This paper examines the challenges to and opportunities for social science research in the UAE based on a survey of over thirty professors spanning six of the country's major universities between July and September 2014, and on conversations with colleagues and academics in the field.

Our research found a number of significant challenges that impede research production in the UAE, as well as strengths that present important opportunities for developing social science research capabilities and increasing social science production. They are as follows:

## *Challenges*

- Universities' focus on vocationalism and instrumental knowledge leads to a commercialization of knowledge that limits the university's role as a space for dialogue and advancing the public good.
- University cultures in the UAE devalue social science research in comparison to other fields.
- Research and academic institutions present excessive red tape and bureaucracy which academics must then navigate.
- Universities and research institutions lack the academic resources to sustain research projects and initiatives.
- There is a dearth of human resources to support local research endeavors and local knowledge production.
- Social attitudes discourage students from being interested in research or in pursuing social science research based careers.
- The scarce use of Arab and Emirati authored teaching materials in core curricula has led to disengagement with important local issues and contexts.

## *Opportunities*

- University infrastructures are strong, stable, technologically advanced and up to par with institutions in the developed world.
- Financial stability underlines the stability of academic and research institutions and allows for continuous funding for relevant and timely research initiatives and projects.

- A number of independent government and research institutions that support research and innovation exist and continue to grow in the country.
- Primary and secondary education reforms have been put in place to better prepare students for higher education.
- Higher education curricula are continually upgraded to maintain high and competitive standards.
- There are increasing investments in research institutions and industry aimed at improving relevance and impact of research projects as well as collaboration and synergies.
- ICT infrastructure in the UAE is highly developed and rivals some of the most technologically advanced countries.

These challenges and opportunities were examined within the context of regional and global trends in academia, namely globalization and the spread of neo-liberal capitalism. It is from this departure point that this paper explores the position of the Arab world, and particularly the UAE, in the global politics of knowledge. It raises important questions on how social science research and knowledge production in the UAE is impacted by these global politics of knowledge and how globalization and the dearth of social science research impacts our abilities to self-determine, write our own narratives, and exploit global knowledge in such a way that benefits social development.

This paper is organized into three distinct parts: first, we contextualize social science in the Arab world as a whole, and the challenges it faces; second we discuss social science production in the UAE; and finally we present a set of recommendations aimed at government entities and academic and research institutions in the UAE.

# INTRODUCTION

The Tragedy of the Arabs” was the title of the Economist’s July 5th 2014 edition. The cover of the influential magazine’s issue on the state of the Arab world was a picture of a young Arab man from Wilfred Thesiger’s travels in the Empty Quarter between 1945 and 1950. Indeed, this image on the covers of the economist magazines that were distributed, sold, and read in offices and city streets all over the world, is the very same image that donned the cover of Thesiger’s Arabian Sands when it was first published in 1959, then again in 1984, and again in 2007. In 2014, it was still the image snapped by a European explorer and former colonial administrator that depicted the Arab world to a global audience.

The economist’s article, and the imagery that came with it, travelled across the internet. People all over the world, including the Middle East, debated its contents. A quick Google search will tell us that as British, American, and Australian readers pondered over our civilizational demise, Arabs were writing scathing critiques of this article, which fell on deaf ears – a reflection of disparities in the power to shape global opinions. The internet, combined with globalization, and the spread of the English language has created circumstances in which western institutions and media have more control over the ways in which the globe is to think of the “Tragedy of the Arabs” than their Arab counterparts.

It is from this departure point – of globalization, and global knowledge politics – that this paper begins to think about the ability of Arabs to produce our own narratives and to project those voices onto global discourse about us. It might then be best to first define globalization and to ask what it has to do with knowledge production and indeed what knowledge production has to do with narrative about the Arab world and why that matters.

We will begin by examining some influential definitions of globalization that tackle it as each of an economic, political, and social process.

“Globalization refers above all to a dynamic and multidimensional process of economic integration whereby national resources become more and more internationally mobile while national economies become increasingly interdependent” (OECD, 2005, p. 11).

“[G]lobalization represents the triumph of a capitalist world economy tied together by a global division of labour.” (Wallerstein, 1979, p. 46)

“[Globalization] refers broadly to the process whereby power is located in global social formations and expression through global networks rather than territorially-based states” (Thomas & Wilkin, 1997, p. 6).

“The process of globalization suggests simultaneously two images of culture. The first image entails the extension outwards of a particular culture to its limit, the globe. Heterogeneous cultures become incorporated and integrated into a dominant culture which eventually covers the whole world. The second image points to the compression of cultures. Things formerly held apart are now brought into contact and juxtaposition” (Featherstone, 1995, p. 6-7).



The above definitions encourage us to think of globalization as simultaneously an economic process of international movement of goods, capital, and labour, a political process whereby global power becomes distributed through different channels of global networks, and finally as a cultural process in which the movement of images and information across compressed time and space is leading to a homogenized global culture. In a global environment where knowledge moves freely and quickly and is consumed by more and more people, and in which countries are moving toward knowledge economies and becoming more embedded in global systems and structures, the institutions and individuals tasked with producing knowledge are influenced by global practices and institutions. Knowledge becomes shaped by global agendas and systems and regulated by dominant rules and ideologies. Publics and knowledge producers alike consume knowledge from all corners of the earth and disseminate their knowledge beyond the borders of their own countries or communities of practice. In the present circumstances, economic, political, as well as cultural processes of globalization are closely tied to knowledge production and the exercise of power through meaning making.

The production of knowledge about one's self or about others, can be loosely described as a process of narration in that it tells the stories of the past, present, or possible futures of a person or peoples to a determined audience for one purpose or another. The process of narration is one with tremendous consequence in that it engages in discourse making which is regulated and influenced by power structures, both global and local. As Macdonnell notes, "discourses differ with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they take shape and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address" (Macdonnell, 1986 cited in Mills, 1997). Additionally, discourse, and therefore narrative, impacts and influences the ways in which subjects, such as the societies, and states of the Arab world, are understood and subjected. Discourses have the ability to structure realities, identities, and alternative futures (Mills, 1997).

Within the new global order, Arjun Appadurai suggests, the power to imagine, and write, social realities (the main work of knowledge production) is what defines agency. And so, for those on the margins of global discourses, it is the control of the imagination that is at stake (Appadurai, 2001). We acknowledge in this paper that global knowledge production has power dynamics embedded within it and that power relations exist between global research communities whereby dominant euro-centric ideologies, frameworks, and narratives drown out other voices in the periphery.

As such, this paper begins an exploratory process whereby the Arab and Emirati academic and research community is encouraged to ask where the Arab world falls within this global politics of knowledge; what these power relationships mean for the region; how globalization impacts our abilities to self-determine and write our own narratives; how we can best exploit global knowledge in such a way that benefits social development for all citizens of the Arab world; how we can legitimate knowledge and voices produced outside of the academy; and how we can engage with the global knowledge community on a more equal footing?

The aim of this paper is to situate social science research in the UAE within a global context, present challenges facing social science research in the UAE, uncover opportunities for improvement and progress, and discuss the consequences and benefits of producing social science for the UAE's national goals, cultural identity, and economic growth. This paper is organized into three distinct parts: the first is a contextualization of social science in the Arab world as a whole, and the challenges it faces; the second is a discussion of social science production in the UAE; and the third is a presentation of recommendations aimed at government entities and academic and research institutions in the UAE.

# ARAB SOCIAL SCIENCE: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Starting in the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in academic and research institutions in the Arab world (Jamal 2006). In particular, governments in the Gulf have made substantial investments in building academic infrastructures and modern institutions of higher learning. These investments include “[the] construction of new campuses and buildings, the expansion of computer laboratories, the effort to diversify faculty recruitment, and the enhancement of faculty exchange programs” (Altorki, 2013, p. 246). More recently, political upheavals in the region have encouraged civic engagement on many levels bringing about a renewed interest by youth and the older generations in social science research (Altorki, 2013).

Despite social, political, and economic investments in research and academia, the Arab world- when measured against its global counterparts- has low research productivity and funding. Measures produced by international organizations, such as UNESCO, report that the combined number of social science publications of the Arab countries between the years of 2007 and 2011 amount to 1% of those produced by the United States, 3% of those produced by the United Kingdom, and 29% of those produced by Japan (see figures 1a and 1b).

*Number of Social Science Publications per Country 2007-2011*

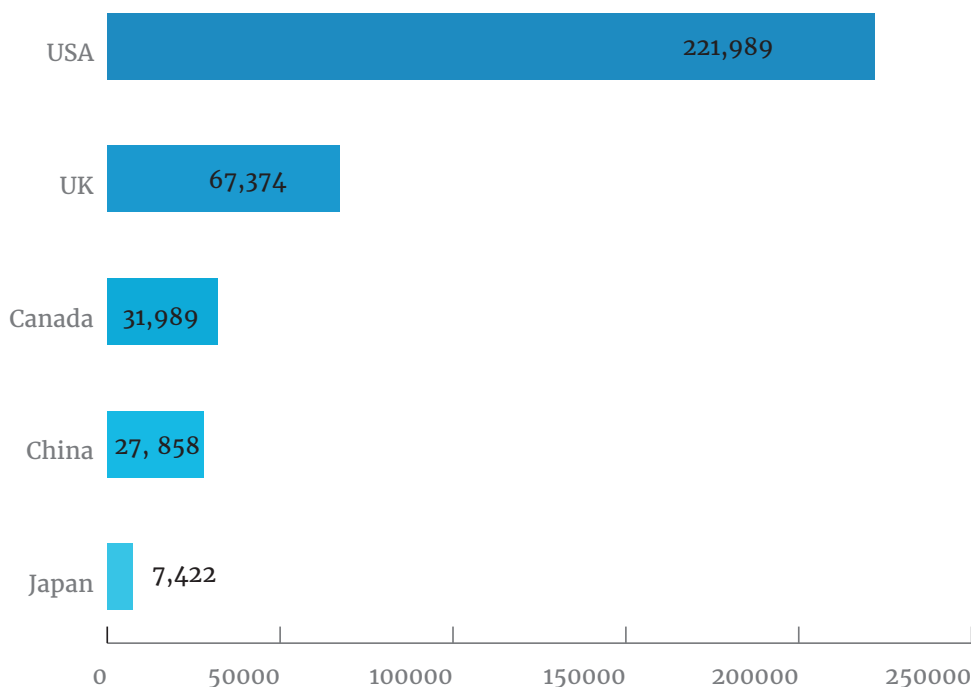


Figure 1a. Source: UNESCO Social Science Report (2010)

### Number of Social Science Publications per Country 2007–2011

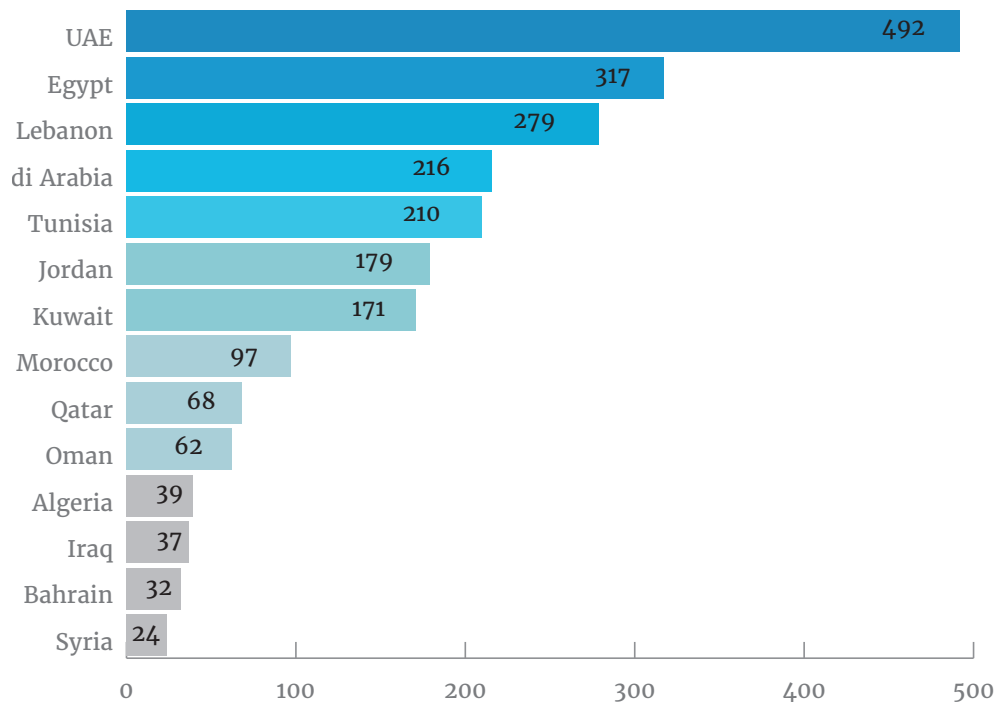


Figure 1b. Source: UNESCO Social Science Report (2010)

These low figures are indicative of two main umbrella issues facing social science production in the Arab world. First, the Arab world still suffers from a number of challenges that impede social science production. While these challenges are experienced differently by each Arab country depending on its socio-economic background and level of wealth, many of the problems exist across the board.

Second, the ways in which research production in the Arab world is measured and incentivized is in itself problematic and does not reflect or acknowledge the true state of social science production in the region. Current measurement systems focus on peer reviewed journals that are published in the academic centers of the world which are disproportionately located in the global north and take into little consideration local, regional, and Arabic language journals and publication outlets. Social science production in the region is measured against yardsticks that use the west and European and American universities as the reference standard and then compare the Arab world to it. In so doing, social scientists in the Arab world are incentivized to produce research that fits in to the agendas of international journals and measures up against irrelevant KPIs. This does not occur in a vacuum, but is reflective of global trends in academia and research.

### GLOBAL TRENDS IN ACADEMIA

Globally, scholars and academics have been lamenting what Buroway (2011) has described as the “crisis of the university” which, he argues, can be witnessed “almost everywhere”. Buroway, like many others in global academia, bemoan the erosion of the university’s status as simultaneously “inside and outside society” as both observer and participant (Buroway, 2011, p. 1). Today, academia is becoming subject to twin pressures of globalization and neo-liberal capitalism.

Globalization has had a multidimensional impact on education and research in the social sciences. Broadly, these influences relate to economic and market forces, organizational and managerial cultures, and state regulation and intervention. These impacts overlap and intersect.

Neoliberal individualistic perspectives on education, where education is a means to compete in the labor market and increase purchasing power, emphasize education as a training tool that enables the production of cadres of future employees for private industry and as a means to individual commercial ends. The university's role as a space to advance the public good through knowledge production, public debate and discussion, and expansion of knowledge skills becomes secondary, if not tertiary. Within this framework, knowledge becomes a marketable commodity whose production, consumption, and circulation is driven by market forces (Allman, 2001; Appadurai, 2006; Boden & Epstein, 2006; Burroway, 2011; Levin, 2001; Spring, 2001, 2008).

As a result, neoliberal ideologies have made universities and research centers look a lot more like corporations (Boden & Epstein, 2006; Buroway, 2011; Levin, 2001). Specifically, the ideology of 'corporatism' and the preference for self-interest and dismissal of the public good have led to managerial styles in which academics and researchers are treated as employees and subjected to high degrees of scrutiny and assessment (Boden & Epstein, 2006; Levin, 2001). Within this context, students are treated as consumers and universities as businesses that are focused on performance and productivity. Managers control and direct employee behaviors for the benefit of institutional profit or strategic goals. Academics' social and professional lives become subject to high levels of control for the ultimate profit of institutions. "[T]he university, as a place which facilitates the work of academics rather than employing them, is now...a residual ideological practice" (Boden & Epstein, 2006, p. 227).

Politically, global competition between countries, precipitated by global indices and rankings produced by international organizations such as the WEF, OECD, and UN has led to government policies that focus education on global competitiveness and knowledge economy goals (Buroway, 2011; Luke, 2001). In order to maximize profit garnered from knowledge production in the knowledge economy, states need to control what constitutes valuable knowledge and exercise property rights over that knowledge (Boden & Epstein, 2006). State intervention has caused universities to focus on market outcomes, business growth, vocationalism, and commercialization of education. State regulation, according to Buroway, is not trying to "bring the university into the market, but instead to make it more efficient, more productive, and more accountable by more direct means" (Buroway, 2011, p. 2). As such, universities are now required to produce evaluation schemes with measurable outputs and KPIs which "reduc[e] research to publications, and publications to refereed journals, and refereed journals to their impact factors" (Buroway, 2011, p. 2). According to Burroway, this has caused parallel distortions and led academics to resort to "gaming the system" and "distorting their output" (Buroway, 2011, p. 2).

States have been active players in the globalization of education in that they comply with the global standardization of degree programs and accreditation in order to gain legitimacy while also complying with benchmarking discourses so that they can be deemed globally competitive. These indicators are standardized, ignore local contexts, and are at risk of being easily manipulated and abused.

In addition to these issues, the Arab world faces challenges specific to its research environments, institutions, and capabilities.

## CHALLENGES FACING ARAB SOCIAL SCIENCE

On the research environment level, low funding, weak academic networks and associations, ineffective national policies and regulations, global liberal capitalist influences, as well as academic cultures and social values create an environment that is not conducive to research production. At the level of research institutions, university bureaucracies, institutional performance measures, academic resources, and poor working conditions hinder the productivity of researchers. Finally, on the level of research individuals, lack of capacity, flight of talent, and dominance of western researchers, exacerbates already existing difficulties.

### *Environmental Challenges*

**National policies and regulations:** Existing political systems coupled with instability in the region have led to an overregulation of research and academia. Research is tied to centralized institutions which regulate and direct social science research and in turn limit the growth of autonomous research communities and set boundaries for research topics and methods (Arvanitis & Gaillard, 1992 cited in Hanafi, 2013). The ability to publish and to obtain approvals and funding necessitates scholars to develop research projects that appease governments and promote government agendas (Altorki, 2013; Hanafi, 2011; Nasr & Hajjar, 1997; Rached & Craissati, 2000). Additionally, in order to maintain objectivity, and avoid the questioning of the rigor of their research, academics refrain from engaging the community in their research projects (Hanafi, 2011).

**Global liberal capitalist influences:** Globalization and the capitalist neo-liberal market forces that accompany it, have greatly impacted the education landscape in the region in positive ways, but also in ways that are counterproductive to knowledge production. Globalization has opened the door to various state sanctioned, foreign, elite, higher education institutions- such as the American Universities of Sharjah, Beirut and Cairo and satellite campuses such as NYU Abu Dhabi, INSEAD, and Qatar's Education city- that have diversified and enriched academic offerings in the Arab world. These institutions have carved a small space for Arab researchers to take part in global academia; however, this access is only available to a privileged few and further intensifies the gap between elite institutions and others who are not on the same playing field (Hanafi, 2011).

By the same token, globalization, and the deregulation of higher education, has also led to the commodification of education and to what Appadurai (2006) calls a "diploma market", whereby there is a mushrooming of low quality, profit hungry, institutions that are doling out meaningless certifications, diplomas, and degrees in pursuit of financial gain (Appadurai, 2006). These types of training institutions, which market forces are making increasingly accessible, are not producing critical thinkers with the strong analytical skills and tools needed to thrive in academia and make meaningful contributions to research and knowledge production in the region. Aggravating this further, the global financial crisis and resulting budget cuts have rendered education and research subservient to different types of clients, be they government or businesses, which has led to a focus on more profitable disciplines in sciences, technology, and business.

**Academic cultures and social values:** Premiums placed on marketable and employable disciplines associated with the hard sciences and business administration have led to an asymmetrical investment in profit driven research and to the demise of academic scholarship, which particularly devalues the social sciences (Altorki, 2013; Buroway, 2011). Social science disciplines in the region are further devalued by a culture that



associates them with a lack of rigor and prestige. In many Arab countries, exam scores dictate students' fields of study, whereby the hard sciences matriculation scores are higher than the social sciences and are associated in the public psyche with greater social status (Jamal, 2006).

**Academic networks and associations:** Arab academic associations and cross-regional networks are weak, be it among local universities or foreign founded universities. Local universities are marginalized from global networks due to language, subjects of research, lack of publications in globally recognized journals, lack of resources, and inaccessible elite academic circles. Foreign founded universities that do take part in global discourses and forums are often disconnected from local research priorities and interests due to the language of operation and the need to adjust their research priorities to adhere to global standards and academic trends (Hanafi, 2011). A situation in the region has been created whereby only a small group of "elite" academics are partaking in global discourses and conferences with little room for others, especially young scholars, to participate. (Nasr & Hajjar, 1997)

The lack of cooperation between local and foreign founded universities extends to other types of institutions engaged in research, such as think tanks, civil bodies, and government entities. In terms of subjects of research, those that engage in critical professional social science do not interact with those that conduct practical and applied policy oriented research. Although multi-disciplinary social science is the global trend, we don't see this kind of cross disciplinary work being done in the Arab world.

**Funding:** Social science in the Arab world suffers from a lack of funding where even the wealthiest Arab countries spend less than 1% of their GDP on research and development (see figure 2). However, governments continue to be the most significant sources of funding for social science research in the Arab world. In many Arab states, gaps persist between what is budgeted for research, and what is actually spent. Additionally, when countries face financial difficulties, research funds are usually the most drastically cut (Handoussa, 2003). In many countries where researchers rely on donor agencies for funding, research agendas are molded to fit donor priorities and frameworks. Funding sources greatly impact and shape the research objectives, outcomes, and quality in that researchers end up pandering either to government priorities or to donor priorities with little room left for autonomous research conducted for the sake of knowledge production.

### *Institutional Challenges*

**University bureaucracies:** Universities in the Arab world are highly bureaucratic and expose faculty and researchers to excessive red tape such as long and tedious approval processes, extensive paperwork and reporting, and ineffective and inefficient governing bodies. This creates disincentives for research production and greatly decreases outputs.

**Institutional performance measures:** In general, across the Arab world, there is a weak commitment to subjecting academic institutions and programs to regular evaluations and performance measurements by accrediting bodies, and low standards for assessing faculty and students (al-Najjar, n.d. cited in Altorki, 2013). In the case of the social science programs and institutions, information on structures, functions, research, and outputs is, at best, lacking, making assessments of effectiveness inaccurate and untrustworthy (Rached & Craissati, 2000). This creates a situation of unfamiliarity with the standards that Arab academic institutions are truly operating at, and with their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Arab academic institutions also face the dilemma of being measured against

international standards set by the global north. The criteria for measurement are specific to the ways in which western academic centers operate and are often divorced from local and regional contexts, realities, and priorities. This puts Arab researchers at a disadvantage as they grapple to shape their work to fit into what are considered acceptable global frameworks, theories, and ideas at the cost of overlooking important local issues that may not (Hanafi, 2011). This breeds an environment in which there is little room for generating academic debates at the local level; where mainstream western frameworks, theories, and ideas are not critiqued; and where Arabic language academic research and publications are considered of lower value (Altbach, 2013; Hanafi, 2011; Jamal, 2006).

**Academic resources:** Universities in the Arab world suffer from a lack of adequate resources that are paramount to cultivating a healthy academic research environment. Poorly equipped libraries and inadequate access to periodical and global journal databases are major hurdles for researchers in the region. Limited access to accurate data is commonplace, as is a general lack of consortiums, networks, and cooperatives for sharing academic resources. Also, for the most part, there is an absence of institutional structures and systems through which to circulate academic research (Altbach, 2013; McGlennon, 2006; Nasr & Hajjar, 1997).

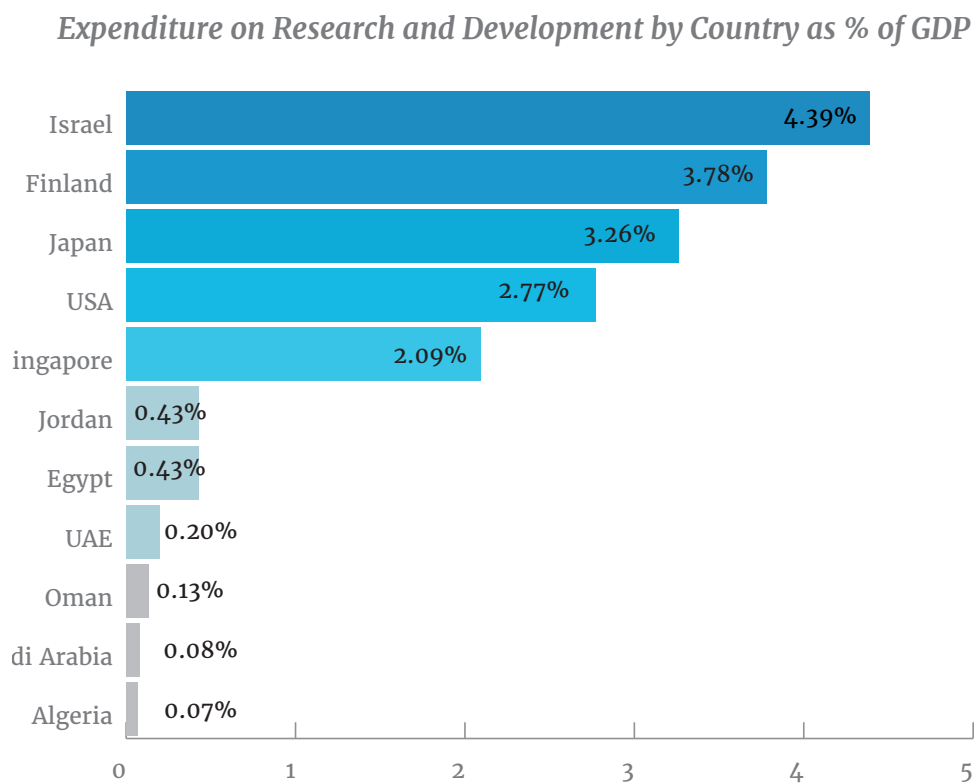


Figure 2. Source UNESCO World Social Science Report (2013)

Source for UAE data: FNC First Annual Conference for UAE Researchers (2014)

**Working conditions:** Research in Arab universities is disincentivized due to the general working conditions faculty members are faced with. Heavy teaching loads with little release time to commit to research projects coupled with excessive paperwork and approval processes discourage academics from producing research. This is exasperated by congested working spaces; absence of support staff; limited access to academic resources; and lack of computing facilities. The low income of faculty members in

the region introduces a need to take on consultancy, moonlighting, and other revenue generating activities which significantly reduce the time spent on academic research (Altbach, 2013; Jamal, 2006; Nasr & Hajjar, 1997; Shami, 1989).

### *Capability Challenges*

**Capacity:** One of the biggest challenges that knowledge production faces in the region is capacity of researchers. Local education systems use outdated methodologies and frameworks and encourage rote memorization over critical thinking. Teaching is repetitive and redundant; training in theory is weak and philosophy is often absent from curricula. As Altorki wrote on methodology in the Arab university, “[t]he ‘traditional methodology’ of the narrowly trained scholars seems to promote respect for exaggerated scientism. This approach tends to miss the qualitative dimension of social relations and institutions and often results in figures and statistics that support flimsy results and flimsy conclusions” (Altorki, 2013, p. 244). Rached and Craissati (2000) find that this methodological lag brings about questionable and flawed results which “reduces or destroys the faith of users in the proficiency of indigenous Arab researchers” (p. 129).

A key contributing factor to lack of capacity is the rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions in the region. As the numbers increase at a fast pace, there is difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified faculty, and as a result, universities have been offering short doctorate programs to undertrained students who eventually move on to teach in these universities (Rached & Craissati, 2000).

**Flight of talent:** Specifically looking at the flight of talent within social science academia, two forms can be discerned. First, are those individuals who leave lower paying bureaucratic jobs in academia for more lucrative private sector and consultancy opportunities. While many of these individuals who were trained abroad or in elite foreign founded universities in the region are well positioned and well prepared to train future young researchers and to cultivate knowledge production in Arab universities, their efforts are geared towards short term, quick, client based research projects within the corporate world. This loss of talent has sidelined the university from its primary role of producing knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

Second, is the classic Arab “brain drain”, a phenomenon common to the region. The “push” factors that entice Arab youth to leave their countries to study or work abroad are many, and include political and social instability; unemployment; low salaries; mismatch between education and market needs; high costs of living; and respect in the workplace (Abu-Nasrah, 2013; Chaaban, 2009; Hassan, 2007; Sawahel, 2004). In the social sciences, the relative lack of opportunities for research; the absence of high quality research universities; the low esteem in which research and development are regarded by Arab governments (Zahlan, 1980); and the lack of investment in research (Sawahel, 2004), all contribute heavily to the flight of talent. This intellectual and human capital along with the potential ideas and discoveries that come with it, is lost (al-Wazir, 2014) and Arab academic institutions suffer greatly as sites for knowledge production.

**Domination of western researchers:** Researchers in western institutions dominate the field of social science. Researchers in public universities or foreign founded universities in the Arab world produce a significantly lower percentage of research on the region than their western counterparts. Knowledge produced regionally does not become a part of the global discourse on the region. This dynamic creates a dearth in knowledge production that is rooted in local experiences and contexts and supports the hegemony of western thought and frameworks.



## SUMMARY: CHALLENGES FACING ARAB SOCIAL SCIENCE

### *Research Environment Challenges*

**National policies and regulations:** In the Arab world there is an overregulation of research and academia whereby research is tied to centralized institutions which limit the growth of autonomous research.

**Global liberal capitalist influences:** Globalization and the deregulation of higher education have led to the commodification of education and to the mushrooming of low quality, profit seeking institutions which are not producing critical thinkers needed to make meaningful contributions to research and knowledge production in the region.

**Academic cultures and social values:** Globalization and neoliberal capitalist influences have led to an asymmetrical investment in profit driven research. Social science disciplines in the region are further devalued by a culture that associates them with a lack of rigor and prestige.

**Academic networks and associations:** Arab academic associations and cross-regional networks are weak, be it among public local universities or foreign founded private universities and only a small group of “elite” academics are partaking in global discourses and conferences.

**Funding:** Social science in the Arab world suffers from a lack of funding where even the wealthiest Arab countries spend less than 1% of their GDP on research and development.

### *Research Institutions Challenges*

**University bureaucracies:** Universities in the Arab suffer from bureaucracy and red tape such as long and tedious approval processes, extensive paperwork and reporting, and ineffective and inefficient governing bodies.

**Institutional performance measures:** Across the Arab world evaluation and performance measurements are weak. Also, Arab academic institutions are often measured against international standards set by the global north which are divorced from the local contexts.

**Academic resources:** Universities in the Arab world suffer from the lack of adequate resources such as poorly equipped libraries; limited access to periodicals and data; and lack of networks and resource sharing.

**Working conditions:** The working conditions faculty members include heavy teaching loads; excessive paperwork and bureaucracy; congested working spaces; limited support staff and access to resources; and low pay.

### *Research Individuals Challenges*

**Capacity:** Local education systems use outdated methodologies and frameworks and encourage rote memorization over critical thinking. Teaching is repetitive and redundant; training in theory is weak and philosophy is often absent from curricula.

**Flight of talent:** Individuals leave lower paying bureaucratic jobs in academia for more lucrative private sector and consultancy opportunities. Others are pushed to study or work broad due to a number of reasons such as political and social instability; unemployment; low salaries; mismatch between education and market needs; high costs of living; and respect in the workplace.

**Domination of Western researchers:** Western and western trained Arab researchers dominate the social science field in academia. Researchers in public universities or foreign founded universities in the region produce a significantly lower percentage of the research on the Arab world.

## THE BIG PICTURE

### *The Impact of knowledge production on informed citizenship and development in the Arab World*

Colonial contexts, in which social science has developed, have led to an unequal production, distribution, and acquisition of knowledge across geographies. This disparity in knowledge production is further aggravated by globalization and neo-liberal capitalist influences. Global knowledge production has politics inherent within it- in the current global context, western institutions and countries determine research agendas, standards, and priorities, and are therefore more likely to reap the benefits of globalized knowledge production. As countries compete on a global scale to be viable and prosperous knowledge economies, knowledge is commodified and becomes their prime product. Knowledge activities and universities become a means of production while researchers, academics, and other knowledge workers are labourers within this system. In this sense, control over what counts as knowledge, what are priority knowledge agendas, and what are suitable theoretical frameworks, can target knowledge production towards objectives and utilities that best suit certain kinds of knowledge producers and their economic, social, and political priorities. Additionally, as identities and senses of space and place become deterritorialized, those with the greatest control over knowledge production and communication, have the biggest chance of shaping global identities and global modes of understanding and meaning making.

Knowledge produced on the Arab world, which guides our development priorities, policies, understanding of identities and selves, and collective consciousness is disproportionately produced in the west or by westerners. The voice, perspectives, and experiences of those living in the region continue to be subjected to external observers whose points of reference are foreign and who maintain an uneven power relationship to their subjects of study.

If we agree that discourses, global and local, serve to structure our perceptions of reality, as well as our own identities, the exclusion of Arab voices from global discourses distorts our view of reality. De facto control of research agendas by global research centers (in which conferences are held, research is funded, and peer reviewed journals are published), skews research in the developing world toward subjects that are not necessarily local priorities. More importantly, it creates an imbalance in discourse itself. While discourse does not exist in isolation, but is in constant dialogue with other discourses, the lack of participation and inclusion of non-elite Arab researchers in global research communities and circles reproduces hegemonic narratives that do not allow for a choice in what constitutes “truth”.

Imbalance of perspectives within global discourse has a pedagogical impact as well. Only students of elite, English medium, universities have access to sufficient resources and are able to utilize them adequately. Those who do not qualify for or cannot afford an education in private and foreign founded institutions receive poor training in research and are disadvantaged by the scarcity and low quality of local, Arabic research and the neglect of theory and frameworks by professors in local universities. For everyone else,

for whom a university education is out of reach, research and knowledge production remain enigmatic processes that are the purview of the elite. Inequality in class, social status, and education translate into a discrepancy in the capacity to produce knowledge. In a world rapidly moving toward knowledge economies, such skills become paramount to economic survival and therefore inequalities of capacity become disparities in earning potential and reproduce existing social inequalities.

As young Arabs seek to reform unequal social structures and institutions, and take on more civic responsibilities, it is paramount that pedagogy, as well as the knowledge and information they consume is informed by both global ideology and local narratives, contexts, and experiences. Informed and responsible citizenship requires both an understanding of the global principles that govern us but also of the experiences of others who share our contexts and histories. Analytical skills and the ability to understand and shape the forces around us are critical to a public able to self-determine and lead their countries to prosperity. Without local knowledge production that encourages the participation of all sections of society, what is ultimately at stake is not just susceptibility to orientalizing discourses but also a lack of self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-determination.

If globalization is the driving force of the day, and its character is neoliberal and based on free market capitalism and individualist consumerism that does not attend to the public good, an opposing and balancing force must be erected within the Arab academy to counter and contest the so called normalcy of this state of affairs. The Arab academy and indeed its engagement with the Arab public must seek to contest the dominant hegemonic logic of neo-liberal globalization to make visible the diverse narratives of Arab citizens, demonstrate their agency, and project their voices.

# GLOBALIZATION AND RESEARCH IN THE UAE

Globalization has impacted the UAE politically, economically, and culturally. As a new state, the UAE has worked towards becoming an active global player in the world economy and surpass the developed world through state led policies and initiatives to build large service and commercial sectors that take advantage of the UAE's unique geographic location as a trade center. More recently, the state has embarked on a plan to achieve a service-knowledge economy by 2021 as has been reflected in the UAE Vision 2021. This thrust onto the global stage coupled with the country's ambitious plans for the future has led to a focus by the state on global competitiveness and on enhancing institutions and policies in order to maximize productivity. State led interventions have included the development and modernization of public services, building infrastructures, launching strategic projects around tourism and the media, as well as mega projects.

The UAE's ambitious plans to build modern urban centers on par with its global counterparts have required the import of migrant labor from across the globe and the Arab region. This has shifted the UAE's demographic make-up drastically and has led to an imbalance whereby UAE citizens make up less than 20% of the population. Demographic changes, rapid development, and an unprecedented encounter with globalization have made the need for preserving national identity, heritage, and history especially pronounced. Discourses and debates surrounding national identity are commonplace. The National, a local UAE newspaper, regularly features articles by prominent Emiratis bemoaning the threat to national identity and the imminent loss of the Arabic language and Emirati dialect.

The modernization project of the UAE and its endeavor to be a player in the global knowledge economy, and a modern state that preserves its local identity necessitates that it pay special attention to research, documentation, and the comprehension of the everyday lives of nationals and expatriates in the country as well as to the discrepancies of experiences between different segments of Emirati society.

## RESEARCH IN THE UAE

The UAE faces many of the same challenges to knowledge production as the rest of the Arab world though to varying degrees because its historical trajectory and encounter with globalization have been unique. While the UAE shares a similar history with its Gulf neighbors, its context remains largely different from that of the rest of the Arab world. Unlike countries of the Levant and North Africa, the UAE's experience with colonialism was very brief and its inception as a nation state is relatively new. As such, the UAE's institutions, educational, cultural, or otherwise are nascent. This also means that local documentation of history, ways of life, urban development, migration patterns, and research on the impact of globalization and rapid socio-economic change is new and scarce.

While the UAE has done much to encourage research, it has done so primarily with an economic goal in mind. The UAE has developed policies and institutions to support the nation's transition away from dependence on natural endowments and towards a knowledge and innovation driven economy. National rhetoric is very much focused on the ultimate goal of building a knowledge economy through education, innovation, and research. The nation's mission and vision as reflected in the UAE's Vision 2021 clearly outlines this as a national priority, with the dedicated theme of "United in Knowledge:

A Competitive Economy Driven by Knowledgeable and Innovative Emiratis,” in which “a diversified and flexible knowledge-based economy will be powered by skilled Emiratis and strengthened by world-class talent to ensure long-term prosperity for the UAE” (UAE Vision 2021 website). Embedded within these messages is an underlying quest to become one of the most competitive nations, not just regionally, but also globally, in line with the most advanced countries of the global north. Indices, such as the WEF’s Global Competitiveness Index and the World Bank’s Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) became primary indicators for measuring progress and success. Moving up the rankings of global competitiveness indices is important to the national agenda, with dedicated government departments and institutions working towards this goal. The efforts channeled have seen the UAE rank 19 out of 148 countries on the WEF’s 2013–2014 KEI and become the only Arab country to be classified as “innovation-driven”– the most advanced stage of economic development– for the past seven years (ECC, 2014).

Driving this move towards a knowledge economy in the UAE is a strong university infrastructure as well as independent and government research institutions and foundations which support research and innovation and underscore their importance in becoming a strong contender in the global knowledge market. Furthermore, the UAE has taken measures to reform primary and secondary education; to upgrade higher education curricula in ways that promote creativity, innovation, and research capabilities; to encourage and fortify synergies between research institutions and industry; and to develop an advanced information, technology, and communication sector (ECC website).

The UAE today houses 79 accredited higher education institutions, encompassing public and private universities and a number of satellite campuses of western based institutes. Other research institutions, such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) also support research at the university level and beyond, offering competitive and peer reviewed grant opportunities to individuals, teams of researchers, institutes, and companies on a national scale. Further diversifying the research landscape in the UAE are independent research institutions such as the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research; government think tanks such as the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government; international organizations and private sector entities such as consultancies; and research departments situated within various government and non-government organizations.

The importance of research for global competitiveness is quite tangible in the UAE. The government, driven by economic impetus, has not only recognized and clearly articulated this importance, but has also taken substantial measures to lay a solid foundation for research and knowledge production.

According to a report produced by the National Research Foundation (NRF, 2012) in which interviews were conducted with the vice dean or the vice president of eight universities in the UAE (United Arab Emirates University, Zayed University, American University of Sharjah, University of Sharjah, British University of Dubai, Khalifa University of Science Technology and Research, and Masdar Institute), research in universities in the UAE is in its infancy. All of the institutions examined had a primary mandate of producing research and had erected structures and facilities and set up procedures for this purpose. Six of the universities had set up research offices aimed at supporting research in the university and all had included research agendas in their organizational strategies and provided institutional funding for research (NRF, 2012). Institutional competitive research grants have become a norm within these institutions, providing faculty with incentives to produce knowledge that addresses contemporary issues in the UAE. In one public university, institutional funding for research increased almost eight



fold from 2012 to 2014, from approximately half a million to over 4.3 million dirhams. Research agendas set up by institutions are focused on supporting and funding research that is in line with government development priorities and particularly those relating to sustainability, innovation, and technology (NRF, 2012).

Some of the largest universities in the UAE, both public and foreign founded, have been built around other academic models found abroad – namely American, British, Canadian, and Australian. The American University of Dubai, for example, states that it “seeks to duplicate the American recipe for successful higher education” (AUD website). Another example is Zayed University, a public English medium university, which follows international best practice in liberal arts education (typically fashioned against American liberal arts colleges). Universities in the UAE have taken to importing educational models, facilities, structures, and manpower already available, and arguably successful, elsewhere and building on those models for the benefit of local goals. While this emulation of best practice serves many needs and can be beneficial, it allows institutions to fall into trappings of western academia that may not be well suited for the Arab world or the UAE. In particular are the shortcomings of the ivory tower model which sees academia as the main focus of knowledge production. This model views knowledge produced from outside of the academy as less valuable and discourages the engagement of the public in the knowledge production process.

This is particularly problematic in the UAE as most academics and professional researchers are foreigners and have little access to private Emirati lives or cultural, contextual, local knowledge. Furthermore, the dependency on western models of education as well as on what they deem to be “success” within the academy leads to an Emirati social science that is largely organized by social sciences in the west, and by social science structures conceived and first implemented in foreign contexts.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

To help us better understand social science production in the UAE, we surveyed over thirty professors and spoke to a number of colleagues and academics in the field, spanning six of the major universities in the nation between July and September 2014. The following sections outline our findings with the aim to better contextualize research production in UAE universities, and to highlight the challenges and opportunities professors within these academic institutions face. We then offer a set of recommendations aimed at government and institutions, which can be implemented on the short, medium, and long term, to help overcome these challenges and build upon existing strengths and opportunities.

### *Institutions*

The state led capitalist incentive in many institutions of higher learning as well as the emulation of American and British ivory tower institutional models has led to many of the same challenges in the UAE as in the rest of the Arab world. Universities see the instrumental production of research, as well as the churning out of employable students as their highest priorities. Our survey asked university professors to rank the priorities of their institutions and they reported that social development and developing the nation’s workforce are the top aims of their institutions followed by producing knowledge in the third place (see figure 3). Where academics indicated that producing knowledge was important, they clarified that instrumental, utilitarian knowledge was most valued, especially if it was in the sciences and technology. Professors did not rank preserving national history or ensuring cultural continuity as aims of their institutions,

thereby indicating that there is little acknowledgement by universities of their roles as guardians of national culture and history. These priorities impact the culture of research in academic institutions in the UAE, where researchers complain of institutional red tape and an inability to pursue their research interests without interference. Academics surveyed for this paper were asked to rank the top five challenges they face in conducting research in the UAE. The top challenges identified were institutional red tape followed by the lack of resources and lack of academic flexibility.

### *Institutional Priorities*



Figure 3. Institutional Aims of Universities

Academics indicated that the amount of paperwork and approvals required to conduct research was prohibitive particularly when it related to fieldwork and human subjects in the UAE. While research offices were instituted to support research, respondents claim that these offices instead end up being enforcers of tedious bureaucratic rules. Such obstacles were also faced when disseminating research outside of journal publications whereby any broadcast of results necessitated approvals from administrators and marketing offices alike. Furthermore, academics reported that they believed their heavy teaching loads (three or more courses a semester) coupled with the amount of paperwork they had to do, and with abnormally long semesters to be major obstacles in their ability to conduct research (see figures 4 and 5). Research conducted by the NRF on the subject of research priorities in the UAE pointed to some of the same problems we have discovered here and adds that teaching loads also create barriers for academics to network and build associations with their counterparts in other institutions. Additionally, NRF research indicates that some universities officially and unofficially allow faculty to buy out teaching time with grants (NRF, 2012). However, our respondents reported that while this is sometimes possible, the system is not implemented consistently or officially in many universities which makes it difficult for faculty to rely on grants to alleviate their teaching burdens.

Aggravating the lack of time for research is the inadequacy of human resources able to aid academics in their research. The scarcity of PhD students and young researchers

### *Institutional Priorities in Terms of Faculty Workload*

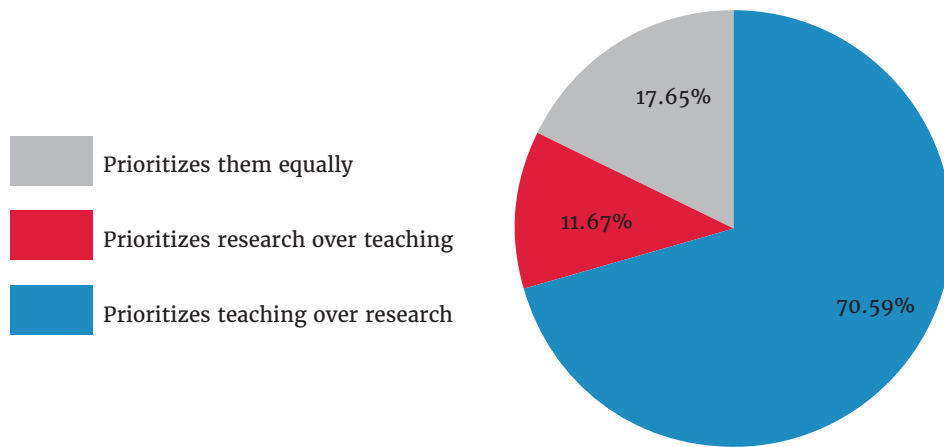


Figure 4. Division of Faculty Workload

### *Amount of Paperwork Universities Require*

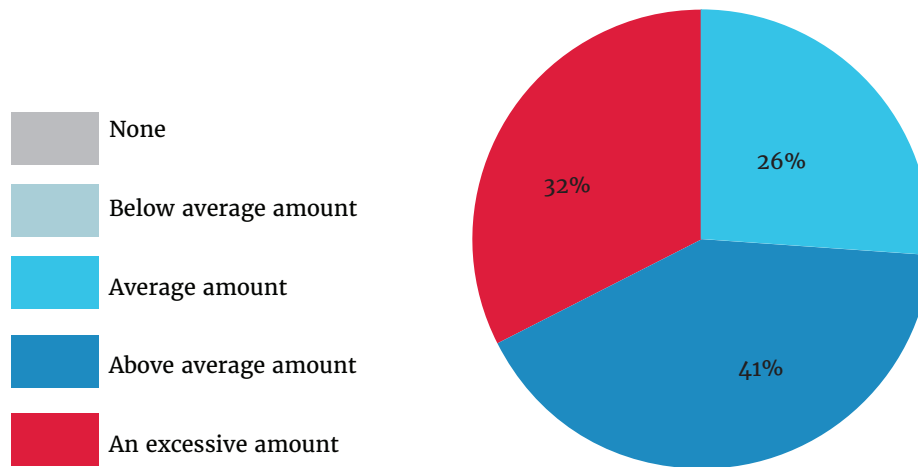


Figure 5. Amount of Paperwork Required by Faculty and Researchers

able to assist and provide research support was a problem for faculty responding to this survey. Access to other kinds of resources was also reported to be limited. Academics described difficulties in accessing data, archival and historical documents, and in some cases, international journals.

Funding, though available, was difficult to access for some who claimed that it was both not enough and also not allocated to specific research areas making grant competitions inconsistent. Additionally, research funding becomes available for subject matters that are deemed most necessary at the time, particularly those relating to the



UAE agenda. Topics that lie outside of those parameters are often left unsupported. As with the regional trend, funding for research in the UAE is primarily government driven and allocated to researchers through university structures or the national research fund. As such, the research agendas of academics become tied to government priorities as opposed to exploring socio-economic issues of all kinds.

### Research capacity

Research capacity in the UAE, as with most other fields and industries, is largely composed of imported academics and research employees. While the UAE has begun to develop national talent in this area, there remains a significant gap in Emirati researchers and research assistants in the country.

This is significant from the perspective of knowledge production for several key reasons: the first is that foreign researchers and those producing knowledge on the UAE do not have access to local networks and communities and therefore are less able to produce work on topics deemed “sensitive” or “private”; second, foreign researchers have, as their areas of expertise, geographies other than the GCC and therefore their training and primary research lies elsewhere; and finally, researchers who produce research on the UAE do so as a means to receive funding or access to resources as opposed to any genuine interest or expertise in and on the UAE (see figures 6 and 7).

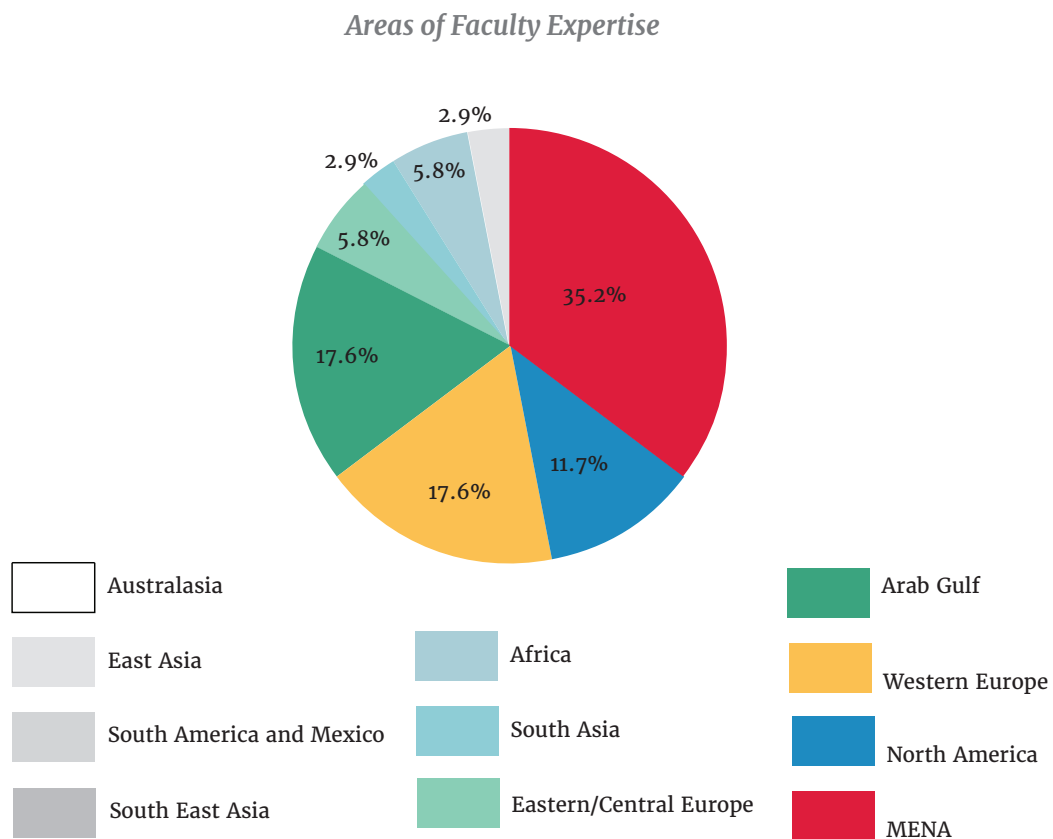


Figure 6. Survey Respondents’ Geographic Areas of Expertise

*Percentage of Respondents who Conduct Research on the UAE*

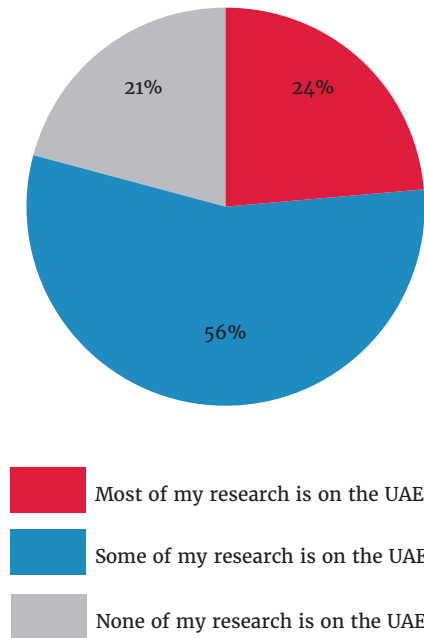


Figure 7. Percentage of Respondents who Conduct Research on the UAE

These factors are detrimental to the quality of social science production coming out of UAE institutions where most scholarship is superficial in nature, lacking in adequate analysis, and lacking in sufficient field work and methodology. Even on the level of research assistants, respondents complained that they were unable to locate and hire qualified undergraduate students, PhD students, or research professionals to assist them with their research projects.

*Faculty Perceptions of Student Interest in Research*

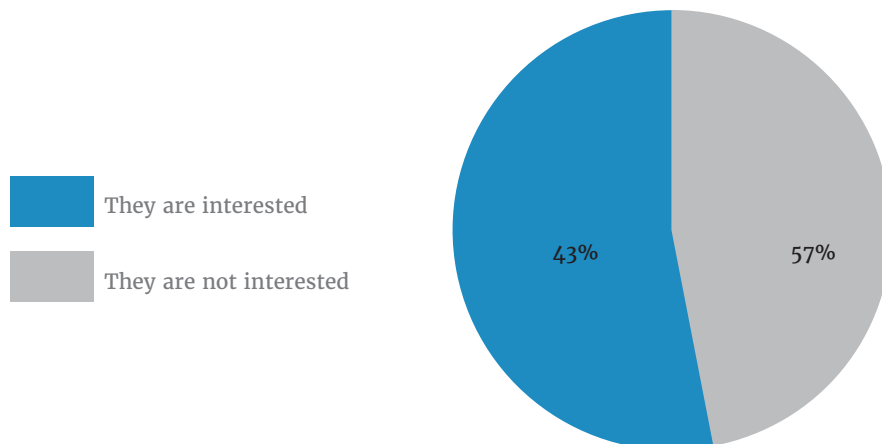


Figure 8. Respondents' Perceptions of Student Interest in Research

Nearly half of our respondents indicated that their students had no interest whatsoever in joining academia or research fields citing that students were not inculcated with this interest at a young age, were more likely to pursue jobs that paid more, and were either unable or unwilling to spend five to seven years earning the necessary degrees (see figure 8).

### *Curricula and education*

Respondents also indicated that they believed that student interest would be heightened if there was more local material available for instruction in classes. Instead, students must learn from foreign examples and texts. As such, 50% of academics indicated that they include contemporary material written by Emirati scholars in their syllabi. However, often times, access to such materials is limited to op-eds, interviews, or other media such as documentaries and videos. Similarly, 71% of respondents indicated that they include contemporary material by Arabs in their teaching, while 94% indicated the use of contemporary western material (see figure 9).

As can be seen in figure 9, western materials are used at a disproportionately higher rate for teaching in all subjects of the social sciences. Materials produced by Arabs or even by Asians and South Asians are used to a lower degree. One attributable reason for this discrepancy is that most public and private universities in the UAE instruct in the English language. As such, materials that are available only in the original Arabic or other languages are excluded. Additionally, classic Arabic materials are not seen as fundamental works for instruction in theory and methods. Instead, core curricula consist of ancient and enlightenment western philosophy. Arab and Muslim philosophers and their texts are relegated more to specialty classes on Arab thought or area studies while western texts form the core of social science curricula.

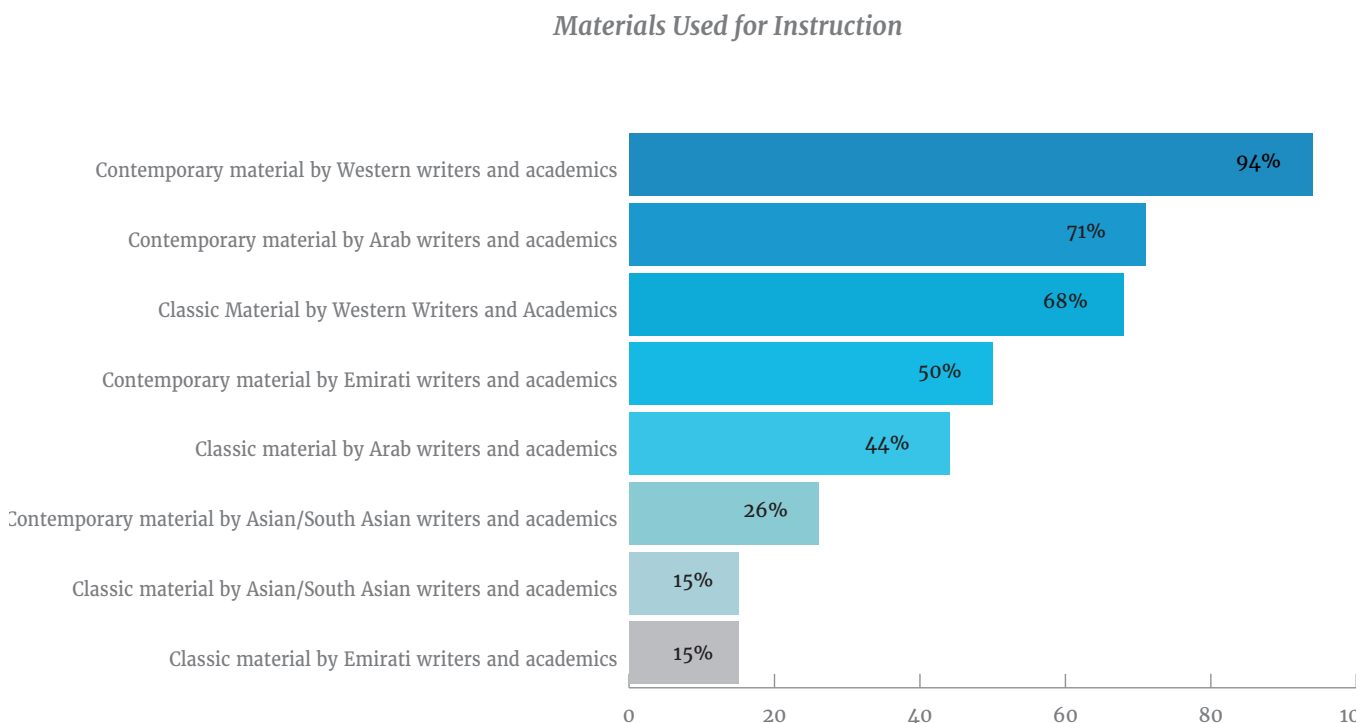


Figure 9. Materials Used for Instruction as Reported by Respondents

## **SUMMARY: UAE'S CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TOWARDS IMPROVED SOCIAL SCIENCE PRODUCTION**

### *Challenges*

- *Focus on vocationalism and instrumental knowledge*
- *University cultures devalue social science production*
- *Institutional red tape and bureaucracy*
- *Lack of academic resources*
- *Dearth of locally based human resources*
- *Disinterest of students in research*
- *Scarce use of Arab and Emirati authored teaching materials in core curricula*

### *Opportunities*

- *Strong university infrastructure*
- *Financial stability*
- *Independent government and research institutions that support research and innovation*
- *Primary and secondary education reforms*
- *Support by leadership for research*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of our research, we propose a set of recommendations that will aid government, academic and research institutions, researchers and academics, and the public to build knowledge ecosystems that serve the public good by making quality knowledge available and accessible to all segments of society. Through various initiatives and policies spanning the short, medium, and long term, stakeholders can work together to transform institutions, build networks, and empower individuals to produce and exploit quality knowledge. Our recommendations aim to address a set of objectives which we believe will support these goals. They are as follows:

**Objective 1:** Encouraging knowledge production that serves local priorities and issues

**Objective 2:** Enabling broad public access to data and knowledge

**Objective 3:** Building public and institutional capacity for knowledge production and consumption

**Objective 4:** Developing social, economic, and civic life in the UAE



## Encouraging knowledge production that serves local priorities and issues

Governments and academic and research institutions must work together to incentivize knowledge production that is local, accessible, focused on local priorities and needs, engaged with local communities and people, and autonomous. Equally, governments and academic institutions must encourage bridging the gaps between those researchers in public universities that produce work in the Arabic language and those that produce it in the English language as well as encourage regional research that does the same.

### *The Role of Government*

#### *UAE Knowledge Production Strategy*

UAE federal government can develop a unified country knowledge production strategy to consolidate efforts and build synergies across universities and institutions, encourage professional networks, consortia, and associations, set national research agendas and priorities, set incentives for universities to produce knowledge at higher rates and of better quality, and produce evaluative criteria and measures for social science production in the UAE. In developing this strategy, government should engage with all stakeholders, including the public, policy makers, universities, research institutions, and academics.

## *Open Data Strategy*

UAE government should develop and pursue an open data strategy in which all government institutions are encouraged and required to publish the data they collect online, in raw formats, and in good condition. The government can build on already existing statistics and research centers to ensure the availability of data.

## *Funding Requirements and Procedures*

National funding institutions should fund researchers directly instead of using universities as the mediators in order to reduce time allocated to unnecessary bureaucracy. Additionally, funding criteria and allocation must be consistent and clear and include requirements that encourage cooperation. Those who receive funding must be required to mentor others, hire national research assistants, give back to the communities they are studying, work with academics in other institutions locally and regionally, and publish some or all of their findings in open access platforms.

## *Facilitating Independent Research Institutions*

Government must set up regulations to facilitate and incentivize the setup of independent research institutions in the UAE. These bodies will support blue skies research and provide funding to projects that are unaffiliated with industry or government, and that produce knowledge for knowledge sake.

## *Matriculation Policies*

The importance of the social sciences in understanding and addressing social issues and ensuring the sustainability and relevance of local knowledge production must be reflected in matriculation policies to ensure that top national talent pursue careers in the field. Current matriculation policies which encourage top students to enter scientific and business fields are inadvertently devaluing the field of social science, making it socially less prestigious, and obstructing its future in the UAE and region more broadly.

## *The Role of Academic Institutions*

### *Measurements and Evaluation*

Universities and institutions in the UAE must develop regular and rigorous institutional evaluation processes which are not based on western models and frameworks. These processes must make local knowledge production more valued and considered in promotions and career trajectories. Evaluation criteria should take into account and valorize publication in local, regional, and Arabic journals, and must place a premium on engaged research by encouraging local and regional collaborative research endeavors which involve the public.

### *Working Conditions*

Current working conditions in UAE universities must be revised to allow faculty members to invest more time in research. Teaching loads and working hours should be reduced, and consistent, official, accessible, and implemented sabbatical systems must be put in place. Furthermore, faculty salaries should be increased to a level that discourages them from engaging in revenue driven activities (such as consulting,

commissioned research, overtime, and moonlighting) which ultimately takes away from time invested in research.

### *Reducing red tape and bureaucracy*

Research offices within universities and institutions must better streamline processes and procedures for researchers and faculty members in ways that reduce red tape and approval times. This can be achieved through transparent guidelines, reduced reporting and paperwork, and more clarity on priority research subject areas. In addition, procedures around the dissemination of research must also be simplified and divorced from marketing and public relation processes that tend to have long approval times.



## **Enabling broad public access to data and knowledge**

Government and institutions must ensure not only the production of local knowledge, but its accessibility to the broadest possible segment of society. Local knowledge must be collected, archived, and easily accessible.

### *The Role of Government*

#### *Translation and Publishing Institutions*

The UAE should facilitate and incentivize the establishment of institutions which specialize in translating knowledge produced globally into Arabic. This will be key in closing the gap between scholars who are affiliated with public Arabic medium universities and those who are part of western institutions or foreign founded institutions in the region. It will also ensure that the latest social science theories, methodologies, and resources, from around the world are available to Arab students, faculty, and scholars. The establishment of local publishing houses must also be incentivized to ensure that locally produced knowledge is published and disseminated locally and globally.

#### *Archiving Institutions*

The UAE can take the lead in establishing a centralized archiving institution which will document both the rich historical and contemporary work from the UAE, as well as the region more broadly. This central archive should seek to access, digitize, and make openly available both private and public collections of historical and contemporary materials.

## *The Role of Academic Institutions*

### *Open Access Databases*

Universities should unify one database for locally produced knowledge. These sources, both classical and contemporary, including published and unpublished work, should be digitized, indexed, and made available and easily accessible to the public.

### *Library Consortia Open to the Public*

Universities and academic institutions should form a library consortium, whereby library resources are shared amongst each other, but are also made available to the public. This will help to ensure that social science material is accessible by all.

### *Using Online Tools and Social Media to Disseminate Research*

Universities and academic institutions should develop dissemination plans and strategies which utilize the internet and capitalize on the outreach of social media. The utilization of online tools will ensure that knowledge produced locally can reach people locally, regionally, and globally.



## **Building public and institutional capacity for knowledge production and consumption**

To be made most useful, access to knowledge has to be coupled with enhancing researchers' and the public's capacity to exploit it for their own benefit. This includes ensuring that higher education bodies are producing quality students who are not just employable but who possess the skills to think critically and analytically, providing space for communities of practice where researchers can learn from one another, and train the public on basic research skills.

## *The Role of Government*

### *Accreditation Body*

UAE government can take the lead in establishing a regional accreditation and evaluation body to complement existing national bodies and develop and standardize criteria across the region. The accreditation body should set measurement and evaluation criteria that is locally and regionally relevant, and that will ensure reliable and accurate assessments. This will also set the stage for increased cooperation, partnership, and resource sharing among regional academic institutions.



### *Policies for How Public Funding is Spent*

Public funds allocated to research should be accompanied by policies which encourage collaboration among various stakeholders. For example, this may include a criterion that specifies a university/industry partnership; joint research among professors in local and foreign funded universities or western institutions; research in collaboration with government entities; or a stipulation for the mentorship of a certain number of students. By creating policies on how public research grants are administered, the government can help to overcome some of the challenges that researchers and research currently face: such as working in silos; duplication of efforts; lack of research interest among students; and isolation of local researchers who work in Arabic, to name a few.

### *Regulation of Degree Market*

Stricter regulations should be set up in the UAE to prohibit non-accredited, low quality, profit driven degree programs from being established. More rigid laws will ensure that individuals enrolled in degree programs are receiving quality education which gives them the critical and analytical skills necessary to compete in a global knowledge economy.

### *Reforming Social Science Degree Programs and Curricula*

Social science degree programs need to be reformed to provide greater emphasis on theory making and on analytical and critical thinking skills. Additionally, degree programs must require professors and educators to include higher numbers of Arabic language materials- both contemporary and classical- in their curricula. On the graduate level, intermediate Arabic language proficiency must be a requirement for graduation and publication in Arabic language journals must be encouraged.

## *The Role of Academic Institutions*

### *Recruitment and Retention*

Universities and academic institutions in the UAE need to enhance the working conditions of social science faculty members by reducing red tape and bureaucracy; decreasing teaching loads; releasing more time for research; providing resources and research support; extending stability through tenure tracks; and offering competitive employment packages. By doing so, universities will not only be able to recruit top talent, but they will also have higher faculty retention rates. Implementing such changes will incentivize more local and regional students to pursue academic careers, particularly in the social sciences, and lead to a future influx of researchers into the labour market thus ensuring sustainability of the field in the long run.

### *Networks and Associations*

Universities in the UAE are well positioned to create formal and official social science networks and associations at the regional level. These associations- through engagement with stakeholders and constituents- are responsible for setting priorities and trends for social science research and knowledge production in the region as well as encouraging networking and collaboration regionally and locally.

## *Training Programs and Networks*

Training and mentoring programs must be set up across universities. Universities must collaborate with one another to form cross-university mentoring programs where senior researchers can offer guidance to junior faculty and researchers and to each other. Local research training networks can be established to offer free and open training for local researchers which can be held in local universities and conducted by local researchers. Furthermore, attending training programs on theory and method on a yearly basis must be made feasible for every professor and researcher to ensure that their skills are updated and enhanced.



## **Developing social, economic, and civic life in the UAE**

Knowledge production and access must ultimately serve the purpose of creating a nation of citizens who are able to be responsible, innovative, analytical, and informed. Documentation, research, and archiving must enable people to engage socially and economically in the nation building process and participate in achieving ambitious national agendas. This requires a cultural shift that must be led by institutions and government alike.

### *The Role of Government*

#### *Awareness Campaigns and Public Engagement*

UAE government and educational institutions can engage the public in a conversation about the significance of the social sciences in public life. School students, particularly, can be engaged to help them to understand the importance of learning Emirati history and partaking in critical thinking and analytical practices that allow them to become better citizens.

### *The Role of Academic Institutions*

#### *University – School Engagement*

Universities must engage with schools through mentorship programs, research internship programs, and public lectures to encourage young people to become interested in social science early and to equip them with the skills needed for critical thinking and analysis.

## *University – Public Engagement*

Universities must engage with the public through training programs, capacity building, and research networks that allow communities and individuals to write their own narratives and engage in participant-as-observer research and create knowledge about their own communities and practices.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined social science in the UAE and confirmed that the UAE, like the rest of the Arab world, suffers from a dearth of social science production due to environmental, institutional, and capacity challenges. Additionally, social science research in the UAE is still disproportionately produced by foreigners, evaluated by foreign measures, and disseminated in euro-centric, global journals, publications, and spaces. Because social science knowledge is still overwhelmingly communicated in European languages, and accommodates a mode of meaning making that is euro-centric, it reinforces inequalities of capacity and has cultural, social, and economic implications for the UAE.

Nation building – efforts to preserve national history, identity, and heritage, coupled with endeavors to build effective public institutions and economic growth– can be supported by quality social science across the country. This is true for three reasons: First, social science allows citizens to better understand who they are collectively as a nation and to understand the history, identity, struggles, experiences, and challenges that face the various and diverse segments of society; second, social science research and teaching raises the capacity of Emiratis so they can better exploit global and local knowledge to improve their lives; third, social science research and its dissemination allows the UAE to assert its interests globally and reshape global discourse and established and accepted rules and standards.

On the level of nation building, conversations around Emirati identity and its preservation can benefit from building research capacities among young Emiratis who can then document the diversity of Emirati heritage, and analyze and comprehend the ways in which modernity, globalization, and economic change have impacted Emirati identities and experiences. National identity cannot be enhanced or preserved without first understanding the historical and contemporary context in which it exists, the ways in which individuals and communities understand their own identities, and how this understanding is evolving. If the mass distribution of goods and services across the globe, the likes of which we have never seen before, is spreading homogenized, capitalist, western culture, it follows that national culture and identity is being impacted in some form by these changes. Citizens must become equipped with the tools (offered through social science training) to negotiate globalizing influences, but also to imagine alternative realities, identities, and communities that are inspired by indigenous knowledge and local goals. Indeed, the ability to make meaning outside of homogenized western discourses is paramount to the collective autonomy of Emirati society.

Public institutions too, of which education and healthcare are some, can be improved through a more nuanced understanding of local priorities and needs rather than a reliance on global best practice alone and on western, individualistic, capitalist notions of what individuals require from their public institutions. On a fundamental level, discourses and practices surrounding public institutions can benefit from redefining what the public good is within the local context of the UAE, and asking what about that is different from western notions of what public goods are. Making concepts of what constitutes the public sphere and what its role ought to be more localized and based on local knowledge and understanding is just as valuable to improving public life as understanding the precise needs of Emirati society. That too, requires social science research. Public institutions can be steered in more effective and efficient directions

through a better understanding of the needs of citizens and residents.

Outside of the purely social, economic competitiveness is highly impacted by research. Conventional wisdom has already proven that scientific research is closely tied to economic growth; we argue that social science research production also impacts the economy. Social science can, as it has done with culture and society, help us negotiate globalization's impact on the economy and on national agendas. Competitiveness, which drives so much of national economic policy and practice, can be reframed, not as a singular goal that we try to achieve and that we assess through our movement up and down indices, but more holistically. If we think of the world as several countries that compete within a global system which is rapidly moving toward knowledge economies, it is those countries that can best produce knowledge and teach their citizens to exploit it, that monopolize the most profitable activities. As such, standards and rules are set in an existing power system that benefits some countries over others. Therefore, social science can and must be used not only to enhance economic activity and products, but also to begin to rethink the rules of global economic engagement and to influence them globally and negotiate their impact locally.

The social sciences are not divorced from global power structures, and we need to consider seriously the structures within which social science disciplines have developed and matured. As Asad (2011) notes in the case of anthropology which emerged as a discipline within a colonial context, "it is...rooted in an unequal encounter between the [w]est and the [t]hird [w]orld...this encounter that gives the [w]est access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a certain kind of universal understanding but also reinforces the inequalities in capacity between the European and non-European world" (p.91). Historically, even the most well intended social science involved imperialist powers, facilitating the study of countries that then exploited and dominated. It is for the reasons of social, cultural, and economic autonomy and progress that creating quality indigenous social science should be an immediate and urgent national objective.

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