BETTER SKILLS
BETTER JOBS
BETTER LIVES

A STRATEGIC APPROACH
TO EDUCATION AND SKILLS POLICIES
FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
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Better Skills
Better Jobs
Better Lives

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO EDUCATION
AND SKILLS POLICIES FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
The United Arab Emirates is identified by PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) as one of the most rapidly improving education systems in the world. However, its students still perform well below the levels expected in advanced economies. This is important because the knowledge and skills of students are a powerful predictor for a country’s wealth and social outcomes in the long run. If the UAE would raise the performance of its lowest-performing 15-year-olds at least to PISA Level 2, which can be considered a minimum for effective participation in industrialised economies, the additional long-term economic output these individuals are likely to generate for the UAE over their working life could be in the order of 2360 billion US$, which exceeds three times the country’s current GDP. Achieving gender parity in PISA outcomes would be equivalent to 660 billion US$. Even if those estimates will always entail considerable uncertainty, they indicate that the likely gains from improving educational outcomes dwarf any conceivable cost of educational reform. Importantly, they also indicate that the current deficits in schooling outcomes in the UAE and other countries are the equivalent of a permanent economic recession.

In short, better skills have become the key to better jobs and better lives.

In 21st century economies, knowledge and skills have become the global currency, and it is essential that a high value is placed on education and training so that a world-class education system can be built. This “currency” of knowledge and skills can only be developed through sustained effort and investment in people. Moreover, it depreciates as skills requirements of labour markets evolve and individuals lose the skills they’re not using.

The coexistence of high unemployment and skills shortages in much of the Arab world illustrates that producing more of the same graduates cannot be the answer. To succeed with converting knowledge and skills into the jobs, growth and social outcomes that nations require, countries need a better understanding of which are the skills that drive strong and sustainable economic and social outcomes. This will help countries ensure that the right mix of skills is being taught and learned, and that effective labour markets are using people’s skill potential.

This report situates the United Arab Emirates in the global context, and puts forward international evidence and research, policy lessons and practical examples to guide the country’s future skills policy development. Following the structure of the OECD’s Skills Strategy, Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies, it explores three policy levers in the context of the United Arab Emirates: policy lever 1, developing relevant skills; policy lever 2, activating skills supply; policy lever 3, putting skills to effective use. The report concludes by discussing the way forward for the United Arab Emirates.

There are no easy answers, and effective policies are usually far easier designed than implemented. But addressing skills needs is essential: success will go to those individuals, institutions and countries that can adapt quickly and are open to change. The task for governments is to help their citizens rise to this challenge.

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Andreas Schleicher
Director for the OECD Education and Skills Directorate
Executive summary

The importance of a strategic approach to education and skills policies

Skills transform lives and drive economies

In today’s knowledge-based global economy, without adequate investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, and technological advances do not translate into sustainable economic and social progress. People with poor skills face a much greater risk of experiencing economic disadvantage, and are more likely to be unemployed and dependent on social benefits. Conversely, the higher their skills the better their earnings, their chances of being employed, and of being engaged in society (Figure I.1).

FIGURE I.1 LIKELIHOOD OF POSITIVE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES AMONG HIGHLY LITERATE ADULTS IN THE OECD AREA

Increased likelihood (odds ratio) of adults scoring at Level 4/5 in literacy reporting high earnings, high levels of trust and political efficacy, good health, participating in volunteer activities and being employed, compared with adults scoring at or below Level 1 in literacy (adjusted)

Note: Odds ratios are adjusted for age, gender, educational attainment and immigrant and language background. High wages are defined as workers hourly earnings that are above the country’s median.

Skills have become the global currency of 21st-century economies. But this “currency” can depreciate as the skills requirements of labour markets, especially of emerging economies such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), evolve. Individuals also lose the skills they do not use, and for skills to retain their value; they must be continuously developed throughout life. Getting the best return on investment in skills requires the ability to assess the quality and quantity of the skills available in the population, determine and anticipate the skills required in the labour market, and develop and use those skills effectively in better jobs that lead to better lives. Working towards achieving this is everyone’s business: governments, employers, employees, parents and students need to establish effective and equitable arrangements as to who pays for what, when and how.
Skills affect people’s lives and the well-being of nations in ways that go far beyond what can be measured by labour market earnings or macroeconomic variables. The benefits of skills to an individual’s health are potentially great. Skills also relate to civic and social behaviour as they affect civic engagement and business relationships. If individuals are more engaged in civic processes then they are more likely to have trust in institutions, which is vital for the functioning of civil societies and business relationships. Figure I.1 above suggests that even if the causal nature of the relationship between skills and positive social and economic outcomes cannot be firmly established from the data available, adults with low levels of foundation skills have a higher likelihood of reporting poor health and participate much less in community groups and organisations. However, adults with high levels of foundation skills are much more likely to feel that they have a voice that can make a difference in social and political life. These results are consistent across a wide range of countries, confirming that skills have a profound relationship with economic and social outcomes across a wide range of contexts and institutions.

**Getting education and skills policies right**

The future prosperity of the United Arab Emirates and other countries will depend, to a large extent, on the country’s success in strategically developing and optimally using its skills potential. The country’s vision for future economic development aims to further diminish its dependence on oil revenue and diversify its economy. At the same time, the national policy aim is to increase the proportion of Emirati natives in the labour force and become less dependent on non-native workers and experts. All these objectives require effective and integrated skills policies that address issues including: the kinds of skills needed in an industrial economy, how today’s students and workers prepare themselves for the future labour market, and how to ensure that available skills are used productively. In considering these issues the United Arab Emirates requires a systematic and comprehensive approach to skills policies that can do the following:

- **Strengthen the case for lifelong learning.** By seeing skills as a tool to be honed over an individual’s lifetime, it is important to take a strategic approach that allows countries to assess the impact of different kinds of learning – from early childhood education, through formal schooling, to formal and informal learning later on – with the aim of balancing the allocation of resources to maximise economic and social outcomes.

- **Combine short- and long-term considerations.** Effective skills policies are needed to respond to structural and cyclical challenges, such as rising unemployment when economies contract, or acute skills shortages when sectors boom. Policies should also ensure that longer term strategic planning for the skills needed to foster competitiveness is in place, as well as the support required for structural changes.

- **Foster a whole-of-government approach.** If skills are to be developed over a lifetime, then a broad range of policy fields are implicated, including education, science and technology, employment, economic development, migration and public finance. Aligning policies between these diverse fields helps policy makers to identify policy trade-offs that may be required, avoids the duplication of efforts, and ensures efficiency.

- **Align the perspectives of different levels of government.** With major geographical variations in the supply of and the demand for skills within countries, there is a strong rationale for considering skills policies at the local level. This would help countries to align national aspirations with local needs.

- **Include all relevant stakeholders.** Designing effective skills policies requires more than coordinating different sectors of public administration and aligning different levels of government: a broad range of non-governmental actors, including employers, professional and industry associations and chambers of commerce, education and training institutions, and individuals must also be involved.

Developing and making the best use of a high-quality pool of skills involves three main policy levers: those that improve the quality and quantity of skills; those that activate skills for the labour market; and those that ensure that skills are used effectively (Figure I.2).
Executive summary

Policy Lever 1: How to improve the quality and quantity of relevant skills?

Build up the evidence base for effective skills policies

Developing the skills potential of a country is at the heart of skills policies. The stock of skills available in the economy at any given time is a function of the size of the working-age population and the level of their skills. Hence, demographic variables need to be taken into consideration when designing forward-looking skills policies (Figure I.3). The United Arab Emirates has one of the fastest growing populations in the world. Much of this demographic change is due to foreign labour migration, however, the United Arab Emirates’ native population has also experienced steady growth in recent decades. This implies that larger numbers of young people will enter the education system (and labour market) in the near future.

In addition to considering the changes in the size and composition of the population, economic context variables need to be considered in the design of skills policies. In the United Arab Emirates, the most salient economic feature used to be the heavy dependence on the oil sector, but in recent years it has managed to diversify its economy considerably, diminishing the reliance on the oil sector to less than 30%. Further diversification and a general shift towards more sustainable sectors of the economy are envisaged, and as with most countries, the economy is moving towards more knowledge-based sectors. These changes imply a decline in the demand for craft skills and physical labour, and a rise in the demand higher-level skills, such as cognitive and interpersonal skills.
Involve employers in designing and delivering education and training programmes

Government and business need to work together to gather evidence about skills demand, present and future, which can then be used to develop up-to-date curricula and inform education and training systems. Beyond designing relevant education and training programmes, both national and international employers also need to be better engaged in the provision of these programmes. Compared to purely government designed curricula taught exclusively in schools, learning in the workplace offers several advantages: it allows young people to develop “hard” skills on modern equipment, and “soft” skills, such as teamwork, communication and negotiation, through real-world experience. Hands-on workplace training can also help to motivate disengaged youth, who struggle with the academic instruction in schools and are at risk of disengaging from education prematurely, to stay in or re-engage with the education system.

Ensure that education and training programmes are of high quality

Time spent in education does not always directly indicate skills learnt, and the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that significant numbers of 15-year-olds in many countries do not acquire even a minimum level of skills through compulsory schooling. The United Arab Emirates made considerable progress between the 2009 and 2012 rounds of PISA assessment (Figure 4), however, its students still perform well below the levels expected in advanced economies. The UAE government can help to foster quality in education and training from early education through school and beyond. Teaching must be valued as a profession so that the best candidates are recruited and the most effective teachers are retained. According to the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), a large majority of lower secondary education teachers in the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi) report feeling “very well prepared” for the content and the pedagogy of the subject(s) they teach. However, schools struggle with high teacher turnover rates, especially among national teachers, and almost 95% of teachers are female meaning that especially young boys may be lacking male role models.
Executive summary

FIGURE 1.4 TRENDS IN STUDENTS’ SKILLS – PISA 2009 AND PISA 2012 IN THE UAE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Score</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OECD PISA 2009 and 2012 databases.

Promote equity by ensuring access to, and success in, quality education for all

Inequality is deepening in many areas of life, and education and training can help to bridge the divide between rich and poor. Improving equity in skills development is both socially fair and economically efficient, with research having long confirmed that the highest-performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine quality with equity (Figure 5). Investing in high-quality early childhood education and initial schooling, particularly for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, is an efficient strategy to ensure that children start strong in their education careers so that first skills lead to future skills. Later in life, financial support targeted at disadvantaged students and schools can improve the development of skills. A particular equity concern in the United Arab Emirates, is the irregular attendance and dropout among boys, especially Emirati nationals, who often seem to lack motivation to remain in school. This creates problems for the national goal of the “Emiratisation” of the workforce, in particular the private sector where relevant skills are necessary to ensure the employability of young men. Related to this issue is grade repetition, which international evidence suggests is not conducive to educational performance and often preludes the disengagement from education altogether.

Remove barriers to investing in further learning

Preparing young people for entry into the labour market with education and training is only one facet of skills development; working-age adults also need to develop their skills so that they can progress in their careers, meet the changing demands of the labour market, and not lose the skills they have already acquired. A wide spectrum of full or part-time adult learning activities needs to be available, such as: work-related employee training, formal education for adults, second-chance courses to obtain a minimum qualification or basic literacy and numeracy skills, language training for immigrants, and labour-market training programmes for jobseekers; as well as learning activities for self-improvement or leisure. The United Arab Emirates is facing the particular challenge of re-engaging adults with very low levels of skills in education, and dropout rates from the Adult Education Centres established to eradicate illiteracy are high. The United Arab Emirates can learn from countries that have developed successful strategies to reach low-skilled adults by combining different modes and purposes of learning, often in non-school environments.
Design policies that encourage students abroad to return after their studies

Knowledge and skills are often acquired outside the national territory, with international student mobility increasing dramatically in recent years. The number of UAE students studying abroad has also been increasing steadily over the last 10 years, reaching around 7 000 in 2008, up from around 4 000 in 1999. This has been supported by a strong scholarship system. To make this investment pay for the United Arab Emirates, however, it is important to ensure that many of these students eventually return and offer their additional skills to the United Arab Emirates’ economy and society. Creating networks of expatriates and alumni can also have positive effects on technology transfer and investments.

Invest in knowledge exchange and cross-border higher education

While governments tend to think and act primarily in national terms, economic activity is increasingly international. As a consequence, skills policies also need to adopt a global perspective. Co-operation on skills policies between source and destination countries can increase benefits to both, for example, some countries provide training to temporary labour migrants in the host country, and the workers can then take this knowledge back to their home.

Source: OECD 2009 PISA database.
Executive summary

countries when they return. Another approach is to design policies that encourage cross-border tertiary education, which can help a country expand its stock of skills more rapidly than if it had to rely on domestic resources alone. The United Arab Emirates has already successfully embarked on this approach by establishing international university partnerships; for example, the Emirate of Abu Dhabi has attracted Paris-Sorbonne, INSEAD and New York University, thus increasing the quality of its tertiary education offerings in a relatively short period of time.

Policy Lever 2: How to encourage people to supply their skills to the labour market?

Identify inactive individuals and the reasons for their inactivity

People may have skills, but for a variety of reasons may not be willing or able to supply them to the labour market. In most countries, a significant number of individuals are out of the labour force by choice due to personal circumstances or financial disincentives to work. Labour force participation rates – the sum of people in employment and unemployment as a percentage of the working age population – vary considerably, ranging from close to 90% in Iceland to below 60% in Turkey. In the United Arab Emirates, 73% of the adult population aged 15-years and older is actively engaged in the labour market. Some socio-demographic groups are more likely to be inactive than others, notably women and people with disabilities or chronic health problems, particularly if they are also low-skilled. Integrating under-represented groups into the labour force has the potential to greatly increase the skills base in an economy. Targeting activation policies efficiently requires identifying inactive individuals and their reasons for inactivity (Figure I.7).

FIGURE I.6 EMPLOYMENT RATES AMONG ADULTS IN OECD COUNTRIES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (2013)

Countries are ranked in ascending order of the employment rates of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary qualifications.

Overcome barriers to female labour force participation

In the United Arab Emirates, the female labour force is largely underused, and productivity could be raised by actively including more women in the labour market. Targeted policies can help to dismantle barriers to labour force participation, which for women are often time constraints due to family and care obligations for children and senior family members. In these cases, limited opportunities for part-time work or limited mobility can be an additional barrier to employment. The reasons people choose to work part-time or leave the labour force entirely are often closely related. For example, the main reason 25-39-year-old women cite for choosing to work part-time is their care responsibilities; the same reason is given for this group's inactivity. This suggests that part-time work, coupled with adequate childcare facilities, can facilitate labour market participation when caring responsibilities prevent full-time employment. However, the inactivity of this group can also be related to cultural norms and traditions prevailing in a country.

Support people with disabilities to be active

For adults with disabilities, it is often the quality of employment that influences participation in the labour market. Improving the general conditions for workers with health problems should therefore be part of joint employer and government strategies, for example by improving workplace safety and being more aware of specific work needs. Given the link between sick leave and incapacity to work, improving prevention and early-intervention measures, while avoiding "medicalisation", is critical. For employers, effective wage subsidies or other financial incentives that compensate for losses in productivity can make it financially more attractive to retain sick workers or people with disabilities. The United Arab Emirates is aware of the challenge facing people with disabilities in the labour market. In 2006, the Federal Government passed the UAE Disability Act to protect the rights of people with disabilities and special needs. It stipulates that UAE nationals with special needs have the same right to work and occupy public positions. It is important to monitor the extent to which these rules are followed and to make employers and employees aware of their rights and duties.

Tackle unemployment and especially engage young people in the labour market

Temporary exclusion from the labour market due to unemployment implies that available skills are not being used. Unemployment of a long duration can translate into permanent disengagement from the labour market and needs to be tackled as a first step towards ensuring that all skills are activated. The skills of people who have stayed inactive for an extended period of time can atrophy or become obsolete. These people may require retraining or up-skilling to avoid moving from inactivity to unemployment as their skills are not in demand. Targeted vocational training and re-entry programmes can help people who have been outside the labour market due to care obligations or illness. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, youth unemployment in particular is a serious issue (Figure I.7). In the United Arab Emirates, youth unemployment is 12%, which although lower than in many other MENA countries, is still a cause for concern.
Executive summary

Discourage early retirement

In about two-thirds of OECD countries the labour force participation rate among 55-64-year-olds stands at or below 60%, ranging from 85% in Iceland to just 30% in Turkey. In the United Arab Emirates, a 2008 labour force survey recorded senior labour force participation as being relatively high, at 70% for 55-59-year-olds, 50% for 60-64-year-olds and 24% for 65-70-year-olds. The increase of the official retirement age in the United Arab Emirates to 65 years has already contributed to boosting labour force participation of older workers, although some still leave the labour force early. The quality of employment often influences decisions to retire early, and there is evidence that employers’ inability or unwillingness to reduce working hours tends to push workers into retirement by limiting the possibility of a phased transition out of employment. Policies to reduce non-financial barriers to labour force participation may work in tandem with other policies intended to encourage employers to hire and retain workers from some under-represented groups. Some countries have begun to emphasise lifelong learning and targeted training, especially in mid-career, to improve employability later in life and discourage early withdrawal from the labour force.
Policy Lever 3: How to make the best use of the talent pool?

Help employers to make better use of their employees’ skills

Not all of the skills that people are willing to offer to the labour market are used productively, and there is evidence that in many cases a mismatch exists between an employee's skills and those required for his or her job. This mismatch, where it affects economic and social outcomes negatively, can be tackled in various ways. In the case of under-skilling, public policies can help to identify workers with low levels of foundation skills and offer an incentive to both employees and employers to invest in skills development so that the worker can meet the requirements of the job. When the skills available are not adequately used, better management practices are needed. For example, employers can grant workers some autonomy to develop their own working methods so that they can use their skills effectively. As workers assume more responsibility for identifying and tackling problems, they are also more likely to “learn by doing”, which can spark innovation.

Provide better information about the skills that are needed and available

Skills mismatch can arise because of a lack of information and transparency in skills systems. The underuse of skills is often related to field-of-study mismatch, whereby individuals work in an area that is unrelated to their field of study, and in which their qualifications or diplomas are not fully valued. The likelihood of field-of-study mismatch varies significantly across occupations, underscoring the importance of up-to-date and quality information on labour market outcomes across fields. In Abu Dhabi, for example, there is a surplus in student enrolment and graduation in some fields, such as humanities, law, administration and sciences, which the labour market does not need, whereas enrolment in the field of medicine is very low, although demand is high (Figure I.8). To raise awareness among UAE nationals of the need to study different disciplines more suited to the needs of the labour market, the government can improve career guidance systems.

FIGURE I.8 HIGHER EDUCATION SPECIALISATION SUPPLY VS. LABOUR MARKET DEMAND

Note: Sciences and Humanities have been separated into two equal disciplines/specializations.

Executive summary

Support efficient recruitment processes

Recruitment processes function smoothly if the relevant information is transparent and available to all. The UAE government can foster the development and dissemination of better information regarding labour market opportunities among students, parents, workers, employers, education providers and policy makers.

Stimulate the creation of more high-skilled and high value-added jobs

A good match between available skills and job tasks is not always positive; for example, people can be matched with their jobs, but at a very low level. Such low-skills equilibria can adversely affect the economic development of a local economy or region, or indeed an entire country. The United Arab Emirates’ economic development strategy aims to achieve a knowledge-based economy. To reach this objective, it will be important, over time, to upgrade poor skills rather than try to match these skills with a job that only requires a low level of skill. To tackle such a situation, policies can also “shape” demand, rather than merely respond to it. By fostering competition in the market for goods and services, policy makers can promote productive economic activities that contribute to stronger economic growth and the creation of more productive and rewarding jobs. While such policies primarily fall into the realm of economic development actors, education institutions focusing on new technologies and innovation can also be involved in developing the skills that will shape the economies of the future.

Supporting research and development (R&D) is another way the government can increase the country’s knowledge base. Investment in research and development is low in the United Arab Emirates by international standards, with current R&D expenditure at 0.01% of GDP compared to 2.6% in the United States, 2.5% in Germany or 3.3% in Japan.

Foster entrepreneurship

Countries can foster the creation of new jobs and increase the demand for skills by encouraging entrepreneurship. Especially in the United Arab Emirates, a country that aims to move away from its dependence on the traditional oil business, fostering the bottom-up development of new business branches can be a highly attractive approach. To be successful, entrepreneurs need to know how to identify opportunities, turn them into successful ventures, and recognise and respond to difficulties and obstacles that may emerge. Teaching entrepreneurship in schools, universities and vocational training institutions can help instil these skills and competences in students. In promoting entrepreneurship, universities themselves need to be entrepreneurial and innovative. In some countries, for example, recruitment and career-development programmes for academic staff in many private and public universities now take into account entrepreneurial attitudes and prior experience, as well as work in mentoring entrepreneurs. Efforts by the UAE government to foster entrepreneurship have already reaped positive results, with the United Arab Emirates now ranked at 22 in the World Bank’s Doing Business report; maintaining its lead in the Arab Region and beating some advanced European and Asian economies (Figure I.9). A great deal could be gained, however, by promoting female entrepreneurship, as the potential of women in business and as entrepreneurs is still largely underused in MENA countries, including the United Arab Emirates.
FIGURE I.9 EASE OF DOING BUSINESS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

United Arab Emirates (Rank 22)
Saudi Arabia (Rank 49)
Qatar (Rank 50)
Bahrain (Rank 53)
Oman (Rank 66)
Kuwait (Rank 86)
Regional Average (Middle East & North Africa (Rank 106)
Jordan (Rank 117)

ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION
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OECD Skills Strategy

Better skills policies help build economic resilience, boost employment and reinforce social cohesion. The OECD Skills Strategy provides countries with a framework to analyse their skills strengths and challenges. Each OECD Skills Strategy diagnostic report reflects a set of skills challenges identified by broad stakeholder engagement and OECD comparative evidence while offering concrete examples of how other countries have tackled similar skills challenges.

These reports tackle questions such as: How can countries maximise their skills potential? How can they improve their performance in developing relevant skills, activating skills supply and using skills effectively? What is the benefit of a whole-of-government approach to skills? How can governments build stronger partnerships with employers, trade unions, teachers and students to deliver better skills outcomes? OECD Skills Strategy reports provide new insights into these questions and help identify the core components of successful skills strategies.

This report is part of the OECD’s ongoing work on building effective national and local skills strategies.

Contents

Introduction
Policy Lever 1: Developing Relevant Skills
Policy Lever 2: Activating Skills Supply
Policy Lever 3: Putting Skills to Effective Use
The Way Forward

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