

Lessons from The Gulf: Female Indigenous Emirati Students' Persistence and Success at University

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Abstract

Students' persistence and success remain significant issues for universities worldwide, but Tinto (2017a; 2017b) argued that universities need to listen to perspectives of students themselves in identifying what causes them to persist and succeed. This article reports on such perspectives of Indigenous Emirati, Muslim women at one public university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Data collection from original doctoral research involved an initial, customised survey completed by 22 Emirati women with subsequent interviews conducted with a further 21 female students. Data for the purpose of this article were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings are presented within Tinto's framework: goals; sense of belonging; self-efficacy; responses to curriculum; and their impact on students' motivation. Tinto's framework provides a valuable insight in understanding the women's experiences, and their statements around persistence and success have important implications for understanding women's progression in higher education in a society where male authority remains significant.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates; Emirati women; higher education; student persistence; student success.

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Arabian Peninsula has earned a global reputation as an economically thriving country, with a culturally diverse population, yet remains a mainstay of male influence (European Parliament, 2014). Surprisingly therefore, women outnumber men in public higher education institutions across the seven Emirates of the UAE (Patterson et al., 2020). Among these women are Indigenous, Emirati women who represent a social minority in that they make up just over 5% of the total population of the UAE. They are from a socially conservative demographic who seek to retain their cultural traditions, customs, and values within the rapidly changing, globalised, affluent UAE society; yet they and their families value higher education and the concomitant opportunities (Abdullah, 2005; Abdullah and Ridge, 2011). The aim of the research reported in this paper was to understand the experiences and perspectives of Emirati women at university, and to identify the factors that contribute to their persistence and success at university. To do so, this paper employs Tinto's (2017a; 2017b) model for understanding student persistence and success as the framework to analyse and synthesise the experiences of these women in universities in the UAE. As Tinto (2017a) argued in this journal, it is important to recognise the nature of those experiences from the students' own voices and to listen to the changes they personally experience, and this is one emphasis of this article. In contextualising how these young women persisted, the paper explores their visions for their future as a result of higher education. The paper draws on previous doctoral research (McClusky, 2017), but the data have been re-examined to



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address a single research question: How do the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous, Emirati women in higher education in the UAE explain their persistence and success at university?

Literature Review

The first part of the literature review is an overview of literature around higher education and female access to that, in what Engin and McKeown call “the unique socio-cultural context of the UAE” (2016, p. 1). The second part unpacks Tinto’s conceptual framework of student persistence and success which forms the theoretical basis of the paper. Contextually, the success and persistence of women in higher education in the UAE is intrinsically linked to the emerging status of women over the last 50 years. This has influenced women’s access to higher education, their degree completion, and confidence in their ability to contribute to their nation’s rapid economic development.

Higher education is in its infancy in the UAE, which as a nation-state was only 50 years old in 2021. In the first decade of the UAE, women from more liberal and higher socio-economic backgrounds accessed higher education in foreign universities, with Kuwait University a longstanding choice (Soffan, 1980). When the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) opened in November 1977, 185 female students enrolled, despite being limited to one segregated campus in Al Ain (Soffan, 1980). In 1988, the Higher Colleges of Technology were established, and in 2020-2021, more than 14,000 of their 23,000 students were female, studying across more than 80 technical and professional degrees on its sixteen campuses (Higher Colleges of Technology, 2021). In 1998, Zayed University was established as an all-women’s institution, but it has now expanded to include men among its 10,000 students. In addition to these public universities, there are eight autonomous private institutions, while several global universities have campuses and programs in the UAE.

Within the public universities, in one of which this research was conducted, women and men are educated separately. While Zayed University, the university specifically established for women, now enrolls men, they only attend the university when the women have left the campus. Nevertheless, there is no requirement that professors and lecturers must be the same gender as the students they teach.

Emirati Women in Higher Education in the UAE

In the late 20th century, UAE policymakers focused on developing Indigenous Emirati human capital across all sectors of education (Al-Khateeb et al., 2007). This investment was part of Government strategy for nation building and the country’s economic development (Akkari, 2004). The advent of local universities made higher education more accessible to both single and married women, and a directive by the founding President of the UAE guaranteed that their education would be paid from government funds. Consequently, the inclusion of all women who pass the university entrance examination in higher education is a reality and has led to recent generations of women becoming part of the labour force.

Abdulla (2005) and Abdulla and Ridge (2011) found four reasons why Emirati women pursued higher education. Most popular was families’ expectations that by completing higher education, daughters would enhance their social and economic mobility. As very few Emirati parents had enjoyed higher education, they wanted their daughters to experience and benefit from university. Second, higher education was an “insurance policy” in the event of a woman’s husband divorcing them and leaving them in financial adversity. The other two reasons were that higher education was an achievable goal, and that higher education was an acceptable thing to do. Findlow (2013) found that some Emirati women went to university because it gave them time to reflect on who they are and their roles within the family and society. Findlow also argued that there was an incongruity between society’s desire to educate women and the realities of employment opportunities for them after completing university. Three years later, Engin and McKeown (2016) raised similar concerns: “Are female students able to participate in the workforce as fully as they talk about?” (p. 13). The evidence for this remains ambivalent (Patterson et al., 2020).

Engin and McKeown (2016) studied aspects of motivation of Emirati university students, both male and female. Their research explained students’ motivation in both individualistic and collectivist contexts. They found that students were motivated by “a secure future... which includes both tangible outcomes such as jobs, as well as notions of good life” (p. 684), and by a desire for social status. These essentially individualistic goals were balanced by “students’” collectivist cultural orientations...(where)...family, country and marriage were key constructs in their motivation” (p. 684). Family motivation included making their parents proud of them, while contributing to the economic development of their country was equally important. “Fulfilling dreams” was a persistent theme especially among women, and these dreams could either be personal or societal (p. 685).

While Engin and McKeown (2016) noted that their participants indicated firm confidence that their goals of gaining a degree could be achieved, there are aspects of higher education in Emirati universities that make success and persistence difficult for women. Some are institutional or systemic; others are societal. Progressive forces associated with higher education generally are often countered by regressive forces in other aspects of female students' lives. For example, many higher education institutions in the UAE are based on American liberal arts colleges (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2007), and yet they exist in a very different social context. The difficulties, outlined below, include: transitions to university teaching and learning; English as the medium of instruction; teacher-student relationships; the realities of career opportunities; and evidence of depression and anxiety which impacted negatively on study success.

Many Emirati students, both men and women, come from a school background of passive learning (Moussly, 2012). Cultural educational stereotypes of rote learning, memorisation, and passivity originate from formal Quranic schools and remain evident in public, Arabic-grounded schools in the region (Richardson, 2004). Over two decades, government initiatives have attempted to transform the quality of primary and secondary level experiences and encouraged schools and teachers to adopt more modern pedagogies (McLaughlin & Durrant, 2016). Kennedy (2002) found that adult learners were receptive to new modes of learning and increasingly adopted different approaches to learning from those at school. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) stated an educational environment created by a teacher whose beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are evident, has a remarkable effect on student learning and engagement in a university setting.

Madsen and Cook (2010) reported how Abu Dhabi Women's College, in 2007, deliberately promoted critical reflection among its Emirati women students by embedding a range of learning techniques into their curricula. Students experienced learning through action research projects, supervised practicums, and case studies, creating authentic experiences for them to discuss and debate issues, engage in collaborative team projects, solve problems, and make decisions individually and within groups. McLaughlin and Durrant (2016) found that such initiatives had generated significant progress across higher education institutions in the UAE.

English is the medium of instruction in universities in the UAE. "The EMI policy has been a naturalized and taken-for-granted practice without questioning or problematizing" (Masri, 2019, p. 21), but it creates problems for many students in their academic progress. The issue of students entering university with an English language deficit was raised in the Accessing Higher Education Language Debate Forum, 2012, which concluded that students were still unable to engage fully in undergraduate programs because of their inability to operate at the required level of English (Moussly 2012). Students graduating from government schools have been taught principally in Arabic, although they have studied classes in English language (Al-Issa, 2017). Their deficit in English language skills meant that significant numbers of students were ineligible for direct entry into undergraduate programs (Wanphet & Tantawy, 2018) and were required to complete English language foundational courses of between six months and two years before embarking on their chosen degree. On the other hand, students entering university from private schools had experienced English as a major or sole medium of instruction (KHDA, 2012; Wanphet & Tantawy, 2018;). This disparity often results in two tiers of students in classes (Al-Issa, 2017). Those with less developed English skills experience difficulties in understanding teachers or engaging in classroom activities – 49% reported that they would prefer to answer questions in Arabic than English – and had difficulty coping with assessments (Belhia & Elhami, 2015). Wanphet and Tantawy (2018) found that 25% of participants said English was an obstacle to understanding lecture content; 36% could not give detailed answers in English, hence 60% preferred not to have essay style examination questions. 48% of teachers in Belhia and Elhami's study said that their students could not understand and answer examination questions in English. Masri (2019) was unequivocal: the Arab students who come from Arabic schools "are forced to bear the burden of underperformance by being relegated to a progressively shrinking sphere of opportunity" (p. 28).

For women students, classroom relationships with, and confidence in, their teachers can add to difficulty in their study. The nature of students' relationships with educational instructors, Morris (2005) argued, is significant for men and women, but mainly for women. Many female students experience male instructors for the first time, often from overseas, and they are therefore very different from anyone they had encountered before. Students from government high schools who were taught by women teachers throughout their schooling face additional challenges. Haidet et al. (2004) noted that, for some, coping with a teacher who was a man was a new experience; for others, from a more liberal family background and private education, the encounter provided an opportunity to further engage with a man who was not blood related.

Few countries in the Middle East and North Africa have made such progress as the UAE in promoting women's opportunities in the workplace and business (Al Hamali, 2021; Kemp, 2013). Concurrent with opening universities to women, the availability of paid work reflects the increasing opportunities becoming available to female Emiratis who wish to join the workforce. As more young women have encountered men through education and employment, there has been some relaxation of previously strict standards of social contact. Nevertheless, mothers interviewed in Ashencaen Crabtree's (2007) study still

wanted their daughters to seek employment that prevented contact with men in the work environment. Crabtree observed parents had an unrealistic understanding of the kinds of work environments their daughters might find themselves in, yet they were pleased their daughters could achieve financial independence, largely impossible for most women in previous generations. Nevertheless, Patterson et al (2020) reported that female nationals remain less likely to find employment; are more likely to take up (lower earning) private sector employment; and will earn significantly less than their male counterparts.

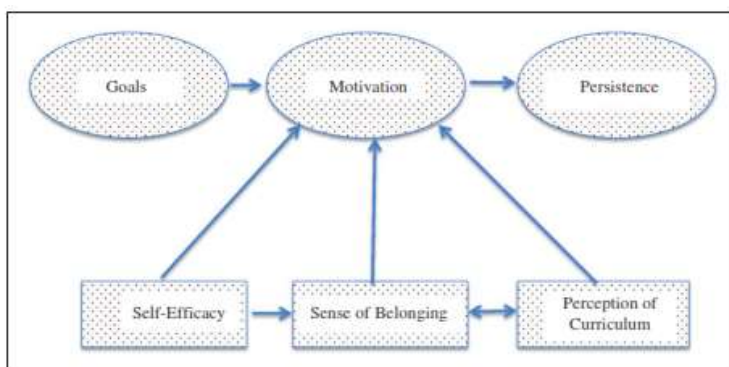
While Engin and McKeown (2016) said that all their participants “indicated firm confidence that the goals of gaining a degree could be achieved” (p. 10), Awadalla et al. (2020) reported on the prevalence of depression and anxiety among Emirati university students and the impact on academic performance. They found that 35% of female students provided evidence of depression and 25% exhibited general anxiety. The authors claimed that “gender moderated the relationship between grade point average (GPA) and anxiety as females in the (general anxiety disorder GAD) group) had substantially poorer GPA scores compared to females in the non-GAD group” (p.7).

Conceptual Framework: Tinto’s Model of Student Success and Persistence

In two articles, Tinto (2017a; 2017b) challenged understandings of student retention in higher education, arguing that “While the institution’s interest is to increase the proportion of students who graduate ... the student’s interest is to complete a degree often without regard to the institution in which it is earned” (2017b, p. 254). Hence, Tinto proposed a conceptual model of student motivation and persistence, the significance of which lay in being “seen through the eyes of students” (2017b, p. 255), rather than being defined by universities. The model is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Illustration of Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence and Success



Note. From Tinto (2017b, p. 256).

Motivation to persist was drawn from four sets of factors: goals; self-efficacy; sense of belonging; and perception of the curriculum. Collectively these factors contributed to the persistence of students to graduate from their university of choice.

In terms of goals, Tinto (2017a, 2017b) stated that ideally students arrive at “college” wanting to complete the degree they have chosen at the institution they have chosen. Students have two sets of goals: (i) intrinsic goals, which include the benefits from being at the college, what they are, or will be, learning, and a sense of affiliation; and (ii) extrinsic goals, which are linked to potential for future income, occupations, and further studies. He argued that not all students are clear about their goals, and that differing goals led to students being differentially motivated by their university experiences.

University students’ self-efficacy lies in the belief that they can succeed in their studies. They also believe that they have the capacity for some degree of control over their learning. Tinto (2017a) argued that self-efficacy is learnt, not inherited, and that it is malleable, not fixed. Particularly important is the insight that self-efficacy influences how a student addresses goals, tasks and challenges, which ultimately promotes goal attainment. Relevant to this study, low self-efficacy can be the result of negative stereotypes which others hold of individuals or the groups to which they belong. Most significantly, students need support early on when adapting to, or meeting difficulties in, their courses.

The sense of belonging students feel once in a higher education setting (Tinto, 2017a) relates partly to self-efficacy. Students come to see themselves as a member of the community and the strength of the bond which students feel towards their institution, its staff and students, leads to strength of commitment. Belonging demands engagement, especially through engaging with others on campus, which in turn furthers their sense of belonging. Also relevant to this context, Tinto (2017a, 2017b) said that sense of belonging can exist in sub-groups, learning communities and minority groups. Finally, he argued that inclusive pedagogies which enable group work and problem-based learning further contribute to a students' sense of belonging.

In the model, a two-way relationship exists between sense of belonging and perceptions of the curriculum. The significance of the curriculum is that it influences students' perceptions of quality and relevance to matters that concern them. The curriculum is a statement of values, and the values they identify convince the student whether they warrant their time and effort. Ideally, the curriculum is inclusive of the experiences and histories of the students who study that curriculum, which in turn creates opportunities for providing pedagogies that encourage engaging with and applying the material they are learning. Lastly the curriculum should contextualise their learning so that connection with their learning communities is achieved.

Enhancing student motivation requires institutions to understand students' perspectives of their experience and how events throughout the campus influence those perspectives and shape, in turn, their motivation to persist. It is particularly important that universities understand how these perspectives apply to students who have been historically underrepresented in tertiary education (Tinto, 2017a, p. 5).

Tinto's two papers are based on research drawn from North American contexts. One thrust of this paper is to ascertain whether the model has value in a different context, namely that the UAE now has a similar higher educational situation and yet a very different cultural background and environment. We consider this in the concluding section.

Research Design and Methods

Data used to address the research question were drawn from the results of a two-phase process of collection for the doctoral study (McClusky, 2017). The first phase of data collection had involved developing and administering a custom-designed, 100-question, online survey. The first 88 closed-question items focused on participants' demographics and perspectives towards educational and cultural issues, while questions 89-100 were open-ended, and focused on examining cultural norms related to: societal and familial attitudes; the role of women in their traditional culture; identity issues; experiences in school and university; and future career expectations. Using purposive, convenience sampling, participants were drawn from a cohort of female, Emirati, undergraduate students in a media course in a non-fee-paying, government-funded university in the UAE. With approval from the researchers' University's Human Research Ethics Committee and from potential participants in the university, consent was carefully informed, and participation was entirely voluntary. Twenty two students completed the survey, which took about half-an-hour to complete. Responses to the closed questions in the survey, questions 1-88, were analysed using descriptive statistics, to record central tendency, range, and patterns.

The second phase of the doctoral data collection involved developing an interview schedule based on the results from the survey responses previously analysed. The schedule was organised to seek students' perspectives to three main questions within a semi-structured interview framework: (i) What factors influence the tertiary education experience of Emirati women? (ii) What is the role of culture in the tertiary education experience of Emirati women? (iii) What are the subtle, dynamic personal and professional changes that take place with students as they progress through their tertiary education? The questions sought students' information and perspectives on: the educational environment; cultural issues; learning approaches; gender capital and cultural identity. These were covered across sets of introductory questions, transition questions, and five broad, open-ended questions, with prompts, probes and further questions also considered. Having refined and trialled the interview schedule, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a different group of participants, still drawn from the original cohort of female, Emirati, undergraduate students in a media course in the same non-fee-paying, government-funded university in the UAE. No participant was involved in both phases of data collection. In-depth questioning probed their opinions, attitudes and perspectives about their education related to gender and culture. All interviews were conducted by the female researcher, who was resident in the UAE at the time.

Responses to both the open-ended questions of the survey and the interviews were analysed using Creswell's (2007) data analysis spiral. At the outset, electronically recorded interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for checking, after which analysis followed a similar pattern to that of the open-ended survey responses. Texts were read through several times to ensure familiarity with the texts, and from these, themes started to emerge. At the same time memoing was important to bracket the principal researcher's perspectives from those of the participants. The second stage of the data analysis involved

the detailed coding of texts, moving from tentative codes to a list of detailed, firm codes. Codes were either descriptive, in that the researchers used their own term as a name-tag given to the code, or *in vivo*, where the code was tagged using the participants' own words (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were recorded on Excel™ spreadsheets, which allowed further sorting and classification. Classifying these codes into themes represented a higher level of analysis, as emerging levels of concepts were identified (Punch & Oancea, 2014). From these, tentative hypotheses and firmer theories were drawn. Finally, the use of data from the two sources – questionnaire and interviews – allowed further cross-checking and interrogation of information and triangulation of data that strengthened the quality of the findings.

To address the research question of this paper, “How do the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous, Emirati women in higher education in the UAE explain their persistence and success at university?” the researchers conducted a second thematic analysis of the qualitative data only, along the lines recommended by Holliday (2016). This was to ensure the primacy of the students' perspectives as they themselves stated them. Sensitivity to the students' perspectives, in terms of what they said and how they said it, remained uppermost in the thoughts of the researchers during this process (Holliday, 2016). This analysis involved re-examining the codes and concepts from the second phase of the doctoral data collection and analysis. In this, researchers used the overarching elements from Tinto's (2017a; 2017b) model of student success and persistence as an *a priori* set of themes for reclassifying the data. These themes were: goals – intrinsic and extrinsic; self-efficacy; sense of belonging; perceptions of the curriculum; and motivation. Together these allowed the researchers to develop some tentative theory about female, Indigenous, Emirati women and how they persisted at university in the UAE. Collectively, these strands of data analysis combined to provide rich accounts of participants' perspectives of how they made meaning of their university experiences. These strands are now presented in the sections below.

Tinto (2017a; 2017b) advised researchers and policy makers to become cognisant of students' “perceptions”. In this paper, however, we use the term “perspectives”, in line with O'Donoghue's (2019) distinction between the two. O'Donoghue argues that perceptions are a distinct term from Gestalt psychology, while perspectives are language-constructed understandings of situations or contexts people find themselves in or gained from social interaction. In line with the interpretivist theoretical perspective of this study, we use the term perspectives, except when using Tinto's terms directly, e.g., “perceptions of the curriculum”.

Findings

The findings are presented through the elements of Tinto's (2017a; 2017b) framework, as developed through the secondary thematic analysis of primary data described above; in doing so the findings outline the experiences of the Emirati women, and their perspectives on those experiences, adding evidential substance to the theoretical model. In that model, there were four influential factors: goals; self-efficacy; sense of belonging; and perceptions of the curriculum. In each section below, the definition of the term relates to Tinto's definitions, as outlined in the review above, and not to more broadly referenced conceptualisations. Together these factors combined to influence levels of motivation that caused the female, Indigenous Emirati students to persist and succeed at university.

Goals

For Tinto (2017a; 2017b) there were two sets of goals, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic goals were personal reasons students identified for studying at university, connected to choices of what they were, or would be, learning. These in turn developed a sense of affiliation to the institution. The women said that their decision to go to university was an intrinsic factor, although as supported by Abdullah (2007) and Engin and McKeown (2016) they were also influenced by matters such as the attitudes of family and friends, and the initial attraction of an all-female learning environment. Crucial to the goals of these women was developing a sense of empowerment and personal competency; as one participant put it:

College made me understand that not only males can do it and not only other female nationalities can. As a female local, we have the opportunity to expand and make something out of ourselves other than being married and raising kids. (S16)

Enhancing their individual strengths was seen as being good for women and the culture. Taking personal responsibility was frequently mentioned when respondents reflected on aspects of their participation which had developed during their university life. There was a shift away from simply reacting to familial influences in expected ways towards more personal responsibility. Extrinsic goals stated by the students related to potentially earning an independent income, access to occupations, and in a few cases, opportunities for further study. Many of the women articulated the importance of securing employment. Career aspirations were carefully blended into the wider familial and social context; as well as personal goals for being employed, they also viewed their education as fundamental to the country's economic development, reflecting Engin and McKeown's

(2016) findings. As one participant put it: “The good thing Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Khalifa did was about the UAE in the 2030 vision, they published it for everyone. Everyone can reach it and read it. Each individual should work to make the vision real” (S19).

Participants related to the utilitarian benefits of their university courses as they discussed how their programs aligned with their career aspirations and interests. In conclusion, the participants reflected high levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation which contributed to the persistence of the students in their degree courses.

Self-Efficacy

Tinto (2017a; 2017b) stated that students’ self-efficacy lay in their belief that they would succeed in their studies and that they could exercise some degree of control over their learning. Most students referred to their experiences of transitioning to university study and said that they had needed support early on when meeting difficulties. As one participant said: “I used to be a practical learner but now I have learnt to understand from books, other sources and lectures. My abilities have expanded to a wide variety of learning styles” (S4).

For some, these difficulties lay in their use of English language, reflecting the earlier findings of Masri (2019) and Wanphet and Tantawy (2018). Hence the importance of the foundational courses that students found themselves in for six months to two years before entering full undergraduate degree programs. Those experiencing difficulties, either in terms of study skills or capability in English language, identified their weaknesses as emanating from high school; they realised older, school-acquired methods no longer served their needs. Over the course of their studies, they became more adept at analysing their own development, and revealed a growing awareness of their own learning needs and challenges; without articulating it, they were describing developing their metacognitive skills, vital in successful learning in higher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Hattie & Anderman, 2020). Almost all of them said their learning strategies at university were now very different to those they had used at school.

Participants also said they had begun to grasp the techniques and importance of improving critical reading skills and understanding, especially in English as the medium of instruction. Those from government schools had more serious difficulties with English: “As I told you, when you come from a government school you don’t have the language that you can interact with others. So, you are shy because your language is weak, not because of your personality” (S21).

Being able to think critically, present an argument, and develop their capacity for evaluating information, were all viewed as the positive skills they had acquired. They had enhanced their English language competency through a more interactive, student-centred form of learning that encouraged exploration, exposition, and shared understandings. They claimed that learning critical thinking took time and hard work but acknowledged that doing so would prepare them better for the outside world. One student said:

It’s not the way we used to read in school. The context was more or less the same of the books. Sometimes I wouldn’t really understand, and I wouldn’t have the ability to evaluate. But at university I became more able to do so. (S20)

In essence, the students articulated an array of factors which had enhanced their learning. They identified tasks and activities not previously encountered; for example, project work promoted writing and collaboration with others which some had not experienced at school. These kinds of activities first surfaced in their foundational courses, while in their subject specialisations they were required to make further proactive decisions pursuing areas of interest and interacting with external parties. Further evidence of self-efficacy from several participants’ responses was that finding their own information gave them a form of academic independence and was a move away from teacher-directed learning.

Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging students feel relates partly to self-efficacy (Tinto, 2017a). Students begin to identify as a member of, and bond with, their institution, its staff, and students, which in turn leads to strength of commitment. This can occur through engaging with others on campus, through sub-groups, learning communities and minority groups. Finally, inclusive pedagogies such as group work and problem-based learning further add to a students’ sense of belonging (Tinto 2017a; 2017b). In these terms, participants reported a strong sense of belonging. They emphasised that being at university meant belonging to a group who shared social and cultural beliefs and values, which in turn created a safe space and presented fewer difficulties or threats to accepted customs and traditions. In addition, the women referred to their institution offering personal assistance; the prospect of an unfamiliar system was daunting, and they were inclined to avoid situations where they may lose face.

The adjustment from school to university was not merely about a change in physical space; several participants stated that the university environment had created a shift in their personality because the university provided an integrated, harmonised framework for their experiences and motivated positive learning engagement. Friendly relationships with their teachers meant a lot to these students and, in contrast to the formal relationships with their high school teachers, they found their university teachers approachable and helpful. As one student said:

It actually depends on the professor or the teacher himself. Some of them are more business-like while others are more friendly, they're more outgoing, you don't have to call them Sir or Doctor. You just call them by their name (S21).

They referred to a mixture of informal, friendly, sociable and more formal, business-like attitudes at university, which they attributed to the manner and personality of academics. Similarly, Davison (2020) had found the relationships of her Emirati women student participants with teachers to be an important contributory factor to their success.

As Tinto (2017a) says, the strength of the bond that students' feel leads to strength of commitment. The participants referred to a growing awareness and acceptance of working in an adult learning environment, understanding issues of gender, working with male teachers, and acknowledging their growing maturity and tolerance within the university environment. Nevertheless, one of the major issues impacting on their sense of belonging was the matter of segregation by gender, surprising perhaps as segregation outside the family is often very much a feature of the women's lives. In interviews, just over half of the participants did not believe it was important to study on a segregated campus; one student said:

During my time in here I have come to believe that probably the biggest mistake is it not being co-ed since that itself acts as a threat to our traditional culture drastically – girls are rebelling against the system, if you will. (S13).

However, this was in marked contrast to the survey results; 75% said that segregation was not acceptable, whereas only 25% maintained that it was appropriate. This could be explained by the more anonymous nature of completing a survey. There was strong agreement about mixing with unrelated Emirati males, particularly since, when they graduated, they would have to work in a professional, non-segregated environment. Hence, they saw segregation at university as an obstacle to developing effective communication with men in future professional work environments.

Perceptions of the Curriculum

In the foundational courses participants found difficulties in extrapolating meaning and internalising them in meaningful ways. Their engagement with the curriculum was enhanced when they enrolled in their selected major programs. Seventy five percent of participants claimed they had never previously been given the option of selecting courses; the flexibility and freedom to select courses according to personal preference was appreciated, and students expressed immense satisfaction at being able to focus on subjects that they chose. One student expressed it this way: "What I studied at school was by way of obligation, however in university I study something that I want to study and something I am passionate about" (S6). They noted an increased awareness of real-world issues through engaging in these programs, which had previously been outside their spheres of reference. As a result, they gained a greater sense of independence, allowing them to develop their intellectual abilities and having a positive effect on their cultural perspectives.

Students' engagement with the curriculum resulted from pedagogies that encouraged them to derive meaning from, and apply, the material they were learning. They quickly observed that they were expected to be creative and do independent research; in short, knowledge-transforming rather than knowledge-telling (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Sevgia, 2016). They identified a new focus through a range of different tasks which created diverse learning experiences, for example through projects and reports. A commonly held perspective among the women was that although they felt that they had entered university with limited academic abilities, the environment had promoted positive changes which allowed them to flourish. However, transforming critical learning skills into an appetite for challenging their culture rested on a combination of other factors, such as personality (participants who were more confident and outgoing), perspectives (such as through taking on a leadership role), family (participants whose fathers allowed them to travel abroad unaccompanied) and prior educational experiences acquired in private English-medium schools. As one student said: "By [becoming] educated about other cultures, it has opened my mind and let me challenge my culture's opinion about the world" (S9).

Motivation

The previous findings highlight that the factors identified by Tinto (2017a; 2017b) – goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and curriculum – were positively experienced by the participants; consequently, motivation levels were equally positive. Motivation was revealed in their taking responsibility for their actions, and making changes to meet university academic processes, as one said: “Motivation is where personal efforts come. Students who work on improving their skills and English language will definitely notice a greater difference from when they first came to the university and now” (S12). Another participant described how she had improved her motivation by the levels of engagement she had witnessed in her peers:

Observing and looking at how hard that person is working got me to do the same and work twice as much to prove my theory correct, which is “Everyone is destined for greatness, so why aren’t I working to get on that list too?” (S16)

Many participants emphasised personal motivation and individual strength as being good for women and the culture. Explicit promotion of women’s education was a recurring theme articulated by all participants in relation to their contribution after graduation.

Discussion

The “unique sociocultural context” of the UAE (Engin & McKeown, 2016, p.679) impacted on the nature of their persistence. As Indigenous women of the nation, they were a minority group in their own country, in terms of gender, religion and ethnicity. Gender coupled with religion meant deference to family decisions which could be capricious; also, they were segregated on campus although most wished not to be. Employment opportunities could be equally unpredictable as several commentators noticed (Engin & McKeown, 2016; Patterson et al., 2020). Prior school education and English as the medium of instruction meant that many had to make considerable adaptations to meet the demands of successful university study. As Findlow (2013) states: “High participation levels themselves are insufficient grounds to claim that Gulf women are being freed via higher education from traditional hegemonic constraints” (p. 115).

The findings showed that persistence leading to success arose from a sense of autonomy and independence, largely shaped by a collective understanding of their position in society. These shared beliefs and moral attitudes, which are part of traditional Emirati culture, framed the young women’s autonomy and the amount of freedom they expected. At university, they appreciated a sense of independence while continuing to accept the societal framework of the Emirati people. They did identify several constraints placed upon them at university, such as segregation, but they interpreted these as an element of their place within the community. Levels of independence for daughters and wives varied according to family attitudes, and cultural norms were always a consideration for these students. Nevertheless, higher education was viewed by many as a mechanism for empowerment and a means to promote change for the betterment of not only women, but society as a whole. As Abudabbeh (2008) has explained, all aspects of an Emirati woman’s life, including future careers and places of employment, are more than just personal preference.

Most significant in terms of Tinto’s factors for persistence and success was that participants felt that they had been encouraged to embrace leadership roles at university, and this was significant in materialising students’ aspirations. The students viewed their involvement in university initiatives as promoting pathways to leadership through skills development, which were beneficial for their future. By challenging their views on traditional roles, university education had opened possibilities that they could achieve anything they wanted to. Further scrutiny exposed their thoughts about a future society where gender segregation no longer applied: “It showed me that a woman can be involved in anything and can do anything. And that that gender segregation is just an idea that with time would be off people’s mind and won’t be an issue anymore” (S5).

University education had exposed them to different cultures leading to deeper self-reflection and understandings of their external world. Interactions with socially and culturally diverse peers and academics and participating in projects which put them in unfamiliar situations broadened their insights and perspectives. Nevertheless, the influence of the family remained powerful; family authority played a major role in their lives, in spite of the students’ exposure to a range of individuals during their education. Also, despite broadening their perspectives, they remained fiercely loyal to their culture, their religion and the traditions they had inherited. Their situation was succinctly encapsulated by one participant:

Culturally and globally, a woman is expected to put her family before her career, which is a must in my opinion. In my experience I am encouraged to pursue my studies and my career, but I am expected to be a stay-at-home mother and wife after a few years on the job. This is based on the experiences of working mothers who belong to an older generation, which is why working women who have a family are seen to be pioneers in their field because they managed to strike a balance between families and their careers. Also, because of the segregation and the problems that seem to ensue from it, I have found myself

seeking opportunities to work in places where I can interact with males professionally. Within university walls I can be a leader in whatever field I put my mind to. As soon as you step out, reality kicks in and you realise that your future plans may be just a mirage. (S13)

Conclusion

There were limitations to this study. Principally, all participants were enjoying success in their courses, so we found no evidence of factors that negated persistence and success. Nevertheless, all referred to difficulties and obstacles they had faced. Notwithstanding this, the research has been valuable in two major ways. First there are important “lessons” for understanding factors that promote persistence and success among female, Indigenous Emirati, Muslim women in a “residual male hegemony” (Findlow, 2013, p. 129) and this paper has attempted to highlight these. There may be important implications for similar contexts and populations elsewhere. Second, we found Tinto’s (2017a; 2017b) framework a valuable one for re-examining data collected in a previous study and attempting to understand the factors that explain the persistence and success of these women in higher education. The findings reported here add flesh to the bones of Tinto’s model and serve to illustrate the importance of comprehending this topic.

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