

# ARE YOU WORK READY? THE CASE OF EMIRATI WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

*Workforce readiness, that is the extent to which graduates have the characteristics and attributes that prepare them for success at work, is a national priority in many countries, including the United Arab Emirates. The aim of this research study is to assess the work readiness of female Emirati graduating students from the perspective of female Emirati students who are in the final years of their tertiary education. The theoretical framework of this research study is the four-factor work readiness model by Caballero, Walker and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz. The four factors of work readiness are personal work characteristics, work competence, organizational acumen and social intelligence. These are measured using a 60-item questionnaire. The participants are 302 Emirati graduating students across various faculties in a tertiary education institution. The contribution of this study is that it assesses the perception of female graduating students and does not limit itself to any particular profession or discipline, such as the health profession, but extends across various disciplines as its context is a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. Findings show that each of the four factors has good internal consistency and significantly predict participants' ratings of work readiness. The main finding is that the perceived work readiness of female Emirati graduating students is a positive perception; however graduating students perceive that they are least work ready with regards to skills related to their personal development, confidence and stress management (personal work characteristics). Recommendations are given for future research and tertiary education institutions.*

**Keywords:** Emiratisation, Work readiness, Female Graduating Students, Personal Work, Characteristics, Work Competence, Organizational Acumen and Social Intelligence.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a vital role in producing highly educated and skilled individuals who are ready to enter the world of work. Workforce readiness is a national priority in many countries working on putting together strategic plans on how to achieve this important goal, including the United Arab Emirates. The UAE's higher education sector plays a critical role in ensuring employability and therefore the economic and human capital development agenda of the country. The UAE Vision 2021 speaks clearly about harnessing the full potential of national human capital whereby all Emiratis are called to contribute to the growth of their nation and universities to listen closely to the needs of the Emiratis and employers to balance teaching to the demands of the workplace.

The recruitment and selection of new graduates differs from traditional selection assessment. In tradition selection the basis is the job analysis whereas the selection of new graduates is based on the perceived general potential and broad abilities. Therefore the more emphasis is on the extent to which graduates have the characteristics and attributes that prepare them for success at work (Caballero & Walker, 2010), in other words the work readiness.

Work readiness in the UAE context is of particular interest when understood as part of Emiratization. Emiratization is the name given to laws, rules, regulations and policies that have been formulated and put into practice to promote workforce localization. Aljanahi (2017) analysed the content of 88 articles on Emiratization published in business focused newspapers and discovered a mismatch between the skills (education, technical and soft) of Emirati nations and those desired by employers. This mismatch featured 49% of the time. Aljanahi (2017) concludes that *“low skill standards are a challenge for the government, private firms and UAE nationals”*.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the work readiness of female Emirati graduating students from the perspective of female Emirati students who are in the final years of their tertiary education. Work readiness is a very important concept and is defined in literature as a selection criterion for predicting graduate potential and success (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Gardner & Liu, 1997; Caballero et al., 2011). This paper focuses on the work readiness of graduating students, meaning students who will shortly be entering professional employment. This population is associated with lack of job related experience and also because the work readiness of new graduates is becoming increasingly valued amongst employers in today's world of work (Caballero & Walker, 2010).

#### **Four-Factor Model of Work Readiness**

Research has shown that there is little agreement on the specific attributes that make up work readiness and various researchers have come up with a breakdown of a wide range of different skills and values. These can be personal skills (Gardner & Liu, 1997), critical thinking and problem solving (Casner-Lotto et al., 2006), teamwork (Hart, 2008), organisational ability (Hambur et al., 2002), verbal and non-verbal skills (Stewart & Knowles, 1999), motivation (Gabb, 1997), informational retrieval and handling (Atlay & Harris, 2000) and self-awareness (Knight & Yoke, 2003). These are examples of the many skills and attributes identified by the different researchers. Although the skills and values vary across researchers there seems to be agreement on the fact that employers tend to describe new graduates as not work ready in areas of personal and relational competencies (Walker et al., 2015).

The main theoretical framework in this study is the multi-dimensional four-factor work readiness model by Caballero et al. (2011). This model is being used as it groups together the wide range of traits and factors referred to above into four factors and has been tested for both validity and reliability by Caballero et al. (2011); Walker et al. (2015); Masole & Van Dyk (2016). The four factors are personal work characteristics, organizational acumen, work competence and social intelligence.

The factor personal work characteristics include items related to personal development, resilience and adaptability. Organizational acumen is a factor that comprises items related to motivation, maturity, organizational awareness, personal development and attitude to work. Work competence is the third factor that addresses technical focus, and problem-solving. Whilst social intelligence is about interpersonal orientation and adaptability (Caballero et al., 2011). The factors are further described below.

## **Personal Work Characteristics**

In studies carried out by Caballero et al. (2011); Walker et al. (2012) and using the same measure as that used in this study (work readiness scale), personal work characteristics are measured using items that ask about resilience, flexibility, stress management, adaptability and personal development.

Personal work characteristics in the study by Walker et al. (2012) are seen to be important for coping with workplace demands, challenges, unpredictability and stress. Such characteristics were also associated with a healthy work/life balance. Other researchers have up until recently studied separate components of personal work characteristics such as self-efficacy (Makki et al., 2015), professional confidence (Ortiz et al., 2016) and cynicism (Laschinger et al., 2016) all indicating the importance of these components in contributing towards work readiness.

Makki et al. (2015) discuss the impact of personal work characteristics on career exploration and work readiness showing a positive relationship between work readiness, career self-efficacy and career exploration. Makki et al. (2015) recommend higher education institutions to invest in increasing the self-confidence of graduating students. Efforts towards improving Personal Work Characteristics of graduating Students are considered to be a way of improving their overall work readiness and work exploration.

## **Organizational Acumen**

Organizational Acumen is a factor that is similar to professionalism, work ethics, social responsibility, motivation and global knowledge (Caballero et al., 2011). Organizational acumen also entails having specific work related knowledge, maturity and professional development (Walker et al., 2012). The items measuring organizational acumen in this study ask about professionalism, work ethics, social responsibility, motivation, work related knowledge, maturity and professional development.

## **Social Intelligence**

The third factor social intelligence may be understood as the ability to communicate with a wide range of people, the ability to work in a team and to manage interpersonal conflict in the workplace with customers and colleagues (Walker et al., 2012). This factor is similar to concepts like social skills, adaptability and collaboration (Caballero et al., 2011). The items measuring social intelligence in this study ask about communication, adaptation, managing relationships and self-expression.

## **Work Competence**

The final factor of work competence is a critical work readiness factor that entails having the required technical skills, knowledge and experience that go together with confidence in one's skills and knowledge and a sense of responsibility (Walker et al., 2012). Caballero et al. (2011) more specifically also mention organizational ability, critical thinking, problem solving and creativity/innovation. The items measuring work competence in this study ask about success at work, strengths at work, knowledge and confidence in skills.

This study measures the relationship between personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence in the specified population. The

null hypothesis is that there is no significant relationship between personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence whilst the alternate hypothesis is that there is a significant and positive relationship between personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence.

This study also tests the relationship between work readiness and each of the individual four factors separately. The null hypothesis is that there is no significant relation between work readiness and, personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence respectively. The alternate hypothesis is that there is a significant positive relationship between work readiness and personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence respectively.

### **Perceptions of Workforce Readiness**

The perception of work readiness in this research is that of the graduating students who will shortly be entering the work force. Work readiness has also been studied from the perception of other stakeholders such as alumni (Landrum et al., 2010) employers (Al-Ali, 2008) and HR professionals (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017). This section is a review of a selection of studies addressing the perception of alumni, HR professionals and executives.

Landrum et al. (2010) investigated alumni perceptions of work readiness discovering that the personal work characteristics of self-discipline, responsibility, confidence, managing various tasks and independence featured amongst the highest rated qualities expected in the work place. Maturity, which is an element in the factor of organizational acumen, also featured as one of the top ten important qualities. Social intelligence was also represented in the list of most important qualities mentioned by alumni as they mentioned working well with others, meeting the needs of others. Work competence featured in the ability to identify, prioritize and solve problems, make defensible and appropriate decisions and possess the ability to work without supervision.

On the perceptions of HR professionals, Ahmad & Pesch (2017) found that HR professionals give most importance to communication (social intelligence), honesty and integrity (personal work characteristics), teamwork skills (social intelligence), flexibility (personal work characteristics), ability to learn (work competence), work ethic (organizational acumen), motivation (personal work characteristics), interpersonal skills (social intelligence) and customer service (work competence). The work readiness elements they believe graduates need to improve on most are: realistic expectations (personal work characteristics), work ethic (organizational acumen); sense of entitlement (personal work characteristics).

Work readiness within the context of the UAE was also researched by Al-Ali (2008) who investigated the perception of employers of the work readiness of Emirati nationals. Al-Ali (2008) found that executives perceive Emirati nationals to have low: standards of experience (work competence); training and skills (work competence); motivation (personal work characteristics); English fluency (work competence); communication skills (social intelligence); personal work attributes. Al-Ali (2008) also writes about the related finding on the lack of trust of employers in the work readiness of UAE nationals.

### **Research Contribution**

This study unlike previous studies on work readiness using the work readiness scale by Caballero et al. (2011) does not limit itself to any particular profession or discipline, such as the health profession (Walker et al., 2012:2015), but extends across various disciplines as its context

is a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. Caballero et al. (2011) conclude that *“work readiness is a concept believed to be applicable to all types of graduates, however differences in scoring and the manner in which scores are interpreted could be expected for different occupational groups and/or work contexts”*.

This study is also new to the context of the United Arab Emirates with a special focus on the perception of the female population of graduating students. Another contribution of this study is that participants are still reading for their first degree and are in their final year of study and this eliminates the social bias referred to by Walker et al. (2015) who conducted a study on work readiness amongst nurses who were already in employment and who may have been biased to respond in a way that puts them in a favourable light with their new employers (Walker et al. 2015).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this study is a quantitative research methodology as a large sample of female Emirati graduating students was targeted and the decision was also taken to increase objectivity and generalization of findings. 302 graduating female Emirati students from various disciplines who are currently in the final year of their first degree participated in this study. The identity of these students and the tertiary education institution where they are completing their studies will be kept confidential.

The current investigation utilized the Work Readiness Scale (WRS) developed by Caballero & Walker, 2010 and later validated by Walker, Storey, Costa and Leung (2015). The 60 item questionnaire comprised 13 items on Personal Work Characteristics, 12 items on Social Intelligence, 20 items on Organizational Acumen and 15 items on Work Competence. Items were scored on a Likert scale from 0 to 10 where 0 represented full disagreement with the item and a score of 10 represented full agreement with the item. Both a paper based and online version of the questionnaire were utilized in ensuring that as many students as possible would fill in the 60 item questionnaire.

Of the 302 female participants in this study 90 participants are from the College of Business (average age of 23), 51 participants from the College of Information Technology (average age of 22), 30 participants are from the College of Health Sciences (average age of 22), 31 participants are from the College of Applied Communication (average age of 21) and 72 participants are from the College of Engineering (average age of 20).

## RESULTS

The work readiness scale developed by Caballero & Walker (2010) was used for the purpose of this study and reliability analysis revealed that overall this scale has good internal consistency when used on this specific population. Items measuring each of the four factors have good internal consistency with a correlation of 93% for all items measuring personal work characteristics, a correlation of 80% for all items measuring organizational acumen, a correlation of 93% for all items measuring work competence and a correlation of 92% for all items measuring social intelligence.

The null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence was rejected at a confidence level of 95%. The alternate hypothesis that there is a significant and positive relationship between personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence

and social intelligence was accepted at a confidence level of 95%. The correlation between organizational acumen and work competence is of 91.5%, between social intelligence and work characteristics is of 81%, between organizational acumen and social intelligence is of 79%, and between personal work characteristics and work competence is of 69%.

Regression analysis was used to test if each of the four factors separately significantly predicted participants' ratings of work readiness. The null hypothesis that there is no significant relation between work readiness and, personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence respectively was rejected at a confidence level of 95%. The alternate hypothesis that there is a significant positive relationship between work readiness and, personal work characteristics, organisational acumen, work competence and social intelligence respectively was accepted at a confidence level of 95%.

The result of the regression analysis (Table 1) indicates that the factor of work competence was able to successfully predict the overall readiness by 87%. The p-value for the Anova hypothesis testing was of 4.76E-118. The residual of the regression study is a low 0.256. When testing if the factor of social intelligence significantly predicted participants' ratings of work readiness. The result of the regression indicates that social intelligence is also able to successfully predict the overall readiness by 82%. The p-value for the ANOVA hypothesis testing is 1.47E-100. The residual of the regression study is a low 0.35. When testing if the organizational acumen factor significantly predicted participants' ratings of work readiness. The results of the regression indicate that social intelligence is also able to successfully predict the overall readiness by 88%. The p-value for the ANOVA hypothesis testing is 3.39E-121. The residual of the regression study is a low 0.35. When testing if the personal work characteristics factor significantly predicts participants' ratings of work readiness. The results of the regression indicate that social intelligence is also able to successfully predict the overall readiness by 64%. The p-value for the ANOVA hypothesis testing is 6.95E-60. The residual of the regression study is a low 0.71.

<b>Table 1</b>					
<b>WORK COMPETENCE</b>					
<b>Source</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Regression</b>	446.7264	1	446.7264	1752.38	4.76E-118
<b>Residual</b>	66.7905	262	0.2549		
<b>Total</b>	513.5169	263			
<b>Social Intelligence</b>					
<b>Source</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Regression</b>	422.7076	1	422.7076	1219.58	1.47E-100
<b>Residual</b>	90.8093	262	0.3466		
<b>Total</b>	513.5169	263			
<b>Organisational Acumen</b>					
<b>Source</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Regression</b>	450.3186	1	450.3186	1866.87	3.39E-121
<b>Residual</b>	63.1984	262	0.2412		
<b>Personal Work Characteristics</b>					
<b>Source</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Regression</b>	328.0729	1	328.0729	463.51	6.95E-60
<b>Residual</b>	185.4440	262	0.7078		

Note: Summary of Regression Analysis for Factors Predicting Work Readiness (N=302).

The overall work readiness average score across all 60-items on the work readiness scale is of 7.09 which on a scale from 0 to 10 is showing a perceived degree of work readiness by the graduating students. This result is the overall result on work readiness and below a closer look is taken at the perceptions of participants on all the four factors of personal work characteristics, work competence, organizational acumen and social intelligence.

The factor of personal work characteristics resulted in an overall average score of 6.37, organizational acumen resulted in an overall average score of 7.56, work competence in an overall average score of 7.34 and social intelligence in an overall average score of 6.92. Graduate students perceive to be least work ready with regards to skills such as are resilience, flexibility, stress management, adaptability and personal development that form part of the factor of personal work characteristics. On the other hand graduating students perceive strength in their professionalism, work ethics, social responsibility, motivation, work related knowledge, maturity and professional development.

A closer look at the factor of personal work characteristics shows that whilst the average score is of 6.37 the standard deviation is of 0.93. The item "*I am able to switch off when I am not at work*" resulted in the highest average score (7.49) showing agreement with the statement, whilst the item with an average score of less than 5 is "*I do not like learning new things*". Graduating students scored highest on an item that reflects their stress management personal skills.

The factor of social intelligence has an average score of 6.92 and a standard deviation of 0.30 showing low variation between scores. Graduating students perceive to be fairly satisfied with their level of social intelligence particularly on the item "*I communicate effectively with different people*" (7.57). They score least (6.41) on the item "*I am good at making impromptu speeches*". Both items belong to the social intelligence factor however require a different skills set. Whilst the latter item requires the skills of public speaking the former entails a good level of interpersonal skills.

The average score for organizational acumen is of 7.56 with a standard deviation of 0.47. The item "*It is important to respect your colleagues*" (8.33) resulted in the highest average score whilst the item with an average score of 6.95 is "*I am eager to throw myself into my work*". The item receiving the highest score is a reflection of professional relationships that are established in the work place whilst the latter item reflects the ability to work in an environment of unpredictability.

Work competence has an average score of 7.34 and a standard deviation of 0.42. The item with the lowest average score of 6.74 is "*People approach me for original ideas*", whilst the item with highest average score of 8.10 is "*Being successful at work is very important to me*" (Figure 5). The work competence item receiving most perceived agreement is related to professional ambition whilst the item receiving least agreement is related to one's sense of authority in creativity and innovation.

What follows is a further reflection on the above findings of this study and a comparison of findings to studies previously carried out on work readiness also in the same context as this current study.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the concept that work readiness is a multidimensional construct (Caballero et al., 2011) and that all four factors share similarities with characteristics that are indicative of workforce readiness and work preparedness suggested in the literature

(Caballero et al., 2011). Results of this study show that the work readiness scale by Caballero & Walker (2010) can provide graduate employers with a good tool for assessing the multidimensionality of work readiness.

This general score of work readiness (7.09) indicates a positive perceived degree of work readiness amongst the population of graduating female Emirati in their final years of studies across different colleges. This result augurs well for the students themselves, tertiary education institutions, and employers in the UAE who have made Emiratization an integral HR strategy.

However a less positive outcome from this study is the average score of 6.37 for the factor of personal work characteristics. The result regarding personal work characteristics shows that graduating students perceive to be less equipped with the required skills to cope with workplace demands, challenges, unpredictability, stress and work/life balance than the more technical skills and work related knowledge comprising the factor of organizational acumen (average score of 7.35). Graduating students perceive to have less than the desirable self-efficacy and confidence required by the world of work. Personal work characteristics are not as easily taught in the lecture room as are technical skills and professional knowledge. Work experience is what helps new employees develop personal skills required at the work place. Since the sample was taken from a population of fulltime students with no work experience this result may be interpreted as one that is confounded by the lack of work experience.

When comparing the results of this study to results of other studies carried out on work readiness exploring the perceptions of other stakeholders it is clear that results vary depending on whose perceptions are investigated. The female Emirati graduating students participating in this study have different perceptions to those of the executives in the study by Al-Ali (2008) who lack trust in the work readiness of UAE nationals. Al-Ali (2008) found that executives consider Emirati nationals to have low: standards of experience (work competence); training and skills (work competence); motivation (personal work characteristics); English fluency (work competence); communication skills (social intelligence); personal work attributes. On the other graduating Emirati students perceive themselves as work ready, particularly on factors related to social intelligence, work competence and organizational acumen.

The results in this study also differ from the results in the study by Aljanahi (2017) who investigated the perceptions of employers in the UAE. Findings by Aljanahi (2017) show that employers are dissatisfied with the skill level of Emirati employees. Aljanahi (2017) had concluded that skills standards, salaries and benefits, and business hours obstruct Emiratization. Findings were also analysed across all of the four factors of personal work characteristics, organizational acumen, work competence and social intelligence. This discrepancy in perceptions may be due to fact that the current study focused on Emirati graduates completing tertiary education and not the general population of Emirati entering the workforce.

A mismatch in perceptions is also noted when comparing the current study to that investigating the perceptions of alumni by Landrum et al. (2010). Landrum et al. (2010) found that the personal work characteristics of self-discipline, responsibility, confidence, managing various tasks and independence featured amongst the highest rated qualities expected in the work place. Whilst in this study graduates who have not yet entered the work force perceive to be least work ready on precisely personal work characteristics. However similarly to the current study, Ahmad & Pesch (2017) in a study on the perceptions of HR professionals also discovered that personal work characteristics featured amongst the elements HR professionals believe graduates need to improve on such as realistic expectations and a sense of entitlement.

The results of this study have interesting implications for tertiary education institutions. In the conclusion that follows such implications are explored and recommendations are made both for tertiary education institutions and further research.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the perceived work readiness of female Emirati graduating students is a positive perception denoting that, in general, students believe to have the required skills and attributes for the world of work. However graduating students perceive that they are least work ready with regards to skills related to their personal development, confidence and stress management. In terms of their professional development and ethics graduating skills perceive themselves as strongest. Tertiary education seems to be having a positive effect on graduating students' perception of work related knowledge, social and technical skills but a less positive effect on their personal development and life skills development.

The main implication from this study is that tertiary education institutions have an important role in the development of students' personal development, resilience, adaptability, work life balance, stress management, self-esteem and confidence, and that this role, from the perception of graduating students, may not be entirely met. The recommendation is for such institutions in the United Arab Emirates to include personal development workshops as an integral part of their curriculum. Another recommendation is to integrate mentoring, coaching and counselling during internships. Tertiary education institutions may also need to evaluate the balance between the learning of technical skills and work related knowledge and time spent in internships. Internships are an opportunity for students to learn and improve their personal work characteristics and such experiences offer opportunities to learn skills such as resilience, adaptability, flexibility, stress management, self-confidence and esteem.

Further research may follow on the cultural differences and gender differences in work readiness since this research limits itself to the female Emirati population. The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of graduating students, it would also be interesting to have a study comparing the perceptions of alumni, employers, faculty members in tertiary education institutions as well as graduating students. This study is a cross sectional study that may be followed by a longitudinal study to compare perceptions of students as they enter the world of work during orientation and beyond.

A limitation in this study is that it was carried out within the context of a tertiary education institution by faculty members who may have unintentionally generated a sense of social desirability in the response of students. All measures were taken to ensure confidentiality of respondents and the institution; however it may not have been possible to eliminate all effects of social desirability.

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