

'Private sector' Emiratisation: social stigma's impact on continuance intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the continuance intentions of the small number of nationals working in the United Arab Emirates' 'private sector'. The analytical framework is informed by job satisfaction measures alongside the Arabian Gulf Social Contract and Social Stigma constructs. A survey of 653 individuals was conducted and found that the nature of the job, pay and benefits and career development opportunities enhanced continuance intentions. However, perceived negative societal sentiment towards such jobs, vis-à-vis classic public sector jobs, reduced these intentions. Recommendations for further research to be conducted on the format of university mandated internship programmes and government-funded workplace training programmes are made, as both were found to help normalise private sector career paths. While this paper is the first to specifically canvas this cohort on their vocational intentions and sectoral preferences, its applied element was limited by being cross-sectional in nature.

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Introduction

The six Arabian Gulf economies – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – share a common indigenous human capital challenge: how to best attract and retain more citizens to their respective private sectors (e.g. Government of Qatar 2008; Government of Saudi Arabia 2016; Government of the UAE 2008; 2021a, 2021b). The challenge, which is of relevance to other hydrocarbon export-dependent economies with rentieristic states (e.g. Kazantzev, Lebedev, and Medvedeva 2022), is now the key domestic socio-political concern for the Gulf because its public sectors are overstaffed with largely nationalised workforces and cannot accommodate all new national labour market entrants (e.g. Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi 2018). Fortuitously, though, there are in fact far more private sector openings than there are graduating nationals seeking employment (Rutledge 2018) thus, interventions tailored to the idiosyncrasies of these labour markets have the potential capacity to address this concern (see, e.g. Metcalfe 2011; Al-Asfour and Khan 2014; Aljanahi 2017). This paper seeks the views of nationals actually working in the 'private sector' by way of a survey ($n = 653$) and

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thus marks it as distinct from previous HRD research on this region. Moreover, it utilises the social aspect of Goffman's (1963) Stigma constructs in order to try and more satisfactorily explain the national cohort's pronounced preference for the 'classic public sector'. In other words, the paper seeks to gauge the impact of sociocultural sentiments above and beyond the well-documented skills mismatches (e.g. Davidson and Mackenzie 2012; Ashour 2020), high national reservation wage demands (e.g. Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012; Ryan 2016) and patriarchal views on 'appropriate' vocational pathways (e.g. Marmenout and Lirio 2013; Abalkhail 2019). Incorporating social stigma into the equation should help better inform HRD policy and practice in terms of the national cohort's vocational training and career development opportunities.

It was stated by a senior government official at a recent graduate job fair in the UAE that the era of 'comfy government jobs' was over yet, the necessary transformation to a more diversified and dynamic economic structure would require a societal 'quantum leap' (Al Nowais 2017; Swan 2017). Despite the fact that private sector labour nationalisation policies have been in place since the mid-1990s – that is, before most of the jobseekers at that fair were born – the public sector remains the preferred option and the vast majority of the Gulf's national workforces currently have government jobs (Rizvi 2018; Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority 2020; Sarker and Rahman 2020; The Economist 2021). Moreover, across the Gulf, most employed nationals have jobs in what this paper terms, 'the classic public sector' leaving the bulk of private sector positions to expatriate labour (see Table 1). Classic public sector jobs tend typically to be highly remunerated, bureaucratic in style and non-taxing in nature (undefined). The proliferation of such roles is considered to be a consequence of the Arabian Gulf Social Contract's (AGSC) 'job provision mechanism'; the primary way by which the region's rulers have distributed surplus oil rent to their respective citizenries from the 1970s to date (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010, 38). However, the region's public sector workforces have largely been nationalised and have long since reached 'saturation point'; many national employees in the public sector are underemployed or indeed, simply hold

Table 1. Population and workforce compositions, selected countries (2020).

| | Per cent | | Number | | |
|----------------------|-----------|---------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | Nationals | Non-nationals | Nationals | Non-nationals | Totals |
| The Arabian Gulf | 46.0 | 54.0 | 26,550,783 | 31,172,292 | 57,723,075 |
| Bahrain | 40.4 | 59.6 | 633,284 | 936,155 | 1,569,439 |
| Kuwait | 31.1 | 68.9 | 1,375,374 | 3,044,736 | 4,420,110 |
| Oman | 48.9 | 51.1 | 2,362,437 | 2,467,036 | 4,829,473 |
| Qatar | 7.3 | 92.7 | 203,779 | 2,591,705 | 2,795,484 |
| Saudi Arabia | 61.3 | 38.7 | 20,985,253 | 13,232,916 | 34,218,169 |
| The UAE | | | | | |
| All | 10.0 | 90.0 | 990,657 | 8,899,743 | 9,890,400 |
| of which, male (m) | 6.9 | 93.1 | 495,329 | 6,668,534 | 7,163,863 |
| of which, female (f) | 24.5 | 75.5 | 495,328 | 1,525,248 | 2,020,576 |
| Employment | m f | m f | | | |
| – Federal gov. | 44.7 31.0 | 2.0 1.6 | | | |
| – Local gov. | 36.7 40.0 | 5.2 3.7 | | | |
| – State-owned | 10.0 16.0 | 4.4 3.7 | | | |
| – GBE/Private | 6.5 11.4 | 82.4 46.4 | | | |
| – Domestic | 0.0 0.1 | 4.3 46.4 | | | |
| – Other | 1.8 1.1 | 1.6 1.8 | | | |

Notes. The figures shown are calculations based on aggregated data from Rutledge (2018), the UAE's Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority (2020) and, the UN Population Division (2021).

sinecures (see, e.g. Shaheen 2010; Coates Ulrichsen 2011; Davidson 2021). Thus, finding ways to better capitalise on national human capital is the region's principal strategic HRD change goal.

This gives context to the new UAE labour nationalisation drive that was launched in 2021 to coincide with the country's 50th year of independence (Government of the UAE 2021b). The labour nationalisation measures are both carrot and stick. For example, one government incentive is a new payments scheme for those nationals willing to take private sector work. Such individuals would be granted up to 5000 dirhams (\$1,360) per month for a period of 5 years in addition to the remuneration package offered by the given private sector employer. Top-down directives include new quotas: in some sectors, private sector companies will now be obliged to incrementally increase the percentage of nationals they employ over a 5-year period (Nasrallah 2021; Tolley 2021; Government of the UAE 2021b). Such new policy measures will have considerable bearing on the stakeholders in the labour nationalisation process including, the region's HRD agencies, the federal Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that seek public-private partnerships and have mandatory vocational internship programmes and, the productive, knowledge-based Government-Backed Entities (GBEs).

Statement of the problem

The problem this paper investigates is the extent to which job-related social stigma impacts the retention rates of the Gulf nationals employed in the private sector. As shown in Figure 1, the Gulf's strategic HRD change goal is to attract and retain more nationals to the private sector ('Continuance intentions'). All six Gulf economies invest substantially in education ('Training', the 1st element) and by way of subsidising employment in the private sector are providing recruitment opportunities and some level of ongoing workplace training ('Recruitment', the 2nd element). But, the third element, 'Retention'—seeking to reduce attrition when it manifests as one leaving the private sector for the classic public sector – is something the region's governments cannot so easily engineer (e.g. Reynolds 2021; Elbanna and Fatima 2022; Rutledge 2022). If, as is predicted, 'Sociocultural sentiments', the perceived social status that society attributes to a given job type has a bearing on this cohort's likelihood of remaining in the private sector, then this would benefit from more HRD practitioner attention and remedial action.

Literature review

In terms of background theory, this paper is grounded upon the AGSC and Stigma constructs. AGSC is founded upon the Landlord State and the less deterministic Rentier State discourses (Mommer 2002; Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010; Coates Ulrichsen 2011; Rutledge 2017; Yamada and Hertog 2020) and centres on a region of the world that is typified by its conservative, patriarchal, and tribal roots (e.g. Farrell 2008; Metcalfe 2011; Marmenout and Lirio 2013). Goffman's (1963) Stigma theory is incorporated into this paper's analytical framework because the region's

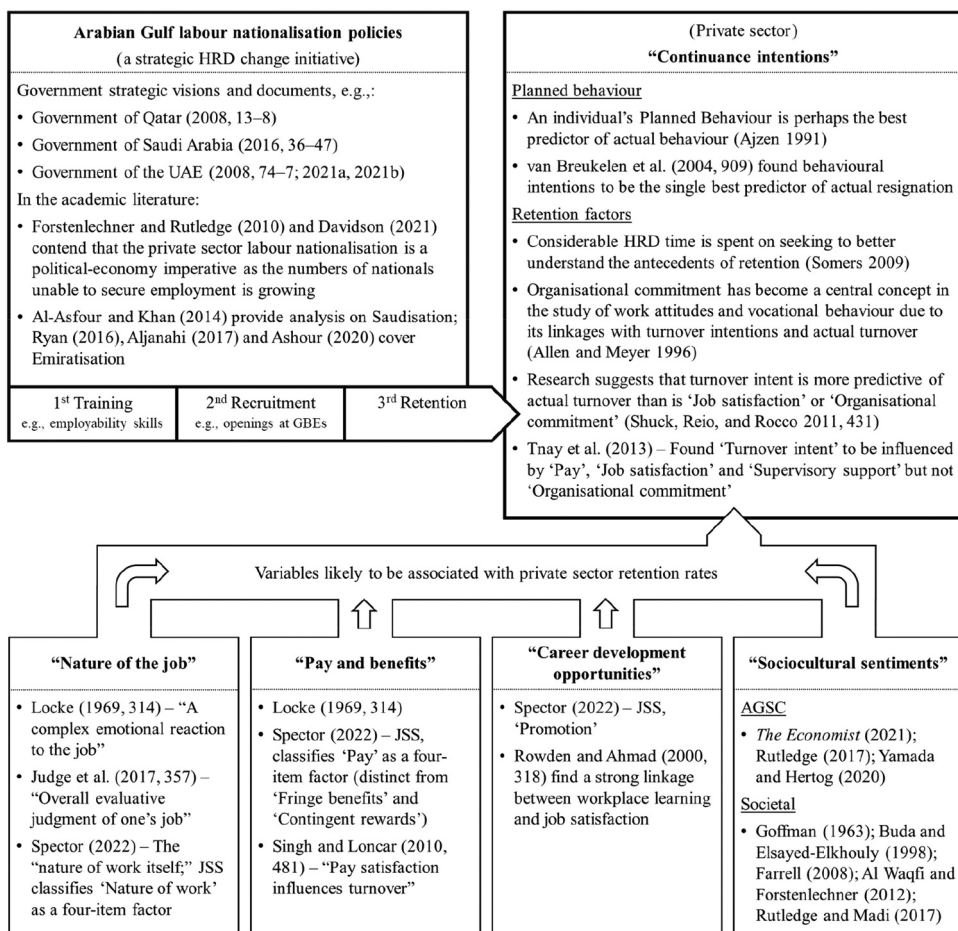


Figure 1. Conceptual framework model.

highly segmented labour market seems to be unmalleable for reasons beyond pay discrepancies, educational choices, and interference of a patriarchal nature (Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012; Issa 2013; Zeffane and Jamal Bani Melhem 2017). As opposed to granting political participation and individual agency, the Gulf's longstanding 'ruling bargain' has been to instead give generous welfare benefits (free housing, land to farm on, education, and healthcare, etc.) and the provision of a ('comfy') government job. Thus, within the AGSC construct, Goffman's (1963) domain of social class can be tied to having such a job, with the associated pride and status (Harry 2007). It follows that not being able to secure such a job may lead to disenfranchisement and feelings of being mere 'window dressing' for a private sector company that simply must hire a set number of citizens to meet its mandated labour nationalisation quotas (Farrell 2008; Elbanna and Fatima 2022). The Gulf's 'private sector' is inclusive of GBEs because such organisations are popularly considered by national society to be part of the private sector (Rutledge

and Madi 2017). GBEs are also distinct from government services departments as they are commercially run (Yamada and Hertog 2020).

Emiratization

The bulk of research covering labour nationalisation in the Gulf focuses on HRD/HRM policies and practices (see, e.g. Metcalfe 2011; Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012, 2014; Al-Asfour and Khan 2014; Alexander 2018). With respect to Emiratization specifically – the UAE’s labour nationalisation agenda – previous studies have explained well the socioeconomic backdrop and the views of educators, labour market specialists and policymakers (e.g. Ryan 2016; Aljanahi 2017; Ashour 2020; Sarker and Rahman 2020). A range of studies have looked at Emiratization and the vocational behaviour of the national workforce, but the focus tends to be within the public sector (e.g. Abdulla, Djebarni, and Mellahi 2011; Zeffane and Jamal Bani Melhem 2017). A smaller body of work has used qualitative approaches such as the focus group-based research by Marmenout and Lirio (2013). Another strand investigates the sentiments of prospective national employees, i.e. those still in fulltime education (e.g. Rutledge and Madi 2017; Griffin, Hodgson, and Sivam 2021).

Framing job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, broadly defined, encompasses the nature of the work and the associated benefits and shortcomings of the given job from an employee’s perspective (e.g. Locke 1969; Spector 2022). To get a holistic response on satisfaction levels, both intrinsic and extrinsic factors are ordinarily computed (Aziri 2011; Judge et al. 2017). When seeking feedback, be it on commitment, engagement, or satisfaction levels, questions tend to focus on the operating environment, incentives and rewards, access to training, career progression opportunities, and how the job in question impacts on one’s work/life balance. Items of this nature are found in various widely deployed instruments including Spector’s Job Satisfaction Survey scales (JSS; Spector 2022). Based on this job satisfaction-related literature, three factors were incorporated into this study’s research instrument, ‘Nature of the job’, ‘Pay and benefits’ and ‘Career development opportunities’. The fourth factor, ‘Sociocultural sentiments’, is specific to this region and its labour market idiosyncrasies.

Continuance intentions

According to Somers (2009) a considerable amount of HRD time, applied and academic, is spent on seeking to better understand the antecedents of retention, and it is argued that behavioural intentions are the single best predictor of actual resignation (van Breukelen et al. 2004, 909). The dependent variable used in this study is termed, ‘Continuance intentions’ (Figure 1), and it can be viewed as one’s plan of remaining in the private sector as opposed to seeking a move to the classic public sector. It is a widely held contention that an individual’s planned behaviour is the best predictor of actual behaviour (Ajzen 1991). Organisational loyalty has become a central concept in the study of vocational behaviour due to its linkages with turnover intent and actual turnover (Allen

and Meyer 1996). Some research has found that turnover intent is more predictive of actual turnover than are reported levels of organisational loyalty (Shuck, Reio, and Rocco 2011, 431). Interestingly, Tnay et al. (2013) find turnover intent to be influenced by pay, job satisfaction, and supervisory support but not organisational loyalty. Informed by this human capital literature, it was felt that ‘Continuance intentions’ (as opposed to ‘Turnover intent’) most satisfactorily captures this study’s aim of better understanding what factors enhance the retention rates of nationals currently employed in the private sector. Rutledge (2022), for instance, stipulates one’s job continuance intentions to be their ‘intention of remaining’ at a given organisation and used items such as, ‘I am [not] planning to look for a different job’ and ‘I see myself doing this job for the foreseeable future’.

Nature of the job

The nature of any given job defies easy classification but, if considered flexibly, it will comprise a fundamental element of satisfaction (Judge et al. 2017). Locke (1969, 324), described the nature of the job as a ‘pleasurable or positive emotional state’ resulting from one’s job experiences. For Spector (2022), the nature of the job is intrinsically linked to a position’s day-to-day tasks and the degree of enthusiasm the given individual has for these. In deference to this typology, elements that contributed to interpretations of the nature of one’s job for the purposes of this study included self-reported stress levels, willingness to work in multicultural environments and the regular usage of English as opposed to Arabic. In the regional context, private sector job-types are considered to be quite distinct from the bureaucratic comfy ones offered by the classic public sector. In the latter, Arabic will be the de facto mode of communication, and working environments are far more likely to be gender-segregated and largely populated by fellow nationals. As noted by Rutledge (2022) for example, private sector employment within the region – including positions at GBEs – ordinarily require punctuality, working to deadlines and English language proficiency. It is therefore of particular utility to gain insight on what impact the way one perceives the nature of their job has in relation to their thoughts on remaining in this sector:

H₁ The nature of the job is positively associated with continuance intentions.

Pay and benefits. Singh and Loncar (2010) find that while pay satisfaction does indeed affect turnover intent, job satisfaction is a more significant variable in terms of ‘actual’ turnover. Indeed, some data on the Arabian Gulf suggest that it is not salary alone that makes the public sector the preferred choice for nationals; status may play a pivotal role (e.g. Gallup/Silatech 2011; Zeffane and Jamal Bani Melhem 2017). That being said, Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2012, 623) argue that national jobseekers do have higher salary expectations than does expatriate labour, which means they may be likely to experience pay dissatisfaction even if they have accepted a job in the private sector (viewed possibly as a stepping stone to the public sector). Issa (2013) along with Davidson (2021) point out that those in the public sector can expect to earn several times as much as those in the private sector. However, ‘Benefits’, for the purposes of this paper, include factors like job security. Conventionally, once secured, a classic public sector job tends to be guaranteed to citizens for life. Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2010,

47) add that the public sector's employee benefits include a shorter working day, very generous annual leave, and pension contributions along with far better maternity leave. These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

H₂ Pay and benefits are positively associated with continuance intentions.

Career development opportunities

Terms such as 'employability' and 'life-long learning' now proliferate in the higher education and vocational behaviour literatures (e.g. Small, Shacklock, and Marchant 2018). This makes professional development and the pursuit of Career Development Opportunities (CDOs) a necessity in most economies globally. As such, both formal and informal on-the-job training will ordinarily constitute a key tenet of a given organisation's employee retention strategies (Rowden and Ahmad 2000; Bratton 2012). Within the context of the Arabian Gulf the situation is a little less ordinary. First, the private sector (both real and quasi) tends to hire expatriate labour with the requisite expertise and experience (Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012; Rutledge 2018). The Kafala system – another aspect of the AGSC – essentially makes it cheap, easy, and expedient for citizens to employ labour from overseas and thus benefit commercially (see, e.g. Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010, 2011). Second, the classic public sector affords training, often of all kinds, including the full funding of postgraduate qualifications with paid academic sabbatical leave to many national employees who have the right connections (such practices are viable as Forstenlechner and Rutledge (2011) point out, many on the government payroll are underemployed). It follows that while it is important to assess the impact of CDOs on continuance intentions, it is not necessarily going to be the case that these alone will transform retention rates:

H₃ Career development opportunities are positively associated with continuance intentions.

Sociocultural sentiments

'Stigma', from ancient Greece to the present day, if broadly defined, encapsulates the embarrassment one may experience by being branded as something other than normal. To an extent, it does not matter if the experience is expressed and 'faced' or, imagined and only 'felt'. Social Stigma is, as Goffman's (1963, 131) theorises, typically allocated due to the predicament, rather than the condition itself as, 'society establishes the means of categorising persons and the compliment of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural'. An 'undesired differentness' may be felt in one or more of the following domains: a physical disability, belief, addiction, ethnicity, and social class (Goffman 1963, 132). For those citizens who now find it less easy to secure positions in the classic public sector – like those at the aforementioned job fair – feelings of embarrassment, shame, or indeed of being abnormal may be felt. As set out by Stuber and Schlesinger (2006), self-stigma is a combination of identity and treatment stigma – the former being one's internalisation of negative labels and stereotypes and the latter, one's expectations about negative treatment by others.

In societies said to be collectivist in nature, employees are considered to derive considerable satisfaction if they believe their role to be viewed positively by society (e.g. Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2014; Abdulla, Djebarni, and Mellahi 2011; Abu

Elanain 2009). The degree to which collectivism is considered to be more pronounced in the Arab Middle East versus the post-industrial economies, while controversial, is observed and reported on in various pieces of research (e.g. Richard and Elsayed-Elkhouly 1998; Gregg 2005; Ryan 2016). Nonetheless, one's job-type may well have more psychological impact depending upon the given economy's cultural context and could amplify or dampen tendencies to depression and other work-related health issues (Van Aerden et al. 2016). The JSS-based research by Abdulla, Djebarni, and Mellahi (2011) that sampled 1,017 national and non-national public sector workers observed that assumptions on how positive the 'public's perception' of the individual's given role were, did impact on overall satisfaction levels. The following hypothesis is therefore posed:

H₄ Societal sentiments towards nationals pursuing private sector career paths are negatively associated with continuance intentions.

Methodology

This study used a survey-based approach to solicit the views of UAE nationals currently employed in the private sector. Much applied research conducted on the Gulf's labour markets relies upon already validated and generalisable instruments, such as the JSS construct (e.g. Abdulla, Djebarni, and Mellahi 2011; Zeffane and Jamal Bani Melhem 2017; Jabeen, Lynn Friesen, and Ghoudi 2018). Such an approach is advantageous in terms of making comparisons with other contexts and time periods. As no pre-existing scale was found that could adequately address this study's central research problem: the impact of societal sentiment towards various job-types that are outside of the classic public sector (Figure 1), a research instrument was deployed that contained a number of bespoke elements. These elements were derived from the literature, extant instruments, and a series of consultative meetings with academics whose expertise spanned HRD and labour nationalisation. A number of the same experts were consulted for a second time once the findings of a pilot study ($n = 31$) were analysed (see Figure 2). The pilot study was carried out at one GBE, and the initial testing was done to ensure provisional items fitted into their forecast groupings and that multicollinearity between the factors was not too high. This process, depicted in Figure 2, alongside the Cronbach's α values (Appendix A) ensured both validity and reliability.

Research instrument

The survey instrument developed for this study was designed to include some widely utilised job satisfaction measures alongside ones that could best draw out sentiment on the impact of prevailing societal norms on the 'appropriacy' of private sector careers. The items included in the scale were five-point Likert-style statements. The dependent variable was constructed to encapsulate and predict the individual's 'continuance intentions' (Appendix A lists the items actually deployed and the Cronbach α values of the factor groupings). The instrument also captured a range of demographic data, including educational attainment (whether or not their education was private or public sector) and whether or not respondents had previously completed an internship at a private sector entity.

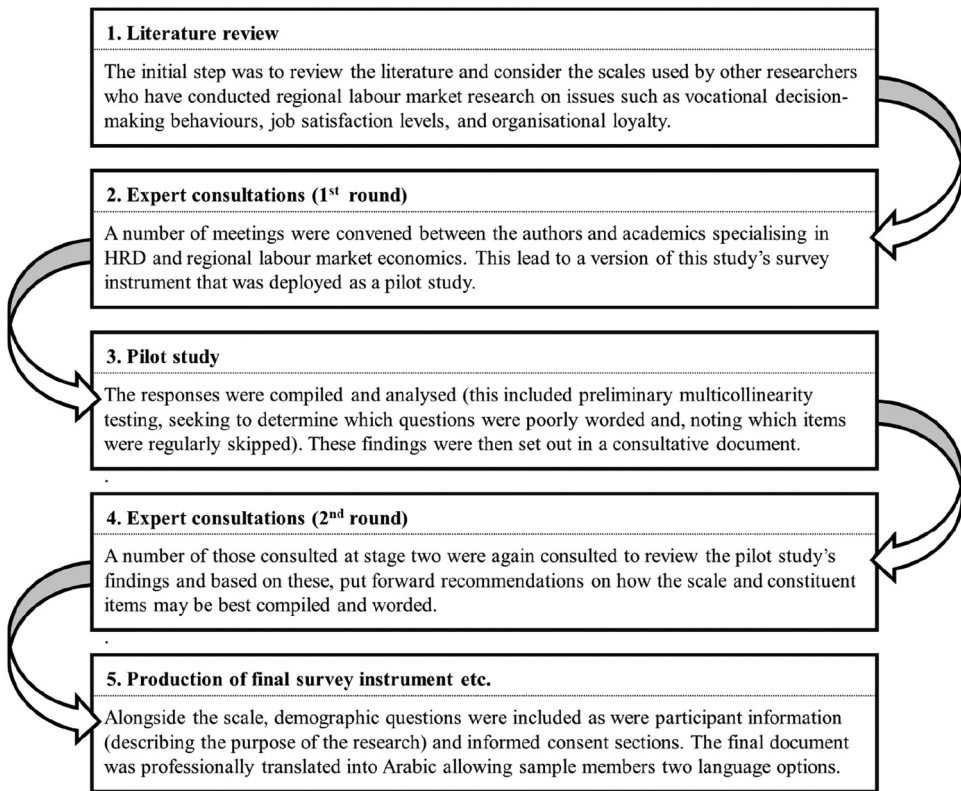


Figure 2. Survey scale formulation process.

Sample

The population from which the sample could be drawn was predefined: Emirati citizens working in the private sector. The sample only included full-time employees, not undergraduate interns and not individuals on initial probation periods. It is argued that to be able to interpret the perspectives of the target population by way of the collected views of surveyed individuals, the sample needs to be sufficiently large and selected by some degree of probability sampling (Wellington and Szczerbinski 2007, 123). In terms of sample size, a target of 500 was computed as being more than adequate for the target population's size. This figure compares favourably to a number of recently published works on the UAE's labour market whose target populations—i.e. the aggregate of all the cases that conform to the specifications defined by the researcher (Maruyama and Ryan 2014, 231)—were larger and their sample sizes smaller. In a study on job satisfaction, perceived organisational performance and turnover intention, Zeffane and Jamal Bani Melhem (2017, 1153) draw upon a sample of 311 employees from the UAE's entire service sector workforce. In another study on the quality of work and its influence on job satisfaction and turnover intention, Jabeen, Lynn Friesen, and Ghoudi (2018, 356) surveyed 323 individuals from a target population equalling all female UAE nationals employed in the public sector. To gain access to nationals

working in the private sector, what is now the Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation was approached. As was Mubadala (2020), the government parent company for many of the UAE's GBEs. Both of these entities administer directly and indirectly Emiratisation programmes across an array of industries. With their assistance, once permission was granted, HR executives at the relevant companies were formally approached and asked to facilitate in terms of distributing the survey instrument and informed consent sheets to employees who met the target sample eligibility criteria.

Procedure

In terms of face-validity checks (Armstrong and Taylor 2014, 194), following on from a preliminary pilot study ($n = 31$) the survey instrument's measures and items along with the outline data from the pilot study were shared in a series of interviews conducted with academics who had specific knowledge of HRM and the Gulf's labour nationalisation programmes (Figure 2). Following on from these consultations a number of refinements were made to the measures and items within the forecast factor groupings—e.g. some clarification of wording and the removal of several JSS factors including Communication, Operating conditions, and Co-workers (Appendix A). The final survey, which was provided in both Arabic and English, was estimated to take approximately 20 min to complete. The survey was distributed in both electronic and paper formats by the HR departments of the companies that have agreed to participate. The deployed survey instrument included an informed consent sheet which provided complete details about why the information was being collected and that participation was entirely voluntary and that their responses would be anonymised. In terms of meeting probability sampling criteria, randomisation was achieved as the participating organisations solicited all of their employees who met our criteria, Emiratis employed fulltime, but as none were obliged to complete the survey, only 653 usable responses were obtained from the approximately 1,200 distributed surveys.

Analysis of data

Various tests were undertaken, including correlation testing, to see the ways in which the sample differs on continuance intentions and responses to various measures along demographic lines. This was done first by utilising Pearson correlation coefficient test functionality in SPSS (version 22) in order to measure various relationships between continuous variables. Secondly, the Kruskal-Wallis and Jonckheere-Terpstra methods were used in order to test for significance between the medians of the independent factor groupings. In addition, multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis was also conducted as a way to establish relationships between the independent and dependent variables. MLR is the default option for many applied studies in the social sciences, it is not without its critics or shortcomings (Strogatz 2019). SPSS offers four modes of MLR and the choice of which one to deploy can theoretically impact on the computed results (Lewis 2007; Petrocelli 2003). All four options were run with the data once computed – backwards, forwards, hierarchical, and stepwise. In each model of the

MLR employed, the factors demonstrated the same direction of influence and relative degrees of magnitude.

Results

In terms of sample demographics, although controls for factors like age and gender were not deployed, the usable responses did happen to be well distributed. In terms of gender, there were 369 females and 284 males. Presently in the UAE, more female than male nationals work in the private sector (Table 1). The sample’s relatively young overall age is reflective of both the UAE’s and the wider Gulf region’s national demographic profiles (Rutledge 2018).

Regression findings

Tables 2 and 3 show the regression analysis findings, a significant regression equation was found with an R^2 of .745 ($F(4, 648) = 472.510, p < .000$). As depicted in Figure 3, four significant predictors of continuance intentions were found. Hypothesis 1—*the nature of the job is positively associated with continuance intentions*—was found to have a positive and significant coefficient ($\beta = .072, t(652) = 2.613, p .009$). Hypothesis 2—*pay and benefits are positively associated with continuance intentions*—was also found to significantly and positively predict continuance intentions ($\beta = .399, t(652) = 12.619, p < .001$), as was the case with hypothesis 3—*career development opportunities are positively associated with continuance intentions*—($\beta = .163, t(652) = 8.013, p < .001$). Further, the statistical modelling also supported hypothesis 4—*societal sentiment towards nationals pursuing private sector career paths are negatively associated with continuance intentions*—to exhibit a negative relationship with one’s continuance intentions ($\beta = -.423, t(652) = -14.239, p < .001$).

Table 2. Multiple regression (models summary).

| Model | R | Adjusted Square | Std. Error | Change Statistics | | | | | |
|-------|------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|------------|----------|-----|-----|--------------|
| | | | | R Square | R S Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig F Change |
| 1 | .000 | .618 | .617 | .63418 | .618 | 1052.523 | 1 | 651 | .000 |
| 2 | .000 | .717 | .716 | .54605 | .099 | 228.099 | 1 | 650 | .000 |
| 3 | .000 | .742 | .741 | .52189 | .025 | 62.571 | 1 | 649 | .000 |
| 4 | .000 | .745 | .743 | .51956 | .003 | 6.830 | 1 | 648 | .009 |

Note. $n = 653$; dependent variable: ‘Continuance intentions’.

Table 3. Multiple regression (coefficients).

| Model 4 | Unstd. Co. | | Std. | t | Sig. | Correlations | | | Collinearity | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-------|-------|---------|------|--------------|---------|-------|--------------|-------|--|
| | B | Error | Co. | | | Zero | Partial | Part | Tol. | VIF | |
| | | | Beta | | | Order | | | | | |
| (Constant) | 3.054 | .289 | | 10.574 | .000 | | | | | | |
| Pay and benefits | .497 | .039 | .399 | 12.619 | .000 | .786 | .444 | .250 | .394 | 2.535 | |
| Sociocultural sentiments | -.691 | .049 | -.423 | -14.239 | .000 | -.785 | -.488 | -.283 | .446 | 2.242 | |
| Career dev. opportunities | .208 | .026 | .163 | 8.013 | .000 | .333 | .300 | .159 | .954 | 1.049 | |
| Nature of job | .081 | .031 | .072 | 2.613 | .009 | .620 | .102 | .052 | .516 | 1.937 | |

Note. $n = 653$; dependent variable: ‘Continuance intentions’.

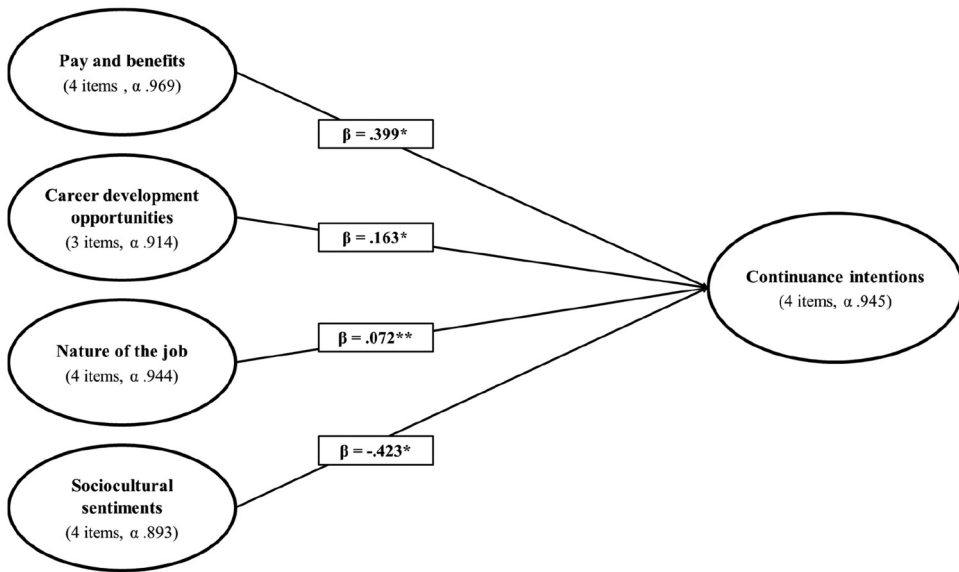


Figure 3. Private sector continuance intentions. Note. $n=653$; based on the survey shown in Appendix A.

Demographic differences

Table 4 delineates the sample in various ways and highlights the statistically significant differences observed along such lines. While gender per se had no statistically significant bearing on this sample’s continuance intentions, male nationals were significantly more negatively impacted by societal sentiments than were their female counterparts and, were considerably less happy with the nature of the job (Table 5). In terms of age there were

Table 4. Sample demographics and significant correlations on ‘Continuance intentions’.

| Item | Per cent | Number |
|--|-----------------|----------------------|
| Gender | | |
| – Male | 43.5 | 284 |
| – Female | 56.5 | 369 |
| Internship data | | |
| – Internship previously completed with this employer | 37.2 | 243 |
| – No internship undertaken | 42.7 | 279 |
| Salary level | | |
| – < US \$5,000 p/cm | 23.9 | 156 |
| – \$5,000–8,000 p/cm | 51.5 | 336 |
| – > \$8,000 p/cm | 24.7 | 161 |
| Family exposure to the private sector | | |
| – No family members in this sector | 30.2 | 197 |
| – One family member | 55.4 | 362 |
| – Two or more | 14.4 | 94 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | Pearson ^a |
| Age | .000 | –.268** |
| Pay and benefits | .001 | .124** |
| Family members working in ‘private sector’ | .000 | .352** |
| Type of education | .000 | .172** |
| Highest educational qualification | .000 | .292** |
| Considering further education | .000 | .208** |
| Years with current employer | .000 | .148** |
| Internship previously completed with this employer | .006 | .106** |

$n = 653$; dependent variable: ‘Continuance intentions’. a Pearson correlation R values * < 0.05, ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Factors in relation to gender.

| | Nature of the job | Pay and benefits | Career development opportunities | Sociocultural sentiments |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Male ^a | 3.0110 | 3.1664 | 3.3739 | 3.4746 |
| Female ^a | 3.4693 | 3.3497 | 3.1900 | 3.1125 |
| KW T ^b | .002* | .202 | .204 | .013* |
| Chi-Square | 10.077 | 1.629 | 1.617 | 6.159 |
| J-T c | .002* | .202 | .204 | .013* |
| Std. J-T Statistic | 3.174 | 1.276 | -1.272 | -2.482 |

Note. $n = 653$; $df = 1$; ^aLikert 1–5 scale was used. ^a Mean Rank derived from Kruskal Wallis Test. ^bKWT = Kruskal Wallis Test, Asymp. Sig. ^cJ-T = Jonckheere-Terpstra Test; Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed). * $p < 0.05$.

significant differences. The younger the sample member was, the lower their level of continuance intention was observed to be. With regard to both salary levels and the number of family members a given sample member had working in the private sector, positive and significant correlations were found. Looking at the educational delimiters, the higher one's qualification was (secondary school, college, undergraduate, postgraduate), the more likely they intended to remain in this sector. In terms of type of education (government, local private, overseas) those that had studied at either a private institution within the UAE or abroad were more likely to intend to remain in the private sector. Regarding considerations on pursuing further education, those seeking to gain higher level qualifications exhibited greater continuance intentions. Turning lastly to the impact of internship programmes, not having completed one had a significant and negative relationship with continuance intentions. Conversely, those that had completed an internship with a private sector organisation previously were significantly more likely to intend to continue in this sector.

Discussion

For the past quarter of a century attempts at private sector labour nationalisation in the Arabian Gulf has been described as a 'real world experiment in economics' and 'a largely unsuccessful one at that' (undefined, 51). While the subject has now built up a considerable literature, what is invariably omitted from the analytical framework is the distortive impact of the AGSC. For at its heart lies the 'ruling bargain', the Kafala system, and the job provision mechanism (omitted perhaps because of their politically sensitive nature). This study specifically considers the distortive impact of the job provision mechanism with regard to national society's sentiment towards job types and critically, employment in the public versus employment in the private sector. By also incorporating Goffman's (1963) Stigma construct into the equation, it seeks to explain how the mechanism fuels pride (Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012), shame (Farrell 2008), status (Harry 2007), and appropriacy issues (Rutledge and Madi 2017).

Nature of the job

Regarding the sample members' views on the 'Nature of the job' (H_1), there was a positive relationship between this and continuance intentions. With regard to gender, a considerably greater percentage of female nationals work in the private sector compared to their male counterparts (Table 1) and this cohort is significantly more positive about the nature of the job (Table 5). This observation supports findings in a number of earlier works like Marmenout and Lirio (2013) and Rutledge and Madi (2017). While both document the

gendered obstacles this cohort faces in terms of job and sector ‘appropriacy’, Rutledge and Madi (2017, 154) found that female nationals not only tended to perform better academically but they also opted more frequently for subject specialisations more suited to the knowledge-based sectors of the economy. Amongst this study’s sample those who had been privately educated exhibited stronger continuance intentions. This cohort, due to their western-style education will be fluent in English and are more likely to be accustomed to notions of individualism. They will also have spent formative years with adolescents and teachers from many different cultures. Both of these factors help explain why the notion of private sector employment might be less of a cultural shock for such individuals. One implication of this finding is that HRD interventions in the private sector workplace can concentrate on language acquisition in the early career stages of nationals recently graduated from federal HEIs, as well as coping strategies of working in unfamiliar multicultural environments.

Pay and benefits

Regarding ‘pay and benefits’ (H₂) it can be stated that these considerations will positively influence continuance intentions. The higher a given individual’s salary was, the more likely was their intention to remain in the private sector. This may be problematic and hard to solve by way of HRD interventions alone because the classic public sector is widely considered to offer far better remuneration and benefits packages overall (Issa 2013; Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010; *undefined*). Announcements such as all government employees are being granted extra pay to mark important national occasions and extra days of holiday vis-à-vis private sector workers to celebrate religious events act to entrench the existing pronounced preference for government jobs. This too will be the case when the current generation of jobseekers hear that, to commemorate the UAE’s 50th anniversary, incumbent national public sector workers are being offered early retirement (at just 50 years of age) on a very generous final salary arrangement (Tolley 2021). Another 50th anniversary labour nationalisation policy decision was to offer incumbent national public sector employees paid leave of up to one year to start up their own business. Whilst the intention may have been to encourage a move to the private sector, it came with a guarantee: those willing to partake would retain their existing position should they choose to return to it (Government of the UAE 2021b; Nasrallah 2021). Inadvertently, this again makes the notion of a government job that much more appealing. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia did in fact cut the salaries of some of its national public sector employees but, following ‘grumblings’, these measures were reported to have soon been reversed (Hubbard 2017). Though provokingly, it was recently said that ‘the most useful thing the Gulf’s governments could do with regard to their labour market dilemmas would be to ‘make their own penpushers work more for less’ (*undefined*, 52).

Career development opportunities

‘Career development opportunities’ (H₃) were found to have a significant and positive relationship with continuance intentions. It may be the case that, by way of promotion, positions at a certain level within the private sector are seen as attractive and thus more likely to result in retention. However, it is the case that the classic public sector also offers a range of CDOs. Extrapolating from the

conclusions drawn by Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2012), it is the public sector that is popularly thought to regularly fund off-site training and indeed, fund the post-graduate education of some of its better connected national employees. Here HRD can play a pivotal role. While cutting the pay of incumbent holders of ‘comfy’ government jobs is assumed to be politically untenable, a gradual reduction of the CDOs offered, could be. This could be enacted in tandem with a concerted campaign to promote CDO opportunities for those nationals willing to commit to working at GBEs for various periods of time. HRD interventions that prioritise nationals employed in the private sector and offer meaningful personal and professional development courses are likely to enhance retention rates. In this regard, it is interesting to note that as part of the UAE’s 50th anniversary year (2021–2022) celebrations, it announced plans to subsidise the costs private sector companies were thought likely to incur whilst upskilling the nationals on their payroll for a 5-year period (Government of the UAE 2021b).

Sociocultural sentiments

In terms of ‘sociocultural sentiments’ (H_4), it is clear that this factor has a significant and negative influence on continuance intentions. The more an individual is affected by the social stigma associated with their job in the private sector, the more likely it is they will seek to move to the public sector. As Goffman’s (1963, 133) stated, ‘shame, arising from the individual’s perception of one of their own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess’ will seek out ways to rid themselves of this thing; one avenue here would be to try and secure a classic public sector position. The observation that males were more negatively impacted than females with regard to ‘sociocultural sentiments’ (Table 5) is at first gloss hard to explain. For it is female nationals who often lack agency due to this society’s conservative and patriarchal nature (e.g. Farrell 2008; Metcalfe 2011). However, as alluded to above, it is female nationals who are more likely to be working in the private sector, and it is this cohort who place more value on the job being vocationally interesting and less on whether or not it is deemed ‘appropriate’ in society’s eyes (Marmenout and Lirio 2013; Rutledge and Madi 2017). One possible reason for why males are more negatively influenced by societal sentiment and norms may relate to whether or not they can perform their patriarchal role within their family and wider society. While their male counterparts with classic public sector jobs can leave their workplaces during the working day to attend to family matters or participate in impromptu gatherings hosted by local dignitaries with little comeuppance, those working in the private sector are not so easily able to. The cultural importance of being able to do such things within the Gulf’s conservative, patriarchal, and tribal context cannot be understated. It is commonplace for men to accompany female members of their family to hospital appointments, etc. The system of ‘open councils’ where (most often) male citizens can come into direct contact with ruling elites will often take place during the working day (Lekhraibani, Rutledge, and Forstenlechner 2015, 121).

Observations on changing norms

In Anderson's (1983) seminal work, it was explained that societal attitudes and norms are largely manufactured. The implication being they are malleable and open to change, be it organic and from the bottom up or orchestrated from the top – female nationals could be granted more autonomy; 'open councils' could be limited to evenings and weekends. As only 6.5% of employed male Emiratis currently work in the private sector they will almost certainly constitute a small minority in the given private sector organisation they are employed by. Thus, one can empathise with those in this position who report feelings of being different and thus 'stigmatised'. This being said, a gradual perceptual change could be manufactured based on the observations and evidence found in this study. This study's observations tentatively find three ways in which the notion of nationals pursuing a private-sector career path will help normalise private sector careers over time (reducing abnormality reduces social stigma). The first is that sample members, irrespective of gender, who had immediate family members already working in the private sector reported stronger continuance intentions. Secondly, those who had been privately educated were more likely to intend to remain in this sector. The third is in terms of internship programmes. Forstenlechner et al. (2012) report that private sector employers consider nationals who have completed a relevant internship to be far more employable. Marmenout and Lirio (2013, 158) argue that such programmes 'push boundaries beyond the typical perceived suitable career paths'. This study observed that respondents who had previously completed internships at private sector companies as part of their undergraduate study programme reported a significantly higher intention to remain in this sector.

Implications

This paper's objective was to examine the role social stigma plays with regard to continuance intentions. In line with previous studies (e.g. Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010) it underscores the economic factor: HRD policy and practice are unlikely to be capable of retaining nationals in the private sector if both classic public sector pay per se and benefits at large continue to be uncompetitively generous. More importantly, however, it highlights the psychological barrier: the stigma attached to not being able to secure a classic public sector position. As Achoui (2009, 35–36) has previously stated, certain forms of employment are not conventionally seen as appropriate from the perspective of citizens. Any improvement in the retention rates of nationals employed in the private sector will, in the short term, be unlikely unless or until the Gulf's HRD agencies are able to normalise the notion of private sector career paths.

Theoretical

Introducing a special issue of this journal focusing on the Arabian Gulf, Metcalfe (2011, 127) highlights the importance of factoring in the labour nationalisation policies to the HRD analytical process. While that issue's focus was on national women, its stress on the need for nationalisation programmes to be more attuned to the sentiments of female jobseekers, applies equally to all the nationals who are now being encouraged to break

with tradition and pursue private sector career paths. Summers et al. (2018, 854) write that ‘practices to manage the myriad potentially stigmatising conditions likely to be exhibited by current and potential employees is limited’. The observations made in this study with regard to sociocultural sentiments (i.e. the impact of local society’s perceptions towards nationals pursuing non-conventional career paths) have implications for the debate on stigma of character in relation to employment. As has been argued by Bos et al. (2013) for example, being stigmatised is not automatically associated with disadvantages caused by discrimination, yet stigmatisation can still be deleterious in the absence of overt discrimination due to its negative impact on the given individual (in this context, their job satisfaction levels). As Krug, Drasch, and Jungbauer-Gans (2019) argue, self-stigma is distinct from discrimination per se because it is based upon the individual’s perceptions of themselves. It is thought likely then that HRD practice and research within this geopolitically important region may be more applicable if Goffman’s Stigma construct is more fully incorporated into the AGSC analytical framework with reference to sentiment, actual and perceived, towards job-types and sector of employment.

Practitioner

Employability and on-the-job training programmes are very much the domain of applied HRD (see, e.g. Cascio 2014; Alexander 2018). Indeed, lifelong learning is elemental to HRD, as set out by Weinberger (1998, 76), Swanson (2001, 304) and Nafukho, Hairston, and Brooks (2004, 546–549). Regional HRD policy formulation and practices, such as HEI vocational internship programmes and government-funded CDOs, should consciously focus on ways to attract and retain more nationals to the region’s private sectors in light of the AGSC framework.

Private sector internship programmes

Going forward, the now mandatory vocational internship programmes could always be conducted in the private sector where tenable. It is reported that in the IAE no less than 85% of the nationals enrolled at university intern in the public sector (Malek 2017). Furthermore, internship programmes could be made more systemic and structure in nature. An implication of this for HR executives at HEIs and at GBEs will be for such practitioners to modify and enhance extant programmes. A goal could be to work towards splitting the internship into two distinct phases (e.g. an initial exploratory one and a longer more subject specialisation matched one in the lead up to graduation). This would allow students to get some experience of the private sector’s working environment in their foundation years and thus being in a better position to select the right entity and job-type with which to complete the second phase of their internship. As this study shows, those who had previously completed an internship in the private sector expressed stronger continuance intentions.

On-the-job training

Another area worthy of consideration would be for the Ministries and affiliated institutions tasked with implementing private sector nationalisation policy (the region’s HRD agencies) to provide more CDOs for the nationals that are currently employed in the private sector. If, as this study finds, CDOs can enhance continuance intentions,

allocating public revenues to this will ultimately be far less costly than continuing to absorb more and more national graduates into the classic public sector. Funded by surplus oil rent, GBEs can afford to implement the region's strategic HRD change goal by taking on recently graduated nationals, offering them reasonably favourable compensation packages, and providing them with an array of employability and vocationally orientated skills whilst in the workplace (Rutledge 2017; Yamada and Hertog 2020). As has been argued, over the medium term, GBEs do have the potential to normalise private sector career paths (Rutledge and Madi 2017). More research on the HRD practices, extant and potential, within such entities (similar to Alexander 2018) will help inform all concerned stakeholders.

Championing private sector participation

Normalising private sector jobs could also be done through government media campaigns organised by the region's human resource development agencies (in the UAE's case, the Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation). In many countries with relatively low public sector pay, public service motivation, spurred on by government-led championing, is one explanation for why individuals choose to work in this sector (see, e.g. Hinds 2019). Equally, a case could be made to manufacture *private sector* motivation within the Arabian Gulf states, with respect to nationals helping their country achieve strategic economic diversification goals by way of utilising the national workforce far more productively.

Limitations and future research

One key limitation is that this research was only conducted in one of the six Arabian Gulf economies and was cross-sectional in design. Ideally, and as a suggestion for future research, longitudinal studies would be conducted to examine the robustness of self-reported continuance intentions in terms of actual retention rates. Further, there would be utility in deploying this study's survey instrument, or a modification of it, in the other Gulf countries as this would help determine its applicability, generalisability, and afford comparative research on the merits of the various labour nationalisation policies currently in place within these six labour markets with particular attention to notions of job-related social stigma. The factors – economic (oil), political (rentieristic) and social (conservative and patriarchal)—that coalesce within the AGSC framework are not new. What is of contemporary importance, however, is the extent to which all six Arabian Gulf countries have underperformed in terms of attracting and retaining sufficient numbers of nationals to their respective private sectors. Therefore, the pressing HRD challenge is how to facilitate the gainful employment of this region's young populations. The issue of social stigma in relation to nationals pursuing non-conventional career paths needs to be better understood in order for HRD interventions to have a greater chance of remedial action. Principally, more research on how lifelong learning can aid the process of normalising private sector career paths (be this initially via GBEs or not) is called for.

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Appendix A

Survey items and factor loadings

| Factor | M | SD | α |
|--|------|------|----------|
| Private sector continuance intentions | | | .945 |
| I am happy to work in the private sector | 2.91 | 1.22 | |
| I would move to the public sector if I could secure employment there | 2.83 | 0.95 | |
| I intend to continue working for this organisation for the foreseeable future | 3.00 | 0.98 | |
| Working in the private sector is better than what many Emiratis think it to be | 3.31 | 1.29 | |
| Sociocultural sentiments | | | .893 |
| Most Emiratis do not understand the need for private sector Emiratisation | 3.22 | 0.78 | |
| Society sees public sector employment as more appropriate for Emirati women | 3.93 | 0.60 | |
| I believe the government should provide all citizens with government jobs | 3.42 | 0.86 | |
| Society attaches more prestige to individuals who have jobs in the conventional public sector (including the army and police force) vis-à-vis the private sector | 3.62 | 0.60 | |
| Pay and benefits | | | .969 |
| In my present occupation, I am satisfied with my salary (financial compensation) | 3.00 | 0.88 | |
| In my present occupation, I am satisfied with my days of annual leave | 2.86 | 0.92 | |
| In my present occupation, I am satisfied with my weekly working hours | 2.87 | 0.93 | |
| In my present occupation, I am satisfied with my level of job security | 2.52 | 0.69 | |
| Career development opportunities | | | .914 |
| In my present occupation, I am satisfied with my training opportunities | 3.49 | 0.86 | |
| I am happy with the training opportunities available to me | 3.28 | 1.02 | |
| There are opportunities to discuss my career development and progression | 3.46 | 0.69 | |
| Nature of the job | | | .944 |
| I do not face a lot of stress in my job in the private sector | 3.55 | 1.00 | |
| I am happy working alongside non-nationals (peers and managers) | 3.82 | 1.14 | |
| My colleagues help me when I have a work problem/I have a mentor at work | 3.77 | 0.47 | |
| I am happy to use English (alongside Arabic) as an when necessary | 3.83 | 1.15 | |

Note. $n = 653$; Cronbach's alpha figures based on standardised items; a five-point Likert scale was used: 'strongly disagree' = 1, 'disagree' = 2, 'neutral' = 3, 'agree' = 4, 'strongly agree' = 5. Shown are the factors retained post confirmatory factor analysis.