

Literacy as Nation-Building: The Evolution of Female Literacy in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception, the UAE has undergone a tremendous change concerning literacy rates, particularly for women, where female literacy has increased from 31% in 1975 to 95.8% in recent years. The overall increase in female literacy exemplifies the modalities of the state in promoting inclusive education policy and practice, particularly as pioneered by Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak and further demonstrated legally by compulsory schooling for students. At the same time, the literacy policy in the UAE goes beyond degrees of reading and writing, as religious and cultural values and dimensions, especially within the context of Islamic education, education in the Arabic language, and social studies, are being embedded into the educational system from kindergarten. Literacy is used, therefore, to develop a national identity, moral character, and social cohesion. These stories influence the development of curriculum, the allocation of instructional time, and ultimately policy decisions in both public and private settings. While we have come a long way, the UAE still faces ongoing challenges in relation to digital literacy, quality assurance, adult education, and inclusive learning. The paper points to the need for community engagement, adaptive learning models, and strong definitions of literacy that support critical thinking and lifelong learning. The UAE's efforts to promote literacy in the UAE and beyond present a useful case study in terms of the synergy of political will, cultural identity and gender equity in support of national development. The focus of this research is to explore how state policies, cultural values, and religious narratives have jointly constructed literacy - particularly for women - as a vehicle for national transformation.

Keywords: Female, Literacy, UAE, Culture, Religion

INTRODUCTION

Developing literacy does not happen in one single act. Literacy, which has traditionally been understood as a set of skills related to reading, writing, and numeracy, is now recognised as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation and communication in a world that is becoming increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-saturated and fast-changing. Literacy is a lifetime continuum of learning and capability in reading, writing and numeracy, a component within a larger set of skills and literacies, which includes digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship, as well as work-

related literacies. Literacy skills are also growing and evolving as people engage with information and learning more broadly through digital technology. Literacy empowers and emancipates. In addition to being a fundamental aspect of the right to education, literacy empowers and improves people's lives through an increase in capabilities which reduces poverty, increases workforce participation, and has a positive impact on health and sustainable development. Literacy empowers women, and this has a positive ripple effect on all aspects of development. Women with literacy skills enhance their own life choices, have an immediate impact on the health and education of their families, and particularly on the education of girl children¹.

1. UNESCO, "Literacy: What You Need to Know," UNESCO, last updated 5 September 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know>

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In 2011, UNESCO's Global Partnership for Women and Girls Education focus on quality education for girls and women at the secondary level and in the area of literacy; its Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) project (2005–15) specifically targeted women; and UNESCO's international literacy prizes each year showcase the transformative effect of addressing women's and girls' literacy needs in specific contexts. The acquisition of literacy often leads to positive changes regarding harmful customary practices, forms of marginalization, and deprivation. UNESCO's most recent data from the Institute for Statistics shows that good progress has been made in relation to literacy, with data indicating that more than 86 per cent of the world's population are now literate (compared to 68 per cent in 1979). Through all of this progress, there are still at least, worldwide, 739 million adults who still cannot read and write (UIS, 2025), two-thirds of whom are women; there are also 250 million children who cannot acquire basic literacy skills².

From Illiteracy to Empowerment

A report highlights a remarkable transformation in literacy levels over the past four decades. According to the data, about 75% of the emirate's population was illiterate around the time of the UAE's formation, but this figure has declined dramatically to 7.5% in more recent years. By 2010–11, the illiteracy rate among Emiratis in the capital was reported at 6%, with female illiteracy specifically at 8.7%, compared to 3.5% among males³. This gender disparity is historically grounded: the report mentions that in 1960–61, no women were enrolled in the emirate's schools, whereas by 2010–11, female enrolment had nearly matched male enrolment (150,010 female students vs. 156,469 male students). Such shifts reflect both policy changes and social progress, where dramatic increases in girls' access to education have fueled reductions in female illiteracy. The decline in demand for

adult literacy classes, particularly among mature women, further suggests that literacy has become more deeply embedded through formal schooling over time. The KHDA report cites that as more people, including women, have stayed in school longer, the need for adult literacy centres has decreased. This transition signals a shift from remedial efforts toward universal foundational literacy, especially benefiting women born in later decades. Overall, the data from KHDA underscore how female literacy in Abu Dhabi has moved from near invisibility to near parity, aligned with broader educational expansion across the UAE. These trends point to the success of policies aimed at universal schooling rather than solely remedial adult education, and emphasise that female literacy gains have been central to the UAE's modernisation efforts⁴.

The literacy rate of women in the UAE is 95.8%. This marks a dramatic turnaround from 1975, when adult literacy among women was only 31%, while among men it was 54%. Over the span of a few decades, the UAE effectively transformed female literacy from a substantial deficit into near parity, reflecting both strong policy commitment and social change. The data also highlight that women now dominate in educational attainment: at two of the country's three federal universities, women make up 80–90% of enrolled students. Among high school graduates, 95% of females pursue tertiary education, compared to 80% of males, demonstrating that the pipeline from basic literacy to higher education is especially active for women.

State-Led Educational Reform and Legal Foundations

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been a global leader in literacy promotion locally and internationally. This commitment to literacy and education is evidenced by the commitment demonstrated by visionary leaders such as the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The UAE

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2. UNESCO, "Literacy: What You Need to Know," UNESCO, last updated 5 September 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know>
 3. "UAE cruises from illiterate to well read in 40 years," KHDA News, 27 August 2012, <https://web.khda.gov.ae/en/About-Us/News/2012/UAE-cruises-from-illiterate-to-well-read-in-40-yea#:~:text=Forty%20years%20ago%2C%20three%2Dquarters,illiteracy%20fell%20quickly%20and%20steeply.>
 4. "UAE cruises from illiterate to well read in 40 years," KHDA News, 27 August 2012, <https://web.khda.gov.ae/en/About-Us/News/2012/UAE-cruises-from-illiterate-to-well-read-in-40-yea#:~:text=Forty%20years%20ago%2C%20three%2Dquarters,illiteracy%20fell%20quickly%20and%20steeply.>

committed to ensure that education is central to the overall national development strategy. They posited that education is vital for economies to thrive and societies to develop, and this resulted in strong policy and initiatives aimed to ensure that educational opportunities are accessible to all segments of the population. One UAE policy that had a leading role in promoting literacy was the introduction of compulsory education laws, with Law No. 11 of 1972 taking the lead on ensuring students enrolled and attended school. There were revisions in 2012 and 2014, but the Law required children between the ages of 6 and 18 to attend school, and imposed legal obligations on parents to ensure school attendance in order to enforce compliance. As a result of these efforts, the illiteracy rate was reduced to less than 1%. The UAE has created various flexible literacies approaches that can respond to different populations such as the elderly, women, and government employees. For instance, there are literacy programs for senior citizens that enable them to learn at their own pace. Specifically for women, Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, the “Mother of the UAE,” has spearheaded initiatives with the Strategy of Literacy and Female Education dating back to 1975. These programs promote an inclusive model of education in the country⁵.

The report details an impressive shift in literacy rates in the past forty years. The report states that about 75% of the emirate’s population was illiterate at the time of the formation of the UAE, estimating a 7.5% illiteracy rate more than forty-five years later. In report drafts dated 2010-11, the illiteracy rate for Emiratis living in the capital is 6%, with the illiteracy rate for women at 8.7% and 3.5%, respectively⁶. This gender gap has historical roots: the report notes that in 1960-61, no girls were enrolled in the emirate’s schools, while by 2010-11, female enrolment was nearly equal to male enrolment (150,010 girls vs. 156,469 boys). Changes in the educational gender gap indicate policy changes and social progress, as substantial

increases in girls’ access to education have significantly reduced female illiteracy. The decrease in demand for adult literacy programs in conjunction with much of the decline seen overall in women’s illiteracy rates, particularly with mature women, also suggests that literacy skills have been normalised through schooling; for instance, the KHDA report notes that as more people, including women, have stayed in school longer, there is less need for adult literacy centres. This represents the shift from ‘remedial literacy’ to ‘universal foundational literacy’, that is, where females born in later decades might benefit the most. Overall, the KHDA data demonstrates how female literacy in Abu Dhabi moved from almost invisibility to almost parity, and reflects broader educational expansion across the UAE. These suggest the success of policies for universal schooling, instead of solely remedial adult education, and highlight how female literacy achievement was foundational to all of the first UAE developmental agenda concerning modernisation in this time period⁷.

95.8% of women in the UAE are literate. This is a stark change from 1975, when adult women’s literacy was only 31% while men’s literacy was 54%. From that point, through a few decades, the UAE changed the substantial deficit of female literacy to almost parity among these two genders, a transformation that attests to policy and social change. The numbers also show that women are now achieving higher education to a far greater degree: two of the three federal universities in the country have an 80 - 90% female student enrollment. 95% of Emirati female high school graduates enroll in post-secondary education while the same applies to only 80% of males. These numbers show that the progression from basic literacy to post-secondary education for women is particularly robust. Regarding university enrollment, women make up about two-thirds of students in at government universities and over half of those in the students at private institutions. At the secondary level

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5. “UAE Is Leading Efforts in Literacy,” Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, February 2020, accessed September/ 10, / 2025, <https://mbrf.ae/en/read/uae-is-leading-efforts-in-literacy/7>
 6. “UAE cruises from illiterate to well read in 40 years,” KHDA News, 27 August 2012, <https://web.khda.gov.ae/en/About-Us/News/2012/UAE-cruises-from-illiterate-to-well-read-in-40-yea#:~:text=Forty%20years%20ago%2C%20three%2Dquarters,illiteracy%20fell%20quickly%20and%20steeply.>
 7. “UAE cruises from illiterate to well read in 40 years,” KHDA News, 27 August 2012, <https://web.khda.gov.ae/en/About-Us/News/2012/UAE-cruises-from-illiterate-to-well-read-in-40-yea#:~:text=Forty%20years%20ago%2C%20three%2Dquarters,illiteracy%20fell%20quickly%20and%20steeply.>

universities. In high schools, 77% of Emirati women enroll on higher in post-secondary education, and women account for 70% of all university graduates. Taken together, these figures present a compelling narrative overall. These numbers tell a remarkably coherent story: the UAE has not only achieved high female literacy rates but also created and devised pathways for women to exceed earlier gender previous imbalances of gender in the realm of education. The transition the shift from mass illiteracy to female gender-based empowerment through education highlights demonstrates how literacy policies, when combined with gender equity strategies and social liberalisation, can transform societal roles completely reshape social roles. For a literacy researcher, studying literacy the dynamics, of literacy in the UAE presents a model case where is illustrative, as female literacy has become central to is prioritised as a mechanism for national development, rather than as a residual issue to be amended topic to address later⁸.

The Gulf News article reports indicates that by the end of 2000, female literacy in the UAE stood at reached 79%, compared to 75% for men, marking a rare an unusual reversal of the typical gender gap in literacy seen across throughout the Arab world. Interestingly in fact, in 1990, both genders were recorded as having men and women had been reported to have equal literacy rates of at 71%, but over the subsequent decade, women appear to have pulled ahead—a shift attributed next 10 years, it appears that women have achieved a gap—the article attributes this gain to rising higher levels of social freedoms, freedom and greater educational opportunity for women, and possibly stronger perhaps even greater motivation among for women to pursue learning. These data points suggest learn. Taken together, the literature suggests that in the UAE, female women’s literacy development has, at least during that period, been robust strong, and even outperforming better than male literacy growth rates, a pattern that is fairly exceptional pretty rare in the regional context region. The article underscores noted that this progress growth occurred even while as many neighboring states continued to experience substantial of the UAE’s neighbours remained with large

male-female literacy gaps, often rooted in deeply due to entrenched social restrictions norms. Thus, the UAE’s trajectory affirms UAE example highlights the significance importance of both supportive policy support and changing social norms in enabling women’s advancing women’s literacy gains, and offers serves as an instructive important comparison for other Gulf states aiming to close persisting gender disparities in education among other Gulf states⁹.

The 2016 declaration of the “Year of Reading” in the UAE marked a significant milestone in the country’s commitment to developing a literate and culturally aware society. This policy move was not only in the UAE, the decision to declare 2016 as the “Year of Reading” represents an extraordinary moment in institutionalizing a further commitment towards building a literate and culturally literate society. The declaration had significant symbolic value, but was supported by practical steps it also included a number of important propositional actions, including the formation establishment of the a National Literacy Strategy, which aims to embed reading as a social and educational norm across among citizens of all age groups. In the context of ages, the relevance for female literacy, this initiative holds relevance, initiatives is evident here. Women in the UAE, and in other parts of the Middle East, have historically played a central significant role in shaping the educational environment within families, and thus context for education in the household. Thus, targeting Emirati mothers and adult women through this in support of a parental literacy strategy is a crucial mechanism for an important lever for building or sustaining intergenerational literacy. The proposal for the policy goal that indicated, “half of Emirati parents undertake pledge to read to their children” has strong important implications for women, who are often especially since women are often the primary caregivers and early educators teachers in the household. Empowering Literacy-empowered women with strong literacy skills strengthens their ability to can model and pass on reading behaviors and habits to their for their daughters and children, especially daughters, thereby supporting (a kind of social role), providing a long-term pathway for promoting gender equity in literacy

8. United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, “Facts,” *Government of the UAE Gender Balance Council*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.gbc.gov.ae/facts.html?utm=>.

9. Nadim Kawach, “UAE’s female literacy rate up,” *Gulf News*, January 17 2004

outcomes¹⁰.

Education as a Tool of Nation-Building

Furthermore additionally, linking literacy to national development particularly, especially around knowledge-based economic transformation—situates, recasts women as not just as beneficiaries merely recipients of literacy programs but as active contributors to participants in innovation, research, and cultural development. As H.H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan emphasised, reading is foundational the basis for creating developing a generation of scientists, and researchers, and or intellectuals. Given the increasing with the growing female enrollment enrolment and dominance of women in higher education in the UAE, enhancing women’s progress toward women’s literacy aligns aligned with broader goals of maximizing larger agendas of maximising human capital and fostering supporting inclusive growth. By embedding literacy in the UAE also prioritises reading as part of a national habit with its broader social practices—of embedding literacy in various other conduits—such as making March the “Month of Reading”—the UAE also integrates reading into”. Through this exercise, the UAE normalises reading as part of its national culture, reinforcing its importance beyond making it relevant outside of the normal confines of the classroom. For women, this opens more represents additional informal and, community-based opportunities for literacy engagement, especially those opportunities, especially for women who may have missed out on formal education earlier in life. In conclusion, the UAE’s summary, UAE reading initiatives directly and indirectly support the advancement of female literacy development both indirectly and directly, by recognizing establishing women as both learners and educators teachers, and by creating an ecosystem in which eco-system for reading is normalized acrossas part of the national culture and, by definition, as something to be modelled by both genders and multiple generations. These efforts not only thus, while the reading initiatives in the UAE reduce illiteracy butexistence of literacy, they may also promoteimprove

literacy as a mode of cultural participation engagement, family cohesion, and female empowerment in line with regarding national development goals¹¹.

The UAE Embassy’s literature Embassy’s materials on ““Women in the UAE” presents” characterise female literacy as not as an isolated achievement end goal, but as a catalyst for a tool of social change for national transformation in education, governance, science, and diplomacy. The statement assertion that 95.8% of literacy rates for Emirati women are literate establishes is 95.8% affirms full literacy as a baseline metric benchmark of gender progress. But advancement. However, the literacy statistics do not express fully what is important; the text goes further, it portrays on to describe literacy as the foundation underpinning for women’s full integration into participation in higher education, the workforce workplace, and public leadership. Crucially Importantly, the passage emphasises notes that more women than men now complete girls achieve secondary education in secondary school at a higher rate than boys, and enroll that women enrol in university and postgraduate programs education in higher numbers than men. This shift demonstrates how female literacy in the UAE has evolved beyond basic is not just a capability of reading and writing into academic performance, but a driver of advanced education and ambition aspiration. With 77% of Emirati women pursue pursuing higher education at university after secondary school, and women represent representing 70% of university graduates overall, it is excusable to view educational statistics for female for female Hikadi as evidence of an intentional programme to address gender gaps in both the rate of literacy and rate of education access and attainment. The text also establishes a correlation between women’s learning and their ability to participate in areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which have traditionally been dominated by men in all parts of the globe. While the report notes that 56% of graduates of STEM programmes from UAE-trained government universities are women, the authors state that educated women are a powerful catalyst for innovation,

10. “National Literacy Strategy,” *The Official Portal of the UAE Government*, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/human-resources-development-and-education/national-literacy-strategy>.

11. “National Literacy Strategy,” *The Official Portal of the UAE Government*, accessed October 3, 2025, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/human-resources-development-and-education/national-literacy-strategy>.

particularly in centralising space exploration, artificial intelligence, and environmental science. Additionally, the overall female literacy rate is implicitly. These figures reflect a deliberate policy effort to close gender gaps not only in literacy rates, but in educational access and outcomes.

The document also links female literacy with participation in STEM fields, which are traditionally male-dominated worldwide. With 56% of government university STEM graduates being women, the narrative positions literate women as critical drivers of innovation, especially in sectors like space exploration, AI, and environmental science. Further, female literacy is indirectly tied to advancements advances in political and military inclusion, such as women entering joining the diplomatic corps, the judiciary, and even, recently, national defense via through the Khawla bint Al Azwar Military College. These roles demand not just, these career paths require not only literacy but also advanced sophisticated cognitive, legal, and communicative verbal skills, all stemming from foundational educational that all stem from access to education at earlier stages of the education continuum. In this literature, literacy is not merely a developmental goal, it is a strategic enabler of broader national aspirations: gender parity in leadership, innovation in STEM, and active global diplomacy. By showcasing women's literacy as both a symbol and a tool of empowerment, the UAE constructs a narrative of female advancement as central to its modernisation agenda¹².

Posited as a development goal that is not just a goal of development but instead is a strategic facilitator of higher order national ambitions, specifically gender representation in leadership, STEM-based innovation, and active participation in global diplomacy. By branding women's literacy as both a symbol of empowerment and as a mechanism of empowerment, the UAE has deliberately constructed a position that women's

advancement is not only a symbol of women's modernisation but its conduit¹³.

Cultural and Religious Narratives in Literacy Policy

Religious and cultural narratives significantly shape the content, timing, and objectives of literacy education in the UAE. Of recent policy interest is the requirement that Arabic language, Islamic education, and Social Studies are now offered in kindergarten for all private schools regardless of curriculum. The intent is clear: teach students foundational reading and writing skills, reinforce religious values and social awareness, and cultivate national identity¹⁴. Such a view of literacy grows from a broader conception of literacy not only as technical skill (reading, writing) but also a means for fostering belonging, moral values, and cultural heritage.

Cultural identity and religious values are significant components of early childhood education curricula. For instance, a case study conducted by Najwa Alhosani (2022) reports that Emirati kindergarten curricula incorporate Islamic studies (with religious values related to gratitude, and charity), social studies (with some lessons exploring Emirati heritage, community, and culture) and stories from the local neighborhood or family life, promoting national awareness¹⁵. While these curricula draw on broader international early childhood education practices, they reflect local religious/cultural traditions and world views, creating a "synthesis" of early childhood education, but where religion and culture are deeply inscribed in what it means to 'literacy' - particularly reading, narrating, and relating to a text related to aspects of literacy. Furthermore, a dimension of these curricula are recent government directives where the government defines and enforces how much time is allocated to Arabic and religious studies at early ages. For example, changes to occur from the 2025-26 academic year, stipulate private schools must teach Arabic every day in

12. "Women in the UAE," *Embassy of the United Arab Emirates – Washington, D.C.*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-uae>

13. "Women in the UAE," *Embassy of the United Arab Emirates – Washington, D.C.*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-uae>

14. "UAE mandates Arabic, Islamic education, and social studies in Kindergarten," *Gulf News*, July 22, 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-mandates-arabic-islamic-education-and-social-studies-in-kindergarten-1.500206749>.

15. Najwa Alhosani, "The Influence of Culture on Early Childhood Education Curriculum in the UAE," *Journal of Cultural Research in Early Childhood* (2022), 284-298.

kindergarten (initially 200 minutes a week, increasing to 300 every week by 2027-28) and Islamic Studies for Muslim students (90 minutes a week)¹⁶. This directive illustrates how religious narrative (Islamic education) and cultural narrative (Arabic, social values, national identity (literacy) form structural esteem in literacy learning time, as well as curriculum development.

Additionally, there are policy selections, which are also intended to mediate cultural diversity and religious pluralism. The UAE has a policy requiring non-Muslim pupils to be exempted from Islamic Studies classes while remaining integral components for everyone include Arabic and other national identity related content¹⁷. Curricula and textbooks for Islamic Education also include components of tolerance, moderation, and respect for other cultures and beliefs which are symptomatic of state interests in representing the UAE as a multicultural society built on the notion of Islam¹⁸. As such religious narrative in UAE literacy policy is not only related to the teaching of beliefs but rather managed diversity, social cohesion and national identity.

On the whole, the process of literacy in the UAE does not simply function as a spruce of skills for decoding and comprehending text. Reading and writing are clearly connected to religion (Islamic studies; Qur'anic recitation and/or Islamic ethics), to preserving the Arabic language (as a cultural asset), to social studies that include Emirati history and the community, and to values such as tolerance, respect and responsibility in community. These attributes clearly exhibit that religious and cultural narratives do more than the simply supplement the curriculum; they are structural in design and reside in practice and policy which influences when children are to begin formal literacy instruction, how much time they are to spend in literacy practices, what texts are included in those practices, and what the moral/civic imperatives are to literacy.

Global Outlook and Humanitarian Literacy Initiatives

Flexible literacy models have been created within the UAE, addressing multiple minorities in the population including, but not limited to, elderly citizens, women, and government workers. For instance, communicating flexibility for the elderly to learn at their own pace was a part of their literacy programs. We can see the same situation for women in the UAE, which was in line with Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak's "Mother of the UAE" movement for literacy and female education starting a strategy for literacy and education in women as early as 1975. The initiative above shows the inclusivity that the UAE has built into their designs for literacy and allows literacy. Moreover, the UAE has developed a great focus on the investments made for infrastructure and human capital. They have built new schools, renovated the existing schools, and trained the teachers, so they provided literature that was at the level of the global standards. The UAE was a principal provider of their students with a better education as an outcome of the newly established UAE University, which began in 1977, which also allowed the UAE to retain students in the UAE and improve the quality of higher education. Overall, the UAE is now transitioning its education process from literacy to innovation, which has, in part, been possible due to the previous investments in education infrastructure, both hard and soft. Lastly, the UAE is committed to being a globally literate population with a focus on international literacy as well. The Literacy Challenge Initiative was announced in 2017 at the 4th Knowledge Summit with the objective of educating three million Arabs by the year 2030. As a partner with UNESCO and UNDP, it will construct schools and provide other supplies to underserved and conflict-affected areas such as Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which reflects the UAE's humanitarian intent to project its educational vision and model to the world¹⁹.

16. "Guidelines approved for teaching Arabic Language, Islamic Studies, Social Studies in Kindergarten in Private Schools," *Al Etihad News Center*, June/ 22, 2025, <https://en.aletihad.ae/news/uae/4584684/uae—guidelines-approved-for-teaching-arabic-language—islam>

17. "UAE: No change in policy regarding teaching of Islamic studies in schools," *Khaleej Times*, September/ 2, 2022, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/education/uae-no-change-in-policy-regarding-teaching-of-islamic-studies-in-schools>

18. "Tolerance in UAE Islamic Education Textbooks," *Religions* 11, no./ 8 (2020): 377, MDPI, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/8/377>

19. "UAE Is Leading Efforts in Literacy," Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, February 2020, accessed September/ 10,/ 2025, <https://mbrf.ae/en/read/uae-is-leading-efforts-in-literacy/7>

Ongoing Challenges

In spite of such successes, the UAE continues to face several issues of sustainability and expansion of literacy. Significantly, the need to adjust to a world that is rapidly digitizing is paramount. With education moving the online space so readily, the digital divide for older generations and low-income families reappears. Thus, providing equitable access to technology and digital literacy is now a critical area.

A further challenge exists with regards to quality assurance of education throughout all institutions. While access has been enhanced to levels not seen before, there continues to be a need for enhanced teaching, the delivery of high-quality curricula, the development of learning environments to be aligned with other areas of the globe. While this is an ongoing academic process, teaching students with special needs requires additional and further support for an inclusive system of education. There continues to be the cultural inertia of some elderly or conservative families, in which they might not feel formal education is priority. Ongoing public awareness campaigns and engagement with communities is paramount in challenging and changing that behavior and moving toward educating for a lifetime²⁰. Ultimately, the efforts in literacy in the UAE rest upon a sustained and strategic vision that is based upon the pride of the nation and the notion of obligation to the global community. Nearly all adults are literate and even creating semi-literacy and literacy opportunities outside the UAE in a strategic manner. The UAE is an example of how political will, legal systems, ability to create inclusive policy with respect and honor for all in its diverse cultural investment in human capital can transform education. The remaining work will be in quality, inclusion and certainly digital, yet the foundation is stable, and the vision is assured.

The Literacy Challenge Forum, launched in Dubai by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation in collaboration with the UNDP and UNESCO, urgently addressed the problematic issue of illiteracy in the Arab world. One main challenge raised

was the narrow definition of literacy. In many contexts, literacy is still defined simply as the ability to read and write, but in fact, literacy must also include broader skills such as critical thinking, digital literacy, effective communication, and the skills needed to learn for life. This narrow definition of literacy limits the scope of literacy initiatives and does not enable people to access the tools that they need to function in contemporary life. Another substantial barrier is the lower quality of primary education in some Arab countries. Although there has been progress in the accessibility of schools, the nature of the content and the methods used to present the content are often lacking and often leave students lacking basic understanding and problem-solving skills. A weak foundation in education and learning weakens all levels of education and leads to an ongoing cycle of poverty and limited opportunity to advance. Even more compounding the issue is the lack of any data-driven or evidence based literacy programs. A lot of programming is developed without first identifying who the illiterate populations are, where they live, or what their needs might be. Consequently, being poorly targeted is an inherent configuration of programming, and at times, those identified as successes in basic literacy revert back to illiteracy status after taking a short course²¹.

Adult education presents a noteworthy challenge. Adults cannot be taught using the same methodologies that are suitable for children. Without adult learning models designed specifically for adult education that are flexible and sensitive to context, programs designed to engage adults in literacy education will have very little impact. Additionally, conflict and displacement in the Arab region resulted in millions of children out of school education, with girls being disproportionately affected. Approximately four million children in the Arab region lack access to education, including many in war-torn areas, compounding problems surrounding substantive development and helping in the cycle of illiteracy. For these children, alternative and flexible education systems need to be built that allow for children to continue learning

20. "UAE Is Leading Efforts in Literacy," Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, February 2020, accessed September/ 10,/ 2025, <https://mbrf.ae/en/read/uae-is-leading-efforts-in-literacy/7>

21. "Inaugural Edition of the 'Literacy Challenge Forum' Launches in Dubai with Prominent UN Representatives," Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, Literacy Challenge, February 24, 2020, accessed September/ 11,/ 2025, <https://mbrf.ae/literacychallenge/en/news/inaugural-edition-of-the-literacy-challenge-forum-launches-in-dubai-with-prominent-un-representatives>

while aid is being provided in times of crises. Another factor is that after short-term programs that teach literacy skills, individuals revert back to being illiterate. Many individuals, especially if they did not have a sustained experience or opportunities for practice to build on the skills they learned, simply stop those skills. One especially familiar and restricting use of the skills is when adults are no longer literate in their daily lives. Ultimately, the

absence of active support from the community around literacy efforts diminishes the effectiveness and sustainability of literacy initiatives. Literacy must be viewed as a collective responsibility - the responsibility of families, civil society organizations and local organizations, and not only governments and NGOs. Without this community engagement, literacy programs cannot create sustainable change²².

22. "Inaugural Edition of the 'Literacy Challenge Forum' Launches in Dubai with Prominent UN Representatives," Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation, Literacy Challenge, February 24, 2020, accessed September/ 11,/ 2025, <https://mbrf.ae/literacychallenge/en/news/inaugural-edition-of-the-literacy-challenge-forum-launches-in-dubai-with-prominent-un-representatives>