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Social stigma bar to vocational studies

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DUBAI // Emirati youths and their families believe social stigma is a major barrier to studying for vocational trades, a newly released study suggests.

Conducted by the research organisation YouGovSiraj, the study found that among nine potential obstacles to studying vocational trades – ranging from culinary arts and aviation mechanics to hotel and restaurant management – more than half the respondents agreed that society did not find it “favourable”.

Among the other hurdles, vocational studies were seen to be “not of a high social status” while “financially inferior” families opted for vocational education.

The study suggests that a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of vocational studies remains a significant barrier – a worrying trend given a significant rate of unemployment among Emirati youths and the large number of available trade jobs. The sample of 75 parents and 75 students aged 14 to 16 was taken from 2,320 Emiratis from Ras al Khaimah, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain who participated in a two-week vocational-education awareness campaign last year. The results have only recently been released.



A study suggests a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of vocational studies remains a significant barrier among Emirati youths. *Deleores Johnson / The National*

Respondents were surveyed before and after the campaign, demonstrating afterwards a higher interest in vocational education. The study found 77 per cent of students said they were likely to enrol in vocational programmes, if given a suitable choice, after going through the campaign – up 44 per cent from before it.

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The study was commissioned as part of a vocational awareness campaign led by Tawteen, an initiative of the Emirates Foundation that seeks to find private-sector employment opportunities for Emiratis.

“[The campaign] focused on dispelling myths and it demonstrates that through specific tailored campaigns we can make young Emiratis and their families aware of the opportunities that vocational and technical education can provide,” said Khuloud al Nuwais, projects director at the Emirates Foundation, a philanthropic organisation established by the Government.

“When students and parents are shown how [vocational education] can lead to a stable career, and potentially a higher than average salary, it does become more appealing and acceptable.”

The campaign involved 895 students at five schools in Ras al Khaimah, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain. They were given 10,000 guidebooks on vocational trades and listened to presentations given by Emiratis employed as chefs, aircraft mechanics and graphic designers. Another 1,360 families at two malls in Ras al Khaimah and Abu Dhabi also participated.

This and other recent studies come amid rising concern about Emirati nationals’ marginal representation in the private sector, which includes many types of vocational trades. Some estimates have put them at 0.4 per cent of the private sector.

According to a study released last month by the Dubai School of Government and the US-based Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings, 25 per cent of Emirati young were unemployed.

The YouGovSiraj survey highlighted a lack of awareness of institutions in the UAE that offer vocational courses. The perceived suitability of course offerings at 15 different institutes among respondents increased dramatically after the campaign.

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However, persuading more Emiratis to pursue vocational careers would require a major shift in social perceptions and institutions in the UAE, said Dr Naji Almahdi, executive director of the National Institute for Vocational Education, a programme of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority.

Many still think vocational education is for those who could not succeed in university, he said. This was in contrast to the position in countries such as the United States, which essentially transformed vocational institutes into two-year community colleges that fed into a university system.

The Government would need to consider introducing a system in which universities recognised and accepted students with two-year diplomas from institutes, Dr Almahdi said. "There aren't pathways between vocational education and mainstream education, and that is a huge deterrent," he added.

A similar system of recognition would also be necessary in the workplace, typically in public entities.

"If you look at the way government employees are hired, promoted, rewarded, it's based on whether you have a ... degree. If you want people to enter vocational education, you better include that in the rewards system as well."

According to the YouGovSiraj study, 89 per cent of respondents said after the campaign they would be encouraged to pursue vocational education if jobs were guaranteed by the Government. Eighty-three per cent would be encouraged if vocational education was nationally recognised.