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**SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS AFFECTING THE EXPORT OF EDUCATION:  
THE CASE OF FINNISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND THE UNITED ARAB  
EMIRATES**

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## ABSTRACT

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The Finnish education system is known as one of the best performing systems in the world. This has raised a significant international interest, making the export of the Finnish know-how in education a good business opportunity. This thesis considers the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a target market for the export of Finnish primary education and analyzes the business environment particularly from socio-cultural aspects to shed more light on what to consider ahead before venturing in that area of the world. For this purpose, the thesis studies the specificities of the business environment in the UAE, investigates the socio-cultural factors that Finns should consider while planning the export of Finnish education to the UAE and proposes potential directions to overcome these barriers for a successful export of Finnish primary education in UAE.

Being familiar with both UAE's and Finnish cultures is a great asset for studying and understanding the socio-cultural factors affecting the export of the Finnish primary education to the UAE. The findings presented in this thesis are results of literature research, market trend investigations, personal analysis and thinking, and interviews with professionals with high experience in doing business in UAE. The research results illustrated important features of the UAE culture and society as well as a general image of the business environment which provided valuable information on the way to approach the education market notably the export of Finnish education to the UAE.

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Keywords: Finnish Education System, Education Internationalization, Export of Education, United Arab Emirates, Socio-Cultural Context, Primary Education

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background and Motivations

In Finland, the right to education and culture is considered as a basic right that must be equally secured by the authorities for every resident independently of their financial standing. By highlighting quality, efficiency, and equity, the Finnish education system is considered as one of the best performing systems in the world as often shown in different PISA-Studies on ranking different education systems in the world (OECD, 2004). This reputation has raised a significant international interest, making the export of the know-how in the Finnish education an appealing business opportunity.

Exporting education, however, is not comparable to exporting physical products, such as mobile phones as education is deeply bound to culture and society. Therefore, the Finnish education system cannot be exported as it is but should be adapted to the socio-cultural environment of the targeting countries.

Focusing on the case of export of Finnish primary education to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), this thesis aims to gain insight into the specific socio-cultural elements that can be found in the UAE culture and that must be taken into account when planning to do business in this oil-rich country of the Middle East which is investing and putting massive funds for improving its education system.

I moved to Finland in January 2007 and one of the first sources of satisfaction was the confirmation of the good reputation of the Finnish education system. One of my courses of the International Business studies was taught by a teacher who lived in the UAE for couple of years then recently moved to Finland. The constant comparison between Finland and other countries and essentially the UAE while illustrating concepts kept nourishing my curiosity toward this specific part of the world. Furthermore, my fluency in Arabic language which is the national official language in the UAE and my familiarity with the Arab culture encouraged the idea of doing a research study that would shed more light on the UAE's society thus facilitate the penetration of their market.

## 1.2 Objectives and Methodology

This thesis considers the United Arab Emirates as a target market for the export of the Finnish education and analyzes the business environment from different cultural and societal aspects to shed more light on what to consider ahead before venturing in that area of the world. The aim of the thesis is to study research issues related to the specificities of the business environment in the UAE and the socio-cultural factors that Finns should consider while planning the export of Finnish education, particularly primary education, to the UAE. To gain insight into these factors, the thesis aims to conduct a literature research survey, market trend investigation, personal analysis and thinking, and interviews with professionals with experience in doing business in UAE.

Being familiar with both UAE's and Finnish cultures is a great asset for studying the socio-cultural factors affecting the export of the Finnish primary education to the UAE. The research methodology adopted in this thesis consists of both theoretical analysis (literature research, market trend investigations and personal analysis and thinking) and empirical analysis (interviews with professionals with high experience in doing business in UAE). Some of the conclusions from the theoretical analysis are naturally expected to be supported by the empirical analysis.

To best achieve its objectives, the rest of this thesis is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly describes the Finnish education system and discusses the importance of exporting it along with current efforts in this direction. Section 3 introduces the education system and the business environment in the UAE. Section 4 discusses the idea of exporting Finnish primary education to the UAE. Section 5 analyses (through literature research, market trend investigations, personal analysis and thinking, and interviews with professionals) the socio-cultural context and factors affecting the export of The Finnish Primary Education to the UAE. Finally, Section 6 draws some conclusions and points out new perspectives toward successful export of Finnish education system.

## 2 EXPORT OF FINNISH EDUCATION

Finnish education system has a good reputation and this has raised a significant international interest, making the export of the Finnish know-how in education a real business opportunity. This chapter describes the characteristics of the Finnish education system and discusses the motives for its export.

### 2.1 Finnish Education System

Finland has an excellent education system, perhaps among the best ones in the world, according to several PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) studies carried out by OECD member states (OCDE, 2004). The Finnish education system consists: of one year of voluntary pre-primary education; nine-years of basic education (comprehensive school), upper secondary education comprising vocational and general education, and higher education at higher education institution (e.g. universities and polytechnics). The Finnish education system is outlined in Figure 1.

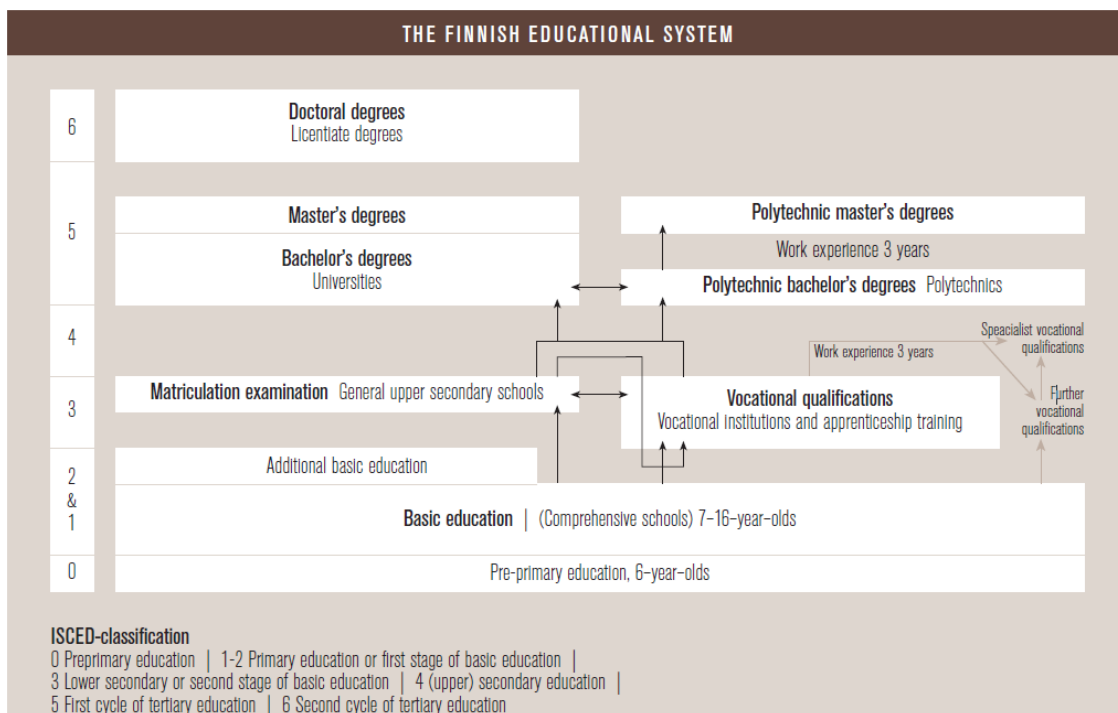


Figure 1. The different stages in the Finnish Education system (picture taken from the webpage of The Finnish National Board of Education (<http://www.oph.fi/english>))

In a nutshell, the different stages in the Finnish education system are the followings. Before compulsory education at the age of seven, children have a right to pre-primary education at the age of six. Participation in pre-primary education is voluntary and is provided for 6-year-olds at day-care centers and in pre-primary classes operating in conjunction with comprehensive schools. Compulsory education begins at the age of seven. After nine years in basic education, it is possible to continue either to general upper secondary education or to vocational upper secondary education and training, and then to higher education. Higher education is ensured by universities and polytechnics. Universities focus on scientific research and instruction, whereas polytechnics are professionally oriented higher education institutions adopting a more practical approach (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010).

Among the properties which make the Finnish education system unique and worldwide attractive are (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010):

- ✓ The Finnish education system offers equal educational opportunities to everyone irrespective of domicile, gender, financial situation, religion, citizenship or linguistic and cultural background. Hence, accessibility of education is ensured for everyone throughout the country.
- ✓ Basic education is provided completely free of charge (including teaching, learning materials, school meals, health care, dental care and school transport) ensuring that all children can attend schools.
- ✓ Significant attention is given on individual support for pupils' learning and well-being and guidelines are included in the National Core Curriculum. Every pupil can receive personalized support.
- ✓ In contrast to many education systems in the world, the Finnish education system does not contain national tests of learning outcomes. Pupils and schools are not compared with each other.
- ✓ Assessment of both schools' learning outcomes and pupils is encouraging and supportive in nature. The aim is to produce information that will help schools and pupils to develop. National assessments of learning outcomes are based on samples and the key goal is to find



areas requiring further improvements in different subjects and within the entire school system.

- ✓ Teachers working at all levels of education are well-trained and strongly committed to their work. All teachers are required to hold a Master's degree. Initial teacher training includes teaching practice. The teaching profession is highly respected and popular in Finland, which makes it possible to select the best young students. Teachers have an independent position in their work.
- ✓ Organization of school work and teaching is guided by a conception of learning where pupils' own active involvement and interaction with teachers and the learning environment are important.
- ✓ Pupils process and interpret the information that they absorb on the basis of their prior knowledge structures.

These above properties (among many others properties) of the Finnish education system have made the Finnish education internationally competitive with an excellent reputation. This position has created a large demand and interest on the Finnish education by several countries in the world.

## **2.2 Export of Education**

Nowadays, a huge demand for international education worldwide is witnessed. For instance, the number of international students is expected to increase from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million students in 2025 (Knight 2006b). Some of this demand will naturally be absorbed by student mobility to foreign countries but there is also an increasing trend of programs, institutions and education providers moving across national borders. Export of education is then becoming an attractive business especially targeting oil-rich countries which are investing heavily in expansion of their education systems (Knight 2006b).

The export of education is not necessary taking place only across national boundaries but it can also be done "domestically" through attracting exchange/degree foreign students, training foreign personnel on administrative structures at universities/schools, staff developments, education

planning, etc (Knight 2006b, Elkin et al 2005, Knight 2006a, Elkin et al 2008, Vincent-Lancrin 2004).

In a cross border case, the export can take the form of programme export or institution export. Programme export refers to an educational programme that can go abroad via e-learning, educational partnerships with foreign institutions to deliver joint courses, or any other joint educational arrangement in which students, academics and institution remain in their home country (Vincent-Lancrin, 2004).

Institution export, on the other hand, takes place when an institution or education provider is taken abroad or when institutions invest for educational purposes by setting up a branch campus, partnering with a foreign university. While the mobility of students, professors, knowledge and values is not a new phenomenon as it has been practiced for centuries in higher education, the recent trend of mobility of programs and education providers, however, is a rather new phenomenon as it began to grow significantly during the last two decades. (Knight 2006b, Juusola 2011).

The British and Australian education institutions are perhaps the most active players in the export of higher education. Institutions from the US, France, Canada, Singapore and India are active as well (Wilkins 2011). These institutions usually open satellite campuses and research centers abroad and offer their education programmes and qualifications via partnerships with a local host country institution (Juusola 2011).

It appears that the majority of education export business concerns mainly higher education whereas the export of primary education is almost left out. This could be a niche and appealing business (Juusola 2011).

### **2.3 Motivations behind the Export of Education**

Internationalization and globalization are phenomena that are favoring companies to expand across borders (Elkin et al, 2005). The Finnish education system has an excellent worldwide reputation and this can be exploited for exporting it abroad. There are basically different reasons

that can motivate the export of Finnish education system including political, economic, academic, social and cultural reasons.

From a political point of view, export of one's education system is an efficient tool as foreign policy, diplomatic relations and communications, and also as a means of safeguarding national identity and culture and securing its survival in globalized world and the homogenization of cultures. From economical point of view, one can see the export of education as alternative sources of funds. From academic point of view, the export of Finnish education system would enhance its recognition by the academic community, motivate the improvement of the system and increase its reputation. Finally, the cultural and social motivations include the importance of preservation and promotion of one's national culture. In addition, they address the need for improved intercultural understanding and communication. It is worth noting that nowadays the main reasons for exports of education systems are more economic than others (Söderqvist 2001).

## **2.4 Ongoing Efforts on Exporting Finnish Education**

Finland has got a significant media attention due to the reputation of its education system and welcomed many groups of 'education tourists' coming to learn from the Finnish way of handling schooling, education and learning. This international interest makes the export of the know-how in the Finnish education an appealing business opportunity. Exporting education, however, is not comparable to exporting physical products as education is deeply bound to culture and society. So, the Finnish education system cannot be exported as it is but should be adapted to the socio-cultural environment of the targeting countries. Currently, the Finnish authorities are defining effective strategies and conducting research and reforms striving for exporting the Finnish education.

Among the most significant ongoing programs on exporting Finnish primary education is the EduCluster Finland project (ECF, 2013) run by the University of Jyväskylä. EduCluster Finland is a gateway to Finnish excellence in education. The project focuses not only on exporting Finnish know-how in education to different countries in the world but also on improving the quality of the Finnish education system by introducing new teaching and learning practices and conducting quality assessment, performance evaluation and teacher training. As shown in Figure 2,

EduCluster Finland is already operating in several countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America.



Figure 2. EduCluster Finland project aiming at exporting Finnish know-how in education is operating in several countries in the world (<http://www.educlusterfinland.fi/en/where-we-operate>)

For instance, it has been reported on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2013 that EduCluster Finland has made an agreement with King Abdulaziz University to bring Finnish-style schooling to the Saudi education system (<http://www.educlusterfinland.fi/en/news/17-02-2013/>). The contract lasts for five years and will develop primary education in Saudi Arabia in the following fields: teacher training system, pedagogical competence of teachers, innovation in the field of education and special themes in education, among others. The operational model is to integrate Finnish best practices and expertise in education to match the needs and reform initiatives in Saudi Arabia. According to a Jyväskylä University press release, the programme will focus on girls' education and the training of female teachers (<https://www.jyu.fi/en/news/archive/2013/02/tiedote-2013-02-17-12-26-36-525699>).

Regarding the export of Finnish primary education to United Arab Emirates (UAE) which is the focus of this thesis, there is an ongoing programme called EPA (Educational Partnership in Abu Dhabi) running from 2010 to 2015. The EPA programme (<http://www.peda.net/veraja/epa/project>) is a partnership programme between EduCluster Finland and Abu Dhabi Education Council in

UAE aiming to combine both the Abu Dhabi and Finnish experience to create world-class flagship schools in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain from 2010 to 2015. EPA builds on a fusing the core pillars of the Finnish primary curriculum considered specific to teaching and learning with the new curriculum in Abu Dhabi. The process requires designing and testing the introduction of a classroom teaching model within the new Abu Dhabi curriculum. It serves to develop show-case schools over 2010-2015, establishing new pedagogical knowledge and skills which enable Abu Dhabi teachers to develop teaching and learning practices through a class teacher model. EPA also offers a professional development programme for Emirati educators operated by EduCluster Finland. More details on this programme can be found at <http://www.peda.net/veraja/epa/project>.

### 3 EDUCATION AND BUSINESS AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Export requires knowledge of the business and cultural environments of the target countries. For instance, business culture in the UAE has specificities compared to Finland and the Western world. This chapter presents the UAE, its education system and the specificities of its business environment.

#### 3.1 United Arab Emirates (UAE)

As illustrated in Figure 3, the United Arab Emirates is located in the Middle East bordering the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and the neighboring countries are Oman and Saudi Arabia. The constitutional federation of the United Arab Emirates was established in 1971. It comprises seven emirates which are: Abu Dhabi, Sharjha, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Kaimah and Fujairah.



Figure 3. The United Arab Emirates and the neighboring countries in the Middle East (Source: Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Arab\\_Emirates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Arab_Emirates)).

The capital of the federation of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, is situated in the emirate of the same name. Although 80% of its area is a desert, The UAE is a country of fascinating landscapes and one of the world's fastest growing tourist destinations. The discovery of oil about three decades ago turned the impoverished region of small desert principalities into a modern wealthy state with a high standard of living. The UAE is still dependent on oil, although it has made successful efforts in diversifying its economy and reduced the proportion of GDP based on oil and gas (Vine, 2010).

The political and economic progress accomplished by the UAE since its creation was followed by an enormous improvement in the social conditions. The first priority of the government's modernization's programme is to invest in the human force that constitutes the "nation's wealth". Nowadays the citizens on the UAE benefit from high living standards as a result of large investments in the Education and health system. Further efforts are spent on the development of the human resources, concretizing the autonomy of women and bringing a social stability to the most vulnerable. Although the Emirati population has succeeded in harmonizing the globalization and modernity with its traditional values, the social mutations had a great impact particularly the demographical imbalances related to the urbanization and the mass immigration. However, the Emirates remain a tolerant, open and humane society that cherishes its traditional roots and bases (Zoubir 1999).

In 2011, the population of the UAE is estimated to 5.1 million with a very high population growth rate of 3.2%. The population of the UAE is very young as 78.7% of the population is between the ages 15-64. The local Emiratis form only 19% of the population while the rest are other Arab and Iranian (23%), South Asian (50%) and other expatriates (8%) mainly from the Western Countries and Eastern Asia (CIA-The World Factbook, 2011, Vine, 2010).

Regarding the religion, the majority of the population (around 96%) are Muslims, which is the official religion in the country. The official language is Arabic, although Persian, English, Hindu and Urdu are widely spoken by the major ethnic groups. English is widely used in business transactions (Juusola, 2011, Vine, 2010).

### **3.2 Specificities of Business Environment in the UAE**

The business culture in the UAE has specificities compared to the Western world (Zoubir 1999). The official language is Arabic and the official religion is Islam. The weekend in the UAE is Friday and Saturday. There is no federal tax for general businesses. Moreover, personal incomes are neither a subject to taxation. In the UAE, it is necessary to build personal contacts as relationships are prerequisite for doing business - there will not be any business without friendship (in contrary to many Western countries where the focus of doing business is on making deals but not necessary building relationships) (Juusola, 2011).

In the UAE, 51% of any business must be owned by a UAE national and businesses must be set up as limited partnerships. Foreign firms entering the UAE also need to have a local sponsor for the firm in order to obtain a business license. Resident employees of a company need a local sponsor in order to get a visa (Juusola 2011).

Obviously, all these cultural and business specificities should be known prior adventuring to enter the UAE market. Section 5.1 compares in more details the business environment in the UAE and in Finland.

### **3.3 The Education System in the UAE**

The education system in the UAE is quite new compared to many other countries (Hvidt 2011, Gaad et al. 2006). The educational structure covers 14 years of compulsory education that consist of pre-school, primary, intermediate and secondary levels. The education market has expanded rapidly during the last decade as there are now many private higher education institutions complementing the public institutions. Most of the Emirati students enrolled in the last year of the secondary school can either apply for an admission into a higher education institution or try to beneficiate from a state funded scholarship to pursue studying abroad. The UAE citizens have the possibility of enrolling in one of the public institutions of higher education free of charge or choose from a growing range of different private institutions fitted with an international reputation. The University of the United Arab Emirate, situated in Al Ain is the flagship institution of higher education in the UAE while the two campuses of Zayed University in Dubai and Abu



Dhabi were created mainly to extend the opportunity to get a higher education for Emiratis all around the country.

A significant progress has been accomplished in the education system of the UAE in a short period (Hvidt 2011). Emiratis of both sexes are offered a public education that is free of charge from preschool to university. In addition, a highly developed private education sector is also available and thousands of Emirati students travel abroad to pursue higher education supported by generous state grants.

However, despite the regular investments during the past years, the government currently focuses on necessary reforms in the education system especially in the primary and secondary schooling to bring it into the line with the international level. In order to achieve this goal, the Emirati Ministry of Education is implementing the Education Programme 2020, which is based on a series of five-year plans including the introduction of state-of-the-art pedagogical techniques as well as the enhancement of students' creativity and self-learning. The UAE is currently aiming to complete the training of no less than 10 000 teachers for the public education sector within the few coming years with another ambition of reaching 90% of the nationalization of the personnel by 2020 (Hvidt 2011).

## **4 EXPORT OF FINNISH PRIMARY EDUCATION TO THE UAE**

Nokia is perhaps one of the best Finnish success stories in business in the past two decades. After the witnessed decline of NOKIA's activities and share in the mobile market in the recent years, Finland is aiming more than ever to create many similar or even better business success stories. Export of Finnish education could be one of these stories given the significant media attention and the excellent reputation of Finnish Education. This could be a very attractive business especially if targeting oil-rich countries which are investing heavily in expansion of their education systems.

While the Finnish education system has several stages (i.e. from pre-schooling to higher education) and there are many countries in the world, this chapter explains the motivations behind particularly focusing this thesis on the Finnish primary education and the UAE as the target country. The factors that may affect the export of Finnish education to the UAE are also discussed.

### **4.1 Why the UAE?**

There are three main reasons which motivated the selection of the UAE as the target country in this thesis.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of my courses of the International Business studies was taught by a teacher who lived in the UAE. The constant comparison between Finland and the UAE while illustrating concepts kept nourishing my curiosity toward this specific part of the world. The choice of the UAE is also motivated by my familiarity with both the Arab and Finnish cultures.

A second reason for targeting the UAE market is the increasing demand for foreign education in the UAE due to the huge amount of foreign expatriates. Emirati students also tend to prefer enrollment into foreign schools instead of federal universities as higher education degrees from Western countries are highly desirable and respected by Emiratis. Private institutions' programs are more suitable for the needs of private sector and hence more likely to lead to employment of its students.

A third main reason for targeting this oil-rich country of the Middle East, is the massive funds and efforts put by the UAE's authorities into expanding the Universities and importing the best performing education systems to the UAE. So, this is could be good business opportunity for Finland to enter the UAE market and exploit the excellent reputation of the Finnish education system.

## **4.2 Why Finnish Primary Education?**

While the Finnish education system has several stages, this thesis particularly focuses on the export for primary education. The main reasons behinds this deliberate choice is explained below.

The UAE is nowadays already hosting a vast number of international universities and business schools that are mainly concentrating on offering undergraduate and postgraduate education. This high education market is quite oversupplied and dominated by prestigious universities from British and American education institutions, and also institutions from the Australian, France, Canada, Singapore and India. These institutions usually open satellite campuses in the UAE and offer their education programmes and qualifications via partnerships with local Emirati institutions. The competition in this sector is then very high. However, there are hardly foreign institutions targeting primary education and there should be enormous opportunities for business in this sector (Juusola 2011).

Another reason for focusing on primary education is that it is more suitable for studying cultural issues in primary education than in high education as primary education is more bound to culture and society. Export of primary education to the UAE would then require culture understanding ad adaption while there is hardly any cultural adaptation in high education as students are generally adults (Juusola 2011).

A third important reason for selecting the Finnish primary education is that Finland's proven strengths is mainly in the primary education sector as shown in different PISA studies while it is quite difficult to compete with prestigious British and American universities in the high education sector.

### **4.3 Factors Affecting Export of Finnish Primary Education to the UAE**

Among the different factors that may affect the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE, I can cite:

- **Economic factors such as high competition in education export to UAE**

The UAE is one of the largest hosts of international branch campuses in global scale. Dominant players in the export of education to the UAE used to be famous US and UK universities. Nowadays, many other countries like Australia and Canada are entering the competition. Such a highly competitive market combined with several other economic factors raise the natural question of the profitability and attractiveness of the Emirati education market for the Finnish education export. While the high education market in the UAE is quite oversupplied, there fortunately should be enormous opportunities for business focusing on the Finnish primary education.

- **Socio-cultural factors**

Doing business abroad, such as education export activities, requires deep knowledge of local culture and society. Socio-cultural factors are the large scale forces within cultures and societies that affect the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of individuals. They are characteristics of the environment that are related to the effectiveness of collaboration and business. For instance, when doing business under Islamic (Sharia) law, charging interest is forbidden in all transactions. Thus, lack of knowledge in Islamic culture can lead to several troubles when Finns do business in the UAE.

- **Geopolitical factors**

Political relations between countries do also affect business export activities. For instance, it would be easier to export Finnish education to UAE than to North Korea. These political factors are unfortunately out of hands of business managers but are controlled by the governments of each country and the geo-political alliances. This is somehow against the principle of globalization. Apparently, Finland and the UAE have normal political relationships which do not hinder business.

- **Finnish Education Strategy and Priorities**

The Finnish authorities are currently defining effective strategies and conducting research and reforms striving for exporting Finnish education. The choice of the targeting countries is then depending on the Finnish education strategy and priorities. It appears nevertheless that the UAE is among the targeting countries of the Finnish education export as there are already ongoing activities in this direction such as the EduCluster project (ECF, 2013) run by the University of Jyväskylä.

## **5 SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS AFFECTING THE EXPORT OF FINNISH PRIMARY EDUCATION TO THE UAE**

As with any kind of export activities, there are plenty of other factors which can affect the business export. Contrary to the export of physical products, education (and particularly primary education) is deeply bound to culture and society. Hence, the Finnish primary education system cannot be efficiently exported as it is but should be adapted to the socio-cultural environment of the UAE.

The gaps between different cultures can be seen in different aspects including the religion (which may have a major impact on one's culture), the power of distance (which deals with inequality of power between people), uncertainty (which defines tolerance for unpredictability), the femininity (which explains different roles of men and woman in the society), demographic and historical factors etc.

This chapter particularly focuses on studying the socio-cultural factors that Finns should consider/know while planning the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE and proposes potential directions to overcome these barriers for a successful export of Finnish education to the UAE.

### **5.1 Socio-Cultural Factors**

- **Demographic Factors**

Before considering the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE, it is important to acquire a clear knowledge on the targeted population. As illustrated in Figure 4, the local Emiratis form only 19% of the population in the UEA while the rest are other Arab and Iranian (23%), South Asian (50%) and other expatriates (8%) mainly from the Western Countries and Eastern Asia. The question which arises then is whether the export of Finnish primary education should target only local Emiratis population or both locals and expatriates. Both cases may be interesting but they may require different business models. Given the local Emiratis children usually have their own

schools while foreigners go to international schools, it is perhaps more appealing to start targeting Emiratis children.

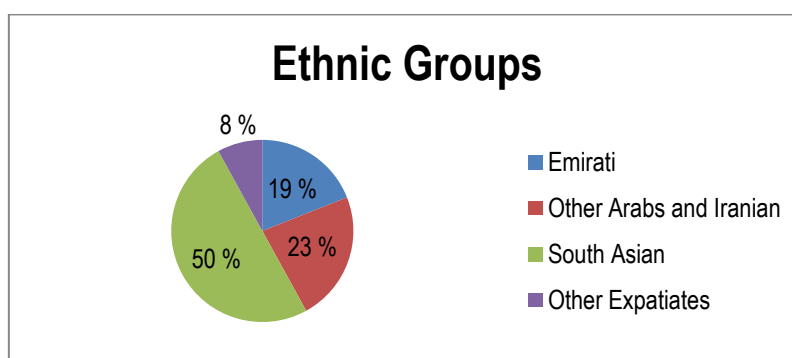


Figure 4: Demographic distribution of the population in the UAE

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population of the UAE has experienced a fast increase after the oil discovery. The boost was a result of not only high natural rates of increase among the UAE's local population but also a large inward migration of expatriates. Out of a total of above 8 million inhabitants, the local Emirati population accounts only for less than one million. Despite this low number of local Emirati population, I think that it is still an appealing business to target this niche market by taking into consideration the fact that the population of the UAE is quite young (20,4% of the population are younger than 15 years) with a very high population growth rate of about 3.7%. Table 1 illustrates some demographic statistics of the UAE, highlighting the high population growth.

<b>Population</b>	<b>8, 26 million</b>
<b>UAE Nationals</b>	947,997
<b>Median age</b>	30.1 years
<b>Urban Population</b>	84,4 %
<b><u>Population growth</u></b>	<b><u>3,7%</u></b>
<b>Fertility rate</b>	2,4%

Table 1: Demographic statistics of the UAE

- **The effects of Oil Boom on the Emirati society**

Forty years ago, the UAE was a poor country. Its economy depended mostly on agriculture, nomadic animal husbandry, pearls extracting and trade, seafaring and fishing. Agriculture was mainly limited to those few locations where fresh water is available (e.g. oasis). The discovery

and export of oil starting from the 70's yield in a major transformation of the emirates' economy and society. Nowadays, it has reached an income level similar if not higher to that of the industrialized nations.

The huge oil and gas revenues, generated by the explosive rise in oil prices in the 70's, enabled the UAE to shorten the hard and long processes for economic development and also allowed her to leap many development stages to reach the stage of high mass consumption. The distribution of these large revenues in the form of social and economic infrastructures, high wages, and a high standard of social services like health and education, has promoted the standard of living of the citizens and helped the maintenance of a political and social stability in the UAE since its formation.

For doing business in the UAE, it would be useful to understand the transformation of the emirates' society before and after the oil boom. Before the oil discovery, people in the UAE were poor and they travelled from one place to another to feed their families and their animals. Today, people are rich and do not need to travel as the government provides houses, food and all other facilities and services. Another significant transformation in the emirates' society is that the country itself was not ruled by a law and there were not any streets or towers until the oil and gas were discovered. Nowadays, UAE are full of streets, buildings, towers and the country is ruled by law.

What Finns should learn from these social factors? First, given the huge financial resources of The UAE, the quality but not the costs should be the main marketing argument when exporting Finnish education. Second, Finns should keep in mind that The UAE did not pass through the normal societal development stages that most developed countries seem to have experienced. Consequently, Emiratis people maybe sensitive to criticisms about their society before the oil discovery.

- **Islamic law- Sharia Law**

Legal systems in the Middle East are usually different from those in the West countries including Finland (Zoubir 1999, Hamade 2011). This could be a major barrier for foreigners who intend to expand or transact in business in the UAE. The basis of the legal system in the UAE is the Sharia law, which is derived from the central religious text of Islam, the holy Quran, the Sunnah (The



acts, the sayings and the silent approvals of the Prophet) as well as other Islamic scriptures. The direct influence of the Sharia law in the UAE is primarily confined to social laws (e.g. divorce, succession, social behaviors etc). Civil courts and arbitration tribunals usually handle most of the commercial issues. However, the Sharia law imposes certain restrictions on business, finance and investments, as well. There are many core principles of Sharia law that apply to business transactions and affect the development of commercial codes and the interpretation of business laws. These principles should be known before planning business in the UAE. For instance, when doing business under Sharia law, charging interest is forbidden in all transactions (Käri-Zein 2003). Thus, a lack of knowledge in Islamic culture and Sharia law can lead an expected “surprises” and significant troubles when doing business in the UAE.

Although the legal system in the UAE seems to be different from those in the West countries, its basic structure and principles are logical and comprehensible. The Emirati legal system has also evolved considerably over many centuries and has been adapted to match the changing needs of a modern society aiming at creating a more flexible environment for foreign businesses and investors.

- **Islamic marketing**

The Islamic religion has a finely tuned set of rules concerning all aspects of life including business and marketing (Hamade 2011, Alserhan 2011). It provides general instructions about what is permissible and what is not in Islam. The globalization of the world economy makes it a requirement for world businesses to be familiar with Islamic business ideals and rules in order to understand the factors shaping the behaviors of Muslim consumers. Businesses that neglect the acquisition and utilization of such knowledge risk alienating a large proportion of their Muslim target market. Businesses are encouraged to comply with the Islamic rules. As a sign of the importance of Islamic marketing is the recent launch of “Journal of Islamic Marketing” which aims to discuss the research advances in Islamic marketing.

Islam requires that traders, both organizations and individuals, achieve a balance between commercialism and humanitarianism, and between profit and social responsibility. Not only does this approach to business conduct provide a solution to the problems of profiteering, customer exploitation, irresponsible corporate governance and environment destruction, it seeks to promote positive aspects of business such as honest conduct, reasonable profit, fair competition, high

standard of service culture, business partnership, cooperation, minimum wage for employees and basic consumerism principles such as the right of buyers to return purchased goods (Alserhan 2011).

In Islamic business and marketing, it is for instance forbidden to make earnings from gambling, lotteries and the production, sale and distribution of alcohol. In Islamic, bribery is a form of corruption and is strongly condemned. Islam stresses the importance of honesty and warns sellers against exaggerating or lying about their products or services. Islam prohibits all interest-based transactions, whether giving or receiving, and whether dealing with Muslims or non-Muslims.

Nowadays, more and more TV advertisements in the Arab world and Muslim countries (including the United Arab Emirates) are being produced using animations and cartoons or women wearing head scarves. The traditional reliance on the look of beautiful and sexy women wearing non-Islamic outfits to sell, although still having some advocates, is being gradually replaced by more Islamic substitutes under the powerful influence of the more conservative trends in these societies (Alserhan 2011).

- **Emirati culture versus Finish culture**

To gain insight into the differences between the Emirati culture and the Finnish culture, the Hofstede's five dimensions of national cultures (Hofstede 1997) are used in this section for illustration.

The five dimensions of national cultures regarding national value systems according to Hofstede's model are (<http://geert-hofstede.com/dimensions.html>):

- **Power distance (PDI):** This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. It defines how a society handles inequalities among people.

- **Collectivism vs. individualism (IDV):** This dimension defines the relationship between the individual and the group. In the high side of this dimension, called Individualism, individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, Collectivism,

represents a preference for a society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

•**Femininity vs. masculinity (MAS):** This dimension defines social implications related to gender. The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material reward for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.

•**Uncertainty avoidance (UAI):** This dimension defines the ways of dealing with uncertainty. The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known.

•**Long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation (LTO):** This dimension defines the concept of time. The long-term orientation can be interpreted as dealing with society's search for virtue. Societies with a short-term orientation generally have a strong concern with establishing the absolute truth. In societies with a long-term orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time.

When comparing the cultural distances between UAE and Finland based on the Hofstede five dimensional Model, the following chart can be obtained (<http://geert-hofstede.com/finland.html>)

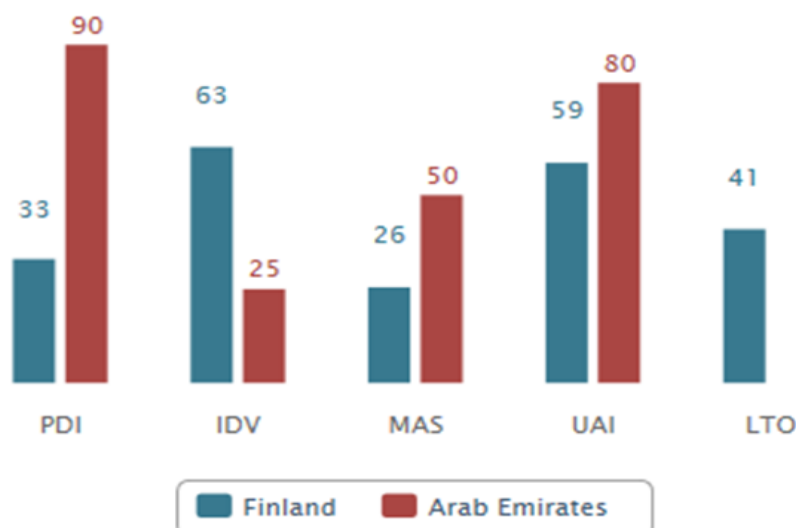


Figure 5. Cultural distances according to Hofstede 5D Model. (Source: Geert Hofstede cultural dimensions 2011, <http://geert-hofstede.com/finland.html>).

Looking at the Figure 5, the greatest gap between the Emirati and Finnish cultures can be seen in the power distance. Power distance is lower in Finland than in the UAE. This means that people in the UAE are more accustomed to deal with inequality and different amount of power between people. This typically creates a hierarchical system (Hofstede 1997). However, in Finland, equality between people is more important. The Arab culture has somehow been affected by Islamic religion in the perpetuation of the hierarchical society. Islam teaches submission to a higher being and this has produced a cultural impact that is hierarchical (Riel 2010). In the United Arab Emirates, there are lots of different ranks in the hierarchy and there tends to be lots of bureaucracy whereas in Finland the equality is more important and there is less red tape (Käri-Zein 2003).

Individualism index is higher in the Western culture (including Finland) and collectivism is more dominant in the Arab world (like in the UAE). In individualistic countries like Finland the interest is on the individual level whereas in a collective culture, like in the UAE, the interest of the group is more important (Hofstede 1997). This typically also defines the different roles in business. When doing business it should be noted that in collective cultures the role of the state is more dominating in the economic system compared to more individualistic countries (Hofstede 1997). For instance, the government of the UAE has a strong involvement in business. This can be seen in the requirements concerning ownership of companies as generally 51% of a business must always be owned by an UAE national, and businesses must be set up as limited partnerships (Zoubir 1999).

Finland seems to score higher on femininity, whereas the UAE has a highly masculine culture. Masculinity and femininity index explains the different social roles of men and women and also differences in a working culture; e.g. preference of different goals in work (Hofstede 1997). In a masculine culture like in the UAE, men are expected to get an education and a career, while many women are raised with the sole goal of being married. After marriage, a woman's primary role is to bear and raise children. Females have a great deal of latitude within the family, and mothers are revered in the Arab culture. However, if a decision has to be made it is still considered the duty of the male, who is seen as the family's prime authority figure. In a masculine culture, there is a strong importance in having an opportunity for high earnings, opportunities for advancement to higher level jobs and having challenges in work as well as getting recognition when doing a good job (Hofstede 1997). On the opposite, in more feminine culture, the most important work-related goals are having a good working relationship with one's direct supervisor,

working with people who cooperate well with one another, living in a desirable area and having the security for keeping the job. Communication and negotiation styles also differ between masculine and feminine cultures. Whereas in feminine culture, e.g. Finland, the preference for resolving conflicts is achieved by compromise, in masculine cultures maintaining face is more important.

When it comes to uncertainty avoidance, Arabs have more tolerance for uncertainty and unpredictability than Finns and Westerns. Thus, it can be assumed that Arabs feel somewhat less threatened by uncertain or unknown situations when compared to Finns. However, uncertainty avoidance is not the same as risk avoidance (Hofstede 1997). Uncertainty avoidance related to doing business typically involves the rules and laws in a business culture. In uncertainty avoiding countries there tends to be more established laws, formal and informal rules and regulations controlling the rights and responsibilities of people (Juusola 2011). In group meetings in the UAE, many agenda items may be placed on the table without feeling a need to resolve any or all of them. This is in contrast to Finnish culture, where time is compartmentalized and tasks are accomplished one at a time.

The concept of time differs within different cultures. The scores of Finland are unfortunately not available in Hofstede's research for comparison. In Western countries like Finland, people value controlling time through schedules, order, discipline and organizing, and people are very much work-orientated with the focus on heavy planning and getting the job done in time (Käri-Zein 2003). However, in Arab culture such as in the UAE, the time is viewed in a flexible manner and there are hardly any binding schedules and therefore controlling time is absent and making plans is considered more as a guideline than as a rule since plans tend to change during the process (Käri-Zein 2003). The Arab philosophical traditions cause them to see time as cyclical and flowing. Arabs tend to have less urgency about immediate achievement. They see life in longer spans of time and are generally more interested in preserving the past than in changing the future (Riel 2010).

Broadly speaking, there are two categories of culture that define the focus of doing business: relationship focus and deal focus (Käri-Zein 2003). In the UAE, the relationship focus is crucial when doing business. Building a relationship and making personal contacts is a process that requires time and effort and it is a prerequisite for doing business (Käri-Zein 2003). There will not be any business without friendship. Family ties and tribal roots are very important for Emiratis and

the preference for long-term relationships in business activities stems from family and tribal ties (Zoubir 1999). Thus, it is necessary to build personal contacts and networks. In fact, forming relationships is more important than making any contracts, as contracts are considered less binding than the bond formed through a relationship. The role of formal contracts in Arab culture is less important as the relationship is the force that makes, and if necessary, changes the content and the binding of the contract. In Finland and many Western countries the focus of doing business is on making the deal and the need to build relationships is less necessary. In addition, in Finland, contracts are considered binding and they form a basis for doing business (Käri-Zein 2003).

Arabs emphasize personal relationships. Thus, personal and social issues are of primary importance in communication between individuals. An Arab will want to get to know someone as a person before engaging in business discussions. In the UAE, the way of communication is indirect and the priority in communication is maintaining harmony in the relationship and avoiding direct confrontation. In the Western culture the communication style is more straightforward and they value truthfulness, honesty and directness in their ways of communicating. Also the body language and gestures differ among cultures. In contrast to Finns, Emiratis are typically very expressive in their way of communicating. Facial expressions are supported with other gestures, such as arm movements and shaking of their heads. Finns that are more introverts in their body language may misunderstand the importance and meaning of Arab body language (Käri-Zein 2003). In the UAE, persons who are inexpressive like many Finns and Westerns may be seen as insincere.

The most important common values in the Arab culture are hospitality, honor and wealth. In general, Emiratis are very generous people and the meaning of honor is very important. The role of extended family (which covers also uncles, aunts, cousins etc.) is important as well as the tribal roots. There are strong gender-related roles in a family in which men and women are not equal. The primary role of women is to raise a family. A man has the right and the duty to defend the honor of his family. If a person is wealthy, he is highly respected in the Arab culture. The culture also defines the rules for social behavior for men and women. In the UAE, as well as in other Arab cultures, it is not appropriate for men and women to interact, unless they are relatives (Käri-Zein 2003).

Arabs are generally very welcoming and generous hosts. These values are somehow inherited from the Bedouins. This stems from the harshness of desert life, where everyone was required to provide food and shelter to guests, regardless of one's own financial situation. Socializing with people in the UAE typically involves food. Food is considered a part of generosity and hospitality. Eating is a social gathering and not a place to do business. There are certain culture-related restrictions for Muslims that stem from the religion, as they do not eat pork and they are also forbidden to consume alcohol. When eating or taking food, only right hand is used in the process as the left hand is reserved for bodily hygiene and is thus considered as unclean (Käri-Zein 2003).

There are several other differences in business culture between the UAE and Western world including Finland. The official weekend in the UAE is Friday and Saturday. During Ramadan, working days are shortened by two or three hours. Although Arabic is the official language in the UAE, English is widely used in business transactions. In the UAE, there is no federal tax for general businesses. Moreover, personal incomes are neither a subject to taxation. The dress code in the UAE is generally relaxed, although respectable clothing should be worn (UAE Embassy 2013). The national or traditional dress for men is the dishdasha or khandura, an ankle length shirt, typically white (Figure 6). Dishdashas are usually worn with a white or red-checked head cloth known as a gutra and a twisted black rope-like coil, the agal. Under the headdress is a skull cap (gafia).



*Figure 6.* The national or traditional dress for men in the UAE (Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/careers/living/history.aspx>)

The national dress for women in the United Arab Emirates is the black “abaya” which is a long, flowing black robe that covers the normal clothes of women (Figure 5). The women also wear a head scarf, called a shayla. Some women also wear a thin black veil covering their face, while some older women wear a small mask made of fabric known as a burkha which covers the nose, brow and cheekbones. Under the abaya, modern women can wear the very latest in international fashions.



*Figure 7.* The national or traditional dress for Women in the UAE (Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/careers/living/history.aspx>)

Foreigners in the UAE are not expected to wear these national dress codes. Tight or revealing clothing should not be worn as it may attract unwanted attention especially in rural areas which are very conservative. Out of respect for the local culture a somewhat higher level of modesty is recommended.

## **5.2 Interviews**

To support the empirical study in this thesis, I interviewed 5 persons involved in the theme of education export. The interviewees kindly answered the questionnaire that I sent them by email.

The selection of the questions to be asked was not an easy task. The challenge was to define a small number of clear and concise questions with a hope to receive a maximum amount of information and feedbacks. The questions should also be broad enough to be asked to different interviewees.



The complete list of seven concise questions that were asked to the interviewers is given in Table 2.

#	Question
1	Could you please briefly describe your background and your experience in education and export businesses?
2	What do you think about the quality of Finnish Education?
3	What do you think about the export of Finnish Education?
4	How important is the knowledge of Emirati culture for doing business in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)?
5	Given the culture differences and high competition, are there real opportunities for exporting Finnish Education, and particularly the Finnish Primary Education to the UAE?
6	In your opinion, what could be the major socio-culture factors that can affect the export of Finnish Primary Education to UAE?
7	In your opinion, what would be the best strategy for exporting the Finnish Primary Education to UAE? Exporting the Finnish Education system as a package? Opening schools and faculties in the UAE? Attracting and offering training for Emirati teachers and personnel involved in the education system in UAE? Or a combination of all of these?

*Table 2.* The list of questions that were asked to the interviewers.

### 5.3 Results and Findings

As with any kind of export activities, there are plenty of factors which can affect the business export. Contrary to the export of physical products such as mobile phones, primary education is deeply bound to culture and society. This thesis pointed out several socio-cultural factors that Finns should consider and know while planning the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE.

The main conclusion in the thesis is that doing business abroad, such as education export activities, requires deep knowledge of local culture and society. Thus, the thesis points out the importance of taking into consideration the socio-cultural factors for export Finnish Primary education to the UAE. The interview results could be summed up as follow:

- First, given the huge financial resources of The UAE, the quality but not the costs should be the main marketing argument when exporting Finnish education. *“Finnish education (primary education) is very well known abroad, especially in the UAE where the local government has actually chosen the Finnish primary education system as the model for developing its primary education in the future.”* as supported by one of the interviewees, Finnish education quality should be well exploited for more successful attempts in the export of education .
  
- Second, Finns should keep in mind that The UAE did not pass through the normal societal development stages that most developed countries seem to have experienced. Consequently, Emiratis people may be sensitive to criticisms about their society before the oil discovery. Being aware of the local culture and knowing local customs are yet another factor that certainly arouses Emiratis’ respect and helps build relationships which are essential in deal making in the UAE.
  
- Third, legal systems in the UAE are different from those in Finland and this could be a major barrier for Finns who intend to expand or transact in business in the UAE. There are many core principles of Sharia law that apply to business transactions and these principles should be known before planning business in the UAE. A lack of knowledge in Islamic culture and Sharia law can lead unexpected “surprises” and significant troubles when doing business in the UAE. When doing business under Islamic (Sharia) law, charging interest is forbidden in all transactions.
  
- Forth, there is significant gap between the Emirati and Finnish cultures in terms of power distance. Power distance is lower in Finland than in the United Arab Emirates. This means that people in the UAE are more accustomed to deal with inequality and different amount of power between people.
  
- Fifth, as previously mentioned, in the UAE, the relationship focus is crucial when doing business and there will not be any business without friendship. Especially that a local sponsor is a must have before entering the UAE for any foreign companies in order to obtain visas and business licenses. Thus, it is necessary to build personal contacts and networks.

- Sixth, in the UAE, there is no federal tax for general businesses. Moreover, personal incomes are neither a subject to taxation.
- Seventh, the dress code for foreigner in the UAE is generally relaxed, although respectable clothing should be worn. Tight or revealing clothing may be worn but may attract unwanted attention especially in rural areas which are very conservative. Out of respect for the local culture a somewhat higher level of modesty is recommended.
- There are several other differences in business culture between the United Arab Emirates and Western world including Finland that should be seriously taking into consideration for successful export activities.

The interviews on the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE have confirmed many of the findings made in the thesis. They also support the fact that the Finnish primary education system cannot be taken out of its cultural and societal context but certain innovations in the Finnish primary education field and teacher expertise can be exported to the UAE.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis discussed the socio-cultural factors that Finns should consider and know while planning the export of Finnish primary education to the United Arab Emirates and proposes potential directions to overcome these barriers for a successful export of Finnish education to the UAE.

The main finding in the thesis is that the majority of education export businesses to the UAE concerns mainly higher education whereas the export of primary education is almost left out. The export of Finnish know-how and expertise in primary education could then be a niche and appealing business. However, the Finnish primary education system cannot be efficiently exported as it is but should be adapted to the socio-cultural environment of the United Arab Emirates.

The thesis pointed out significant gaps between the Finnish and Emirati's cultures which can be seen in different aspects including the religion, the power of distance, uncertainty, the femininity, demographic and historical factors etc. Religion has a major impact on one's culture. Lack of knowledge in Islamic culture can lead to several troubles when Finns do business in the Arab world.

I have interviewed experts on themes related to the export of Finnish primary education to the UAE. The experts confirm some of my conclusions as they also feel that the Finnish primary education system cannot be taken out of its cultural and societal context. However, certain innovations in the Finnish primary education field and teacher expertise can be exported to the UAE.

## 7 DISCUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Internationalization and globalization are phenomena that are favoring companies to expand across borders. The Finnish education system has an excellent worldwide reputation. Finland's strengths in the education field must be utilized and education must be developed into successful export articles for Finland. This thesis' research idea was born from a mixture of a curiosity toward intercultural studies and personal cultural background. Despite of the few successful education export projects, Finnish education export is still far from thriving in the Education market.

During this study, in which the UAE society and culture were introduced, analyzed and compared, I have come to confirm two facts. However highly ranked and well known might the Finnish education be, it is not always possible to export it as a packet to foreign countries notably the UAE. Culture awareness and respect are both vital elements in relationship building in the UAE which is the key to doing business in that area of the world.

Although competitiveness is not considered high at the primary education level compared to higher education in the UAE, urgent measures must be taken to enhance and maintain the international competitiveness of the Finnish primary education system. The aim is for Finland to be one of the world's leading education-based economies resting on the quality of the education system.

In this research two main question were dealt with:

- What are the specificities of the business environment in the UAE? And what are the socio-cultural factors that need to be considered while planning the export of Finnish primary education in the UAE?
- How to overcome these barriers for a successful export of Finnish primary education?

The theoretical part served as a considerable support and delivered a sufficient amount of information to combine with the interviews feedback in order to deduct potential solutions for the second question of the thesis.

The most challenging part of this thesis was conducting the empirical research. To provide sufficient support for the empirical part a presence at the UAE would have been valuable in order to collect more feedback from real life example in the education export field. The number of interviews was far from satisfying due to the interviewees' tight schedule. Only five of total number of people to interview has replied with answers to the interview questions. However, the

theoretical support and my personal knowledge of the subject and the area of study allowed me to come up with answers to wrap up the study.

This research is by no means complete. There are still several other factors that affect export of education and export in general to the UAE. This research concentrates mainly on those factors that are related to social and culture. Throughout this study I have learnt how to analyze a society from a cultural perspective. I have learnt a lot more about the UAE's society and business environment but I have also come to better understand the Finnish culture.

At the end I would like to thank my thesis' supervisor Helena Ahola for her professional guidance all the way through my research process, my husband Dr. Abdenour Hadid for his help, support and love that pushed me constantly toward completing this work. A special word of thanks to Katariina Juusola for her valuable comments and advises that served shaping this thesis from the very beginning and to all the students who have contributed by attending my seminars.

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