

# Social Entrepreneurship in the UAE: An Exploration of Undergraduates' Attitudes, Motivations and Intentions

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**Abstract:** This exploratory study examines the attitudes towards social entrepreneurship amongst a group of students in an early cohort mandated by the government to undertake entrepreneurship education. As such, the study collects responses from students across a range of disciplines, focusing on their interpretation of the impact and importance of the education they have received and how it relates to (and motivates) them to pursue entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurship in particular, themselves. As a 'first step', this initial study highlights areas which should be examined in detail through qualitative methods and suggests early indications for elements which would be useful in a framework to support policy and community interest in social entrepreneurship endeavours.

**Key Words:** Social Entrepreneurship, Mindset, Impact, Social Innovation, Undergraduates

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## 1. Introduction

There is an increasing role for entrepreneurship in a complex world of community development, with the ongoing and changing needs of a very diverse population with complex issues due to changes in society, technology and the economy. Bhowmick (2011) maintains social entrepreneurship differs fundamentally from commercial entrepreneurship, and proposes it is better considered as 'social cause venturing' with the social issue the central element, rather than entrepreneurial activities. In this point of view, social entrepreneurship is not perceived as embedded in entrepreneurship – but rather as an activity in which people engage for different reasons.

The UAE is a recognised regional and global leader in supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. While impact-driven enterprises are gaining traction, greater support from the governments and investors is needed to boost the work of entrepreneurs using business for social good (Forbes, 2016). More recently, it has been suggested that the UAE could be the place where Social Enterprise 'skyrockets in the Middle East' (Johnsen, 2016), and it has been highlighted that Social Entrepreneurship will play a significant role in the future development in the UAE playing a crucial role in the advancement of social and environmental changes (GEM UAE, 2021). Furthermore, a study conducted by Reuters Foundation in 2016 shows that social entrepreneurship is gaining momentum in the UAE and that social entrepreneurs are well received amongst the UAE community. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of students towards social entrepreneurship. In particular, their understanding, attitudes, experience, motivations and intentions towards social entrepreneurship. The findings are based on a survey of a range of final year students across disciplines at UAEU (United Arab Emirates University). The paper provides an insight into the social entrepreneurial mindset of students and, as such, can inform the development of an appropriate framework to support the development of government initiatives to support and drive forward the social entrepreneurship agenda in the UAE.

### 1.1 Social Entrepreneurship as a key part of Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship plays a key role in tackling important societal challenges (Rae, 2010, European Commission, 2020). More recently, and in order to drive this agenda, entrepreneurial education is increasingly seen as a response to the globalized, uncertain and complex world we live in, requiring all people and organizations in society to be equipped with entrepreneurial competencies (Gibb, 2002; Korzhov and Pasko, 2020; Mwasijaji, 2020). The connection that social enterprise offers was seen by many governments around the world to have the potential to galvanize economic growth after the global financial crisis of 2008 and, more recently, post-pandemic. It is necessary to cultivate college students with social entrepreneurship awareness and abilities in the new era because social entrepreneurship can reshape the social morality of students, promote the innovative thinking of students in the new era, and cultivate their consciousness of "sustainable development economy" (Li and Yuan, 2019; Huang et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurial education has been positioned as a means of empowering people and organisations to create social value for the public good (Volkman et al., 2009; Austin et al., 2006). Social enterprise is becoming an

ever-more important aspect of research, teaching and learning, especially in the higher education sector (Reye-Marti et al., 2016; Ratten, 2020, Ratten and Jones, 2020). In response to this, more and more universities are understanding the need to embrace social objectives while developing their presence in the marketplace and they recognize the need to have an impact on communities in which they operate. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Report on Social Entrepreneurship (Bosma et al., 2015), this type of entrepreneurship is closely associated with young change-makers, who are idealistic in nature. In fact, the results of the GEM report show there is a greater representation of incipient social entrepreneurs than commercial entrepreneurs among young people between 18 and 34 years old. More specifically, according to Capella-Peris et al., (2020), higher education students are one of the most relevant populations for the development of social and/or environmental projects.

It would be valuable to train university students in the ability to identify business opportunities despite possible situations of economic and social crises. This effort must be accompanied by public policies focused on facilitating the implementation of this type of initiative, showing that social entrepreneurial intention decreases in times of deep socioeconomic crises and high uncertainty, such as that caused by Covid-19 (Ruiz-Rosa et al., 2020). While entrepreneurship education has an essential role for future entrepreneurs, it now has an increasingly significant role to prepare and create entrepreneurial graduates who can respond in the post-covid world. As a result, higher education can be expected to be a key player in the development of students who are able to develop creative approaches and be innovative in the conditions of a constantly changing environment.

In order to further differentiate social entrepreneurship education, Pache and Chowdhury (2012) proposed teaching the skills needed to connect the core areas of social welfare, commercial and the public sector. It was suggested that programs which help students develop communications, creativity, critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving and social networking skills (Kirby, 2004; Garcia-Gonzalez and Ramirez-Montoya, 2021) are all crucial transferrable skills that both the business and the community sector can benefit from. Through the process of experiential learning as part of social entrepreneurship education students' propensity to launch social enterprises is increased (Hockerts, 2018).

Social Entrepreneurship is also embedded in social domain and students must learn about society to understand how to evaluate appropriate change mechanisms in each context in which they work (Douglas, 2015). Central to social entrepreneurship practice is a robust understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of social issues, and how society operates. Only when students have an understanding of how society works and how and why situations of disadvantage and disempowerment exist, can they identify and develop ideas which are appropriate to respond to such problems and situations. Given the social, political, economic and cultural differences between countries, educators must design their lectures in order to launch discussions on country specific differences of social entrepreneurial activities. For example, according to the GEM 2015 report (Bosma et al., 2015) some developed countries – for example, the USA and Australia, reported 11% and 11.1% involvement in social entrepreneurial activities respectively.

## **1.2 Social Entrepreneurship in the UAE**

The UAE has emphasised the importance of developing a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem for innovation, and this is a vital cornerstone to its UAE Vision for 2021 where “Innovation, research, science and technology will form the pillars of a knowledge-based, highly productive and competitive economy, driven by entrepreneurs in a business-friendly environment where public and private sectors form effective partnerships”. Over the last two decades, the UAE government has introduced various measures evidencing its firm commitment to attracting overseas entrepreneurs and ‘investorpreneurs’, whilst also proactively encouraging local residents and Emirati nationals to pursue entrepreneurship (Sikdar and Prakash, 2011). As Reuters (2016) above note, and consistent with Islamic teaching, entrepreneurship is considered a positive contribution to the community in the UAE. Further emphasising the context and rationale for the development of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, an article published by Dutt D’Cunha (2016) in Forbes mentions the increasing appetite for support mechanisms that are offered by the local government and private investors to encourage entrepreneurs to contribute to the social good of society. One of these initiatives is the Emirates Foundation which targets Emirati residents to address social issues, in order to develop models that are underpinned by market-based approaches and philanthropic considerations. More recently, Abu Dhabi has launched the third sector development strategy along with accreditation of social enterprises which will serve as an innovative enabling tool for the growth and development of socially driven enterprises. This is the UAE’S first recognition scheme for organisations that seek to address a social and or environmental challenge.

### 1.3 Social Entrepreneurship in Higher Education

Entrepreneurship education increases the propensity of students to engage in the launching of social enterprises through a process of social learning (Douglas, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2020). Another content area that could be further developed within entrepreneurship education is that of social and non-profit enterprise. This topic has been attracting considerable attention in the field of entrepreneurship generally, both from a research and a teaching perspective. This is because it is now generally acknowledged that new ventures should have some social dimension incorporated into their mission statement. Consequently, social and non-profit enterprise could well predominate in future Entrepreneurship Education programmes, as the concept of 'doing well by doing good' becomes embedded in entrepreneurship teaching (Henry, 2020) and has become a key element in responses to rebuilding the post-covid economy (Bonnici, 2020).

In order for the students to appreciate the significant role they can play in improving the lives for people living in their communities, they need to understand the potential skill set that they have already acquired and the value they can potential create through the development of projects. Social entrepreneurial self-efficacy describes an individual's perceptions of his or her ability to contribute to societal change through small-scale social entrepreneurial behaviour. There is a link between levels of self-efficacy and intentions to reach and drive social change and impact. Mair and Noboa (2006) suggest that high self-efficacy allows a person to perceive the creation of a social venture as feasible, which positively affects the formation of behavioural intention. Hockerts (2015) argues that social entrepreneurial self-efficacy has a particularly pronounced function because societal problems tend to be perceived as so immense that people may doubt their ability to have any impact at all. By allowing students to identify problems that they fully understand and are familiar with and allowing them to engage in experiential social entrepreneurship education, they gain experience and confidence to enable them to approach similar issues in the community inside a work setting.

### 1.4 Methodology

As the exposure to entrepreneurship across the university was newly introduced, this study decided to employ an exploratory perspective. An exploratory research approach was used to identify and investigate new insights suggested by the results of the study. An exploratory study is a valuable means of 'what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomenon in a new light' (Robinson, 2002, p.59). The objective of the research is to firstly establish the perceptions, attitudes and interest of this cohort and also to explore their experience of engaging with social enterprise. The entrepreneurship context at UAEU reflects the governments priorities as it is a government institution. In 2016, the UAE government mandated entrepreneurship education for all tertiary students across the country, resulting in cross-disciplinary courses being developed. At UAEU, the compulsory General Education offering, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, started in 2021. This course was an addition to courses already offered in the College of Business and Economics in entrepreneurship both as options and as a concentration in the Bachelor of Business Administration degree.

The study method was developed in two related but distinct phases. The first phase involved a review of new trends in entrepreneurship education and in particular social entrepreneurship in higher education and thus, as a literature review, focused on published reports, articles, conference proceedings and government reports in order to develop a body of knowledge, with a specific focus on the UAE. The second phase involved primary research designed to gain a perspective from undergraduates across disciplines *at UAEU*. The intention was to consider entrepreneurship education from a demand-side perspective (both the attitudes towards and interest in social entrepreneurship and their experience of social entrepreneurship).

Surveys were used to collect data from a self-selected sample of third level students in the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). A survey provides an efficient tool for collecting background, quantifiable data from a specific sample, as well as gathering qualitative information from respondents in the form of experiences and views (Saunders et al., 2012). The surveys were anonymous and were distributed through faculty in the university to their classes via a Qualtrics link. The survey was broad in its application and was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative information. The survey was structured into sections:

1. Basic demographic data and general ideas of what entrepreneurship is/how relevant it is to their study/life, and how much prior exposure they have had to entrepreneurship in general.
2. Student perceptions of skills, skills development, future application/use of learned skills in entrepreneurship.
3. Their understanding and perception of social entrepreneurship and their experience and engagement with social enterprise.

4. Their attitudes and motivations towards social entrepreneurship, family involvement and their interest in social entrepreneurship as a viable career option going forward.
5. Students' perceptions of the role of social entrepreneurship in the development of the UAE.

The value added of this research is to present original insights into this cohort from a vibrant Middle Eastern context, namely, the UAE, a country that has attracted and witnessed increasing attention in recent years in the context of globalization. In view of the Western-centric nature of academic publication on the topic, there is a real need for fresh theoretical and empirical insights stemming from an Arab-Middle Eastern context to advance knowledge and scholarship in this area.

## 1.5 Findings and Discussion

### 1.6 Profile of Respondents

The total sample was 170 students. The majority of respondents (92%) were female undergraduate students (72.2%) – reflecting the dominance of female student numbers across the university - and in the 17-22 age group (72.8%); while just 20% were male, and 20% aged 22-26. Overall, 48% of students were from Business/Economics/Accounting (the dominance of business students could be expected as business students are more likely to be exposed to entrepreneurship courses), 17% from Humanities (Arts, Education, Social Science, Psychology) and 14% from Entrepreneurship. Over half (63.9%) of respondents come from a family with business background (reflecting the make-up of the economy).

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Students**

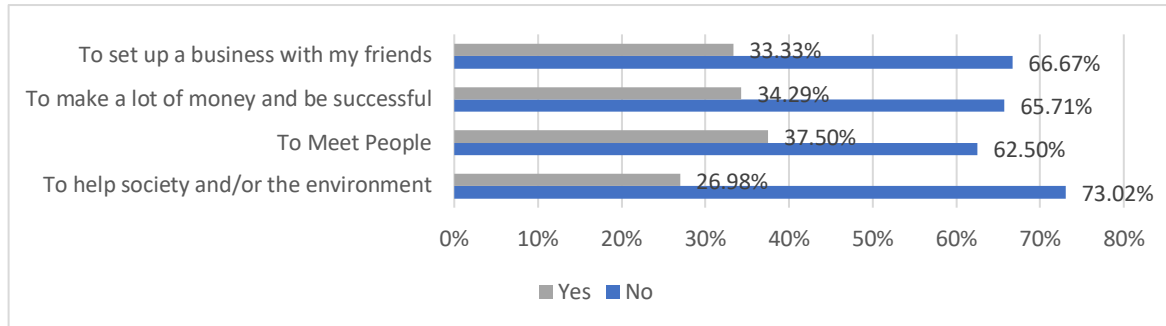
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	35	20.7
Female	122	72.2
Total	157	92.9
<b>Age groups</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
17-22	123	72.8
22-26	33	19.5
30+	4	2.4
Total	160	94.7
<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Undergraduate	156	92.3
Post Graduate	5	3
Total	161	95.3
<b>Area of study</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Business/Economics/Accounting	82	48.0
Entrepreneurship	24	14.0
Science	18	10.5
Engineering	16	9.4
Information Technology	2	1.2
Humanities (Arts, Education, Social Science, Psychology)	29	17.0
Total	171	100.0
<b>Family Business Background</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
No	108	63.9
Yes	53	31.4
Total	161	95.3

### 1.7 Understanding and Perception of Social Entrepreneurship

Respondents were asked to select the entrepreneurship courses they have taken. Half (50%) have completed the Innovation and Entrepreneurship (compulsory General Education) course, followed by 17.6% completing 'other' entrepreneurship courses, and 15.5% were students who had finished the Creativity and Innovation course (a specialist entrepreneurship course at 300-level). Throughout the sample, a particular difference between male and female respondents was noted with more females who had completed the Innovation and Entrepreneurship course being more interested (44.44%) or somewhat interested (61%) in Social Entrepreneurship, than any of the males. Similarly, respondents who showed either 'high' or 'some' interest in social entrepreneurship across all the course options had finished courses such as Creativity and Innovation and Launching a New Entrepreneurial Venture (both specialised, higher level course offerings). However, of

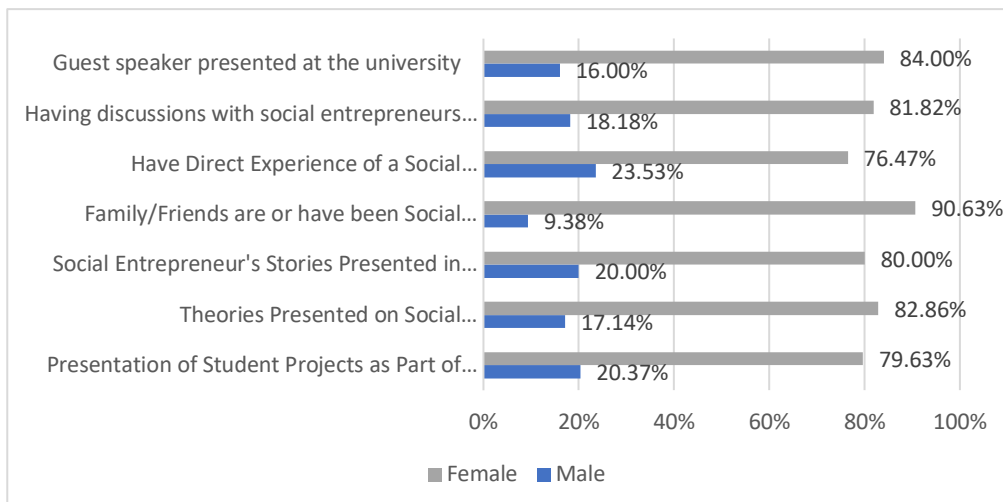
significance for this question is that 22% of those who completed the Creativity and Innovation and other entrepreneurship courses (33%) showed ‘no interest at all’ in social entrepreneurship.

Respondents were asked to show their understanding of the main objective of social entrepreneurship. According to the majority (37.3%) and, notably 75% of female students, their perspective on the objective of social entrepreneurship is to help society and/or the environment. Of the 20.7% that indicated that the objective of social entrepreneurship is to make a lot of money and be successful, 94% are females. Interestingly, both male and female students (50%) consider that social entrepreneurship is a means for meeting people. The inclusion of meeting people featured as a key consideration for our respondents is very important and hints at socio-cultural perspectives that could be investigated further in our on-going study. Arab populations are known for the value they place on personal relationships and longevity of relationships – something reflected in both the shared culture of the Arabs and also the Islamic teaching.



**Figure 1. Students’ Understanding of the Main Objective of Social Entrepreneurship by family business background (yes/no)**

The majority of respondents’ families do not have a business background and they consider social entrepreneurship’s purpose as helping society and making money, however, 66.7% consider it to be ‘setting up a business with friends’. The majority of respondents (37.5%) coming from a family business background consider the objective of social entrepreneurship to be ‘to meet people’, followed by ‘making money’ (34%), then ‘setting up business with friends’ (33%). Different influences are reported by respondents that impact their understanding of social entrepreneurship. Almost 23% of students consider peer-presentations of social enterprise projects as a main influence, followed by 21% who think social entrepreneurs’ stories presented in social media have an important impact. This finding links to the literature, particularly relevant for female respondents, of having role models as a key motivator for engaging in entrepreneurship. Young people, as reflected here, and implying potential for social media relationships to be understood as ‘real’ relationships by ‘digital natives’ give great value to social media as a source of information and influence. The combination of peer presentations and (peer) social media postings as influences is a very interesting finding for our pilot.



**Figure 2. Main Influence of Students’ Understanding of Social Entrepreneurship by Gender (male/female)**

Comparing female and male respondents, the findings are different in terms of understanding the main impact. The majority of female respondents (90.6%) consider family and friends who are or have been social entrepreneurs impact their understanding about social entrepreneurship most strongly. In contrast 23.5% of male respondents believe that having direct experience of a social entrepreneurship and understanding what they do can have major influence on their understanding. Moreover, both 80% of women and 20% of men reported that social entrepreneurs' stories presented in social media and student projects within entrepreneurship courses play key roles as influences. This finding further underscores the role social media plays in young people's lives, perceptions and opinion formation. These findings were also analyzed based on the basis of family business background. The majority of respondents (46%) from a family business background consider that the main influence on their understanding of social entrepreneurship is guest speaker presentations at the university, followed by 43% who highlighted that discussion with social entrepreneurs they meet during events, and social entrepreneurs' stories presented on social media are key influences.

### 1.8 Experience and Engagement with Social Enterprise

Respondents were asked to indicate the key focus of the social entrepreneurship projects they developed as part of their courses. Over a quarter (27%) of student projects in the university-wide introductory entrepreneurship offering were focused on helping protect the environment. It is interesting to note that only males indicated that their projects focused on helping to support people with addictions. Whereas only female-led projects were focused on helping to support women and to give intergenerational benefits. Islamic teaching is committed to environmental sustainability and so this finding is consistent with what one might expect in a committed Muslim society. These findings are also notable and hint towards a socio-cultural basis. In the UAE there is quite a distinct gender separation between men and women in terms of 'realms of responsibility', where roles/spaces viewed as women's spaces and those viewed as men's are quite distinct. In this way, issues of support/care for women and children would likely be more relevant to female society than men's.

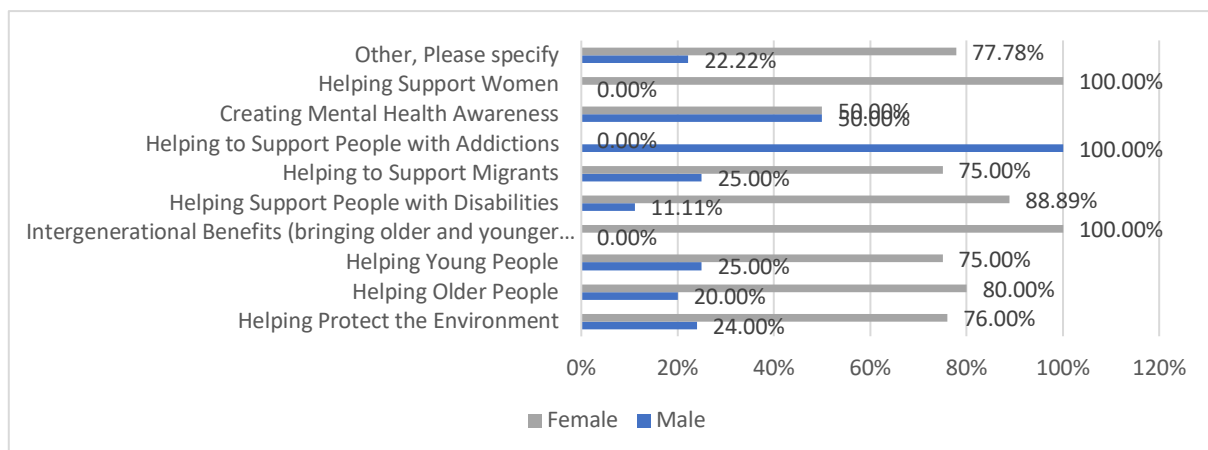
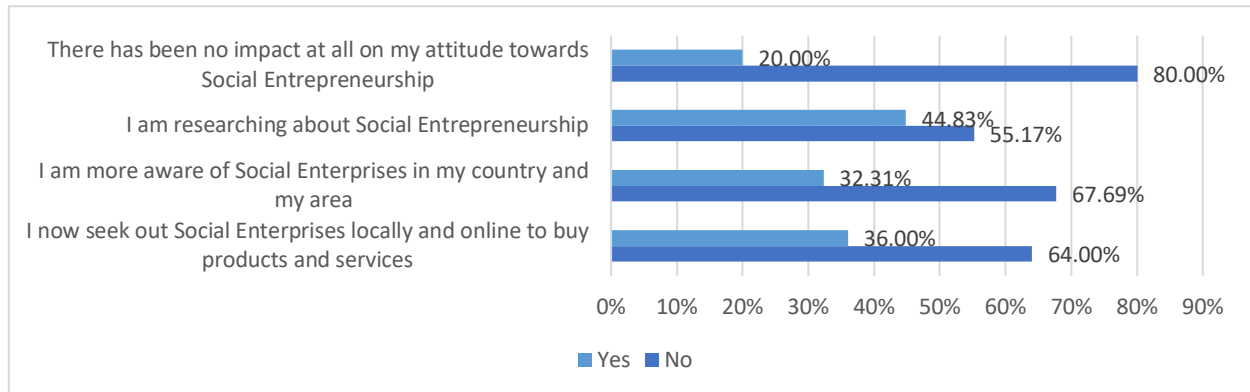


Figure 3. Focus of Social Enterprise Project developed by Students as part of Entrepreneurship Course by Gender (male/female)

### 1.9 Motivation Towards Social Entrepreneurship

There seems to be a relationship reflected between family business background and the impact of entrepreneurship education on respondents' attitudes towards social entrepreneurship. The majority of respondents (80%) without a family business background, felt their entrepreneurship education has had no impact. However, significant numbers of respondents without a business background are more aware of social entrepreneurship in their country and surrounding areas (68%) and are now seeking out social entrepreneurship opportunities locally and online to buy products and services (64%). Additionally, there is a significant gender difference in how entrepreneurship education is impacting respondent's attitudes towards social entrepreneurship. Significantly more female respondents (78%) are interested in setting up their own social enterprise (in comparison to only 22% of males) and also are currently working for a social enterprise (85%). This finding may link to several context-based norms. For example, social entrepreneurship activities are regulated by the government quite carefully and require detailed compliance. Many social enterprise offerings in the UAE are government-based. Many young people are registered for the available options such as at volunteers.ae.

Also, related to socio-cultural norms mentioned across the literature, young women sometimes have issues with being able to travel to workplaces far from their homes, working at night and in mixed workplaces. This would perhaps combine with female socialization norms to reflect this finding – that young women can work within their ‘realm’ and perform work (also likely with only other women) making a difference to society/community. Young men, having more mobility and options for work choices may, as a result, be less interested in the social entrepreneurship sector.



**Figure 4. Impact of Entrepreneurship Education on Attitude Towards Social Entrepreneurship by family business background (yes/no)**

### 1.10 Conclusion

Entrepreneurship education increases the propensity of students to engage in the launching of social enterprises through a process of social learning (Douglas, 2015). Social entrepreneurship in higher education institutions world-wide is an area of enormous potential and has not received enough attention until now (British Council, 2017). Given the capacity of social entrepreneurship education practice to mobilise potential resources (Desa, 2012) and create sustainable social and economic benefits with potentially significant changes to societal institutions (Leadbeater, 2007), it is somewhat surprising that social entrepreneurship education has not received thoughtful consideration and become more widespread in higher education. Social entrepreneurship as a topic of interest in business schools is a rather recent phenomenon (Bacq, Hartog, & Hoogendoorn, 2013; Choi & Majumdar, 2014; Dufays & Huybrechts, 2014; Hjorth & Holt, 2016; Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009). It is only over the past few years that more and more business schools have begun to launch social entrepreneurship courses (Brock and Kim, 2011; Douglas, 2015).

In our case, the UAE Vision documents articulate the top-down policy approach to providing entrepreneurial education to students and, as such, UAEU offers two specific courses across the gamut of university specializations at an introductory level (Innovation and Entrepreneurship – General Education) and as a senior student minor (Developing an Entrepreneurial Venture). In addition, a concentration in entrepreneurship is available under the Bachelor of Business Administration degree. All of these offerings come under the remit of the business school. Bucking international trends, UAEU has offered a dedicated social entrepreneurship paper since 2010. Considering our low numbers of male students university wide, and college/concentration specifically, the aspects of social entrepreneurship interest and intentions that resonate with female students may reflect social class/female socialization norms in the UAE society. This point is a very interesting one for further investigation, with implications for sustainability (longevity/success of entrepreneurs), social sustainability and policy planning.

In undertaking this pilot, a number of literature-related considerations must be respected, interrogated and investigated. For example, in earlier work, we have written on the hegemony of terminology used in business and entrepreneurship writing, which is both western/euro-centric, and also often irrelevant – at least in part – to contexts outside of this geographical and cultural region (Wood et al., 2021). This work, and others like it, suggest that the starting point for developing educational programmes, policy documents and research priorities which are imported without cultural nuance and also imbued with (foreign) cultural bias. This means that research designs may be inherently weak and, therefore, give unreliable findings (Boulanouar et al, 2017). This is particularly the case when writing in English on Muslim women and their experiences and this issue matches wider calls in the women’s entrepreneurship literature for women to speak for themselves, attribute



meaning to their own experiences, and to educate the canon by providing perspectives framed differently to the hegemonic conceptualizations of entrepreneurship we all currently read and, often, reproduce.

### 1.11 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the comprehensiveness of the methodology employed there are limitations that should be recognised. Firstly, the limited sample size indicates that the results are only a representation of the demand side perspective of students who have participated in similar programmes, at the same university, over a short period and are included via self-selection. Similarly, UAEU is predominantly a “women’s university” with 80% of students being female. As such, reporting using this population is necessarily skewed. Following up on this exploratory/pilot study, we intend to undertake a round of focus groups to check both the themes that have emerged and also our interpretation of their importance and meaning. More survey data collection will follow that, as we attempt to uncover what is important and motivational to students so we can provide useful measurable and contributory data and theory to this field and context and support policy considerations and decisions with our work.

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