

Successful School Reform and Development: South Africa and the United Arab Emirates

Liz JACKSON, Higher Colleges of Technology, **United Arab Emirates**

Though many factors effect the successful implementation of educational reform, research-based, contextualized knowledge is often the most crucial factor. However, in developing or emerging educational systems dedicated research communities tend to be scarce, with low standards or uneven foundations for the development of evidence-based policy making. As emerging systems are often impacted drastically by global trends, predicting the feasibility of reforms into the future can often be a difficult task. Finally, and in such a context, emerging systems have few models they can follow, as progress is often nonlinear in developing countries today, with respect both to worldwide trends and to internal systems (that is, there are no other countries one can easily imitate; nor is development always even among different sectors in the local economy).

In this situation it can be helpful to examine concrete situations where educational reforms have been implemented, to clarify what factors are most important to reform feasibility. Toward this end this paper examines the educational reforms of two rapidly growing emerging countries, South Africa (RSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to examine what factors have led to successes and difficulties in implementation. It will show that due to its effective efforts to build local capacity via the development and maintenance of international relationships the UAE has emerged triumphantly as a society poised to grow its higher educational system with universal access, while in the RSA challenges are still involved due to gaps in local capabilities in rural areas and relative isolation in much of the country.

To be sure, the situation between these two countries is not one of mere choice and free decision making. Rather the UAE was poised based on its economic status and resources to seek out and

pay for external assistance in the educational sector, while for South Africa current economic conditions make ongoing efforts to build local capacity increasingly unfeasible. These findings thus debunk the usefulness of frameworks based on purely economic models of global development, as such countries are both considered “developing countries” despite the fact that they find themselves in very different situations today with respect to educational development and reform. Economic models should therefore not be used unduly in discussions of educational development given that each emerging nation today reforms its schools within a distinct, specific economical context (Escobar, 1995; Harriss, Hunter, & Lewis, 1997; Edwards, 2004; Attfield & Wilkins, 1992; Mehmet, 1999).