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# Islamic hospitality in the UAE: indigenization of products and human capital

Islamic  
hospitality in  
the UAE

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by the hospitality industries in developing an Islamic hospitality identity and indigenous styles of management, particularly in the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – especially Dubai. It also aims to identify and comprehend the socio-cultural implications of Islamic hospitality in terms of products and marketing.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual-based paper critically reviews and amalgamates a diverse range of literature concerning Islamic hospitality (and tourism), Arab management and leadership qualities, human capital and nationalization of employment, industry skills and educational directives in hospitality and destination and product strategies.

**Findings** – The work critically accounts for the changing nature of skills needed by localised hospitality managers and the industry in general, especially to keep pace with dynamic customer demands and an increasingly sophisticated market and consumer. The outcome of the paper concerns the operationalisation of soft skills and managerial expertise attuned to ethnic and religious attributes of the host society. The evaluations propose ways in which the education sector can extend the career development and progression pathways for UAE nationals. The work also indicates how product development, innovation, transformation and marketing have a crucial role to play in advancing an Islamic and cultural approach to hospitality.

**Originality/value** – This paper uniquely concerns an under-developed area of academic study: the role Islamic-based principles and practices of hospitality and ways in which they can be developed through an indigenous-led workforce, and Islamic and Arab styles of management, leadership and service sector operation.

**Keywords** Hospitality services, Tourism, Human capital, Islam, Employment, Skills, United Arab Emirates

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



## Introduction

This paper discusses ways in which the hospitality (and tourism) industry in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), notably the Emirate of Dubai, can pursue and develop Islamic-based principles. The work asserts that these principles need to be developed through an indigenous-led workforce, localised styles of leadership and intrinsic forms

of service delivery (and operation). The need to develop human capital through highly skilled employees within the hospitality industries is regarded as a main enabler for sustainable and regional development. Moreover, it is argued that the process of developing a nationalized approach to employment would then inspire more indigenous-led models of hospitality and tourism development, where UAE nationals can act as “initiators”, “creators” and “ambassadors” of culturally inspired and Islamic-orientated products and services.

Given that the hospitality industry is a social and cultural institution, “hospitality” should then closely represent the ethnicity and religious dimensions of the host culture. This concern relates to issues of national and cultural ownership, where hospitality should be viewed, to some extent at least, as products of the UAE and specific Emirates. It is thus ethically and politically appropriate that nationals are positioned in key service sector roles within the industry, especially to deliver and manage hospitality (and tourism) products as well as to represent their country and ethnicity.

The UAE hospitality industries (including tourism) face the problem that current managerial practices are influenced by western principles of leadership and operation. Also, there has been a limited capacity for management-related roles to be locally perceived as legitimate career pathways. Moreover, these roles are arguably not responsive to the religious principles and socio-cultural sensitivities of UAE nationals. Unfortunately, common perceptions and negative stereotypes prevail concerning hospitality work as ethnically divided and financially unattractive. Littlejohn and Watson (2004, p. 411) note: “Against a challenging customer-driven environment, hospitality and tourism suffer from a poor public image and lack of career knowledge”. The UAE hospitality industries face problems concerning the hiring of experienced and professionalised staff, especially those who are naturally attuned to the socio-cultural nuances of the society in which they operate. Bakr (2008b) notes that locating talented hotel staff is an inherent concern in the UAE. The ethnic division of migrant labour is paramount, where cursory observations reveal that UAE’s hospitality industries is staffed significantly by expatriates from such countries as the Philippines, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

The paper intends to clarify the importance of skills towards the overall function of management within the tourism and hospitality industries, particularly through the conceptualisation of perspectives which indicate socio-cultural qualities associated with Arab leadership and Islamic principles of conduct. Key competences can be developed in the education sector, a sector which can also encourage a localised policy of career development as well as innovations in product development via an indigenization-led strategy and a renewed destination image.

The UAE consists of seven Sheikdoms (Emirates): Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah. According to the 2005 census, Emiratis total around 825,000 from a UAE population of 4.1 million, where 79.9 per cent of the population is non-national (EIU, 2006). The rapid increase in the expatriate population over the past four decades of accelerated economic development helped to serve UAE’s modernisation process. Like other Arabian countries of the Gulf region, UAE’s rapid economic development from the 1970s was due largely to huge oil reserves and its subsequent exportation. The recent movement toward the rapid development of service sector industries has been strongly encouraged by national and international investment, and market liberalisation (Shihab, 2001).

Since the early 1990s, Dubai has significantly witness a necessary departure from reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and an almost inevitable movement towards a service sector economy. Part of this diversification programme is set against a background of decreasing oil production, where tourism is designated as one of the main enablers of economic growth. Sharpley (2008, pp. 22-3) highlights a range of “pro-tourism” policies which serve to improve tourism growth in Dubai, such as the liberalisation of visa restrictions (in 2001), liberal trade policies (e.g. the “open skies” policy), and relaxation of strict moral codes of conduct associated with dress code and alcohol consumption. However, as this paper infers, pro-tourism policies arguably need to consider indigenous models of development and operation, particularly in terms of Islamic initiatives and national human resource capital. The alternative approach to development is one that thus grounds localised concepts of hospitality within a wider framework of Islamic forms of tourism development. According to Hazbun (2008, p. 229):

Islamic tourism is just one of the many resources the Middle East can draw on to define alternative narratives and referents in efforts to produce hybrid experiences of place that use local features to craft compelling tourism experiences for a diverse range of potential visitors inside as well as beyond the Middle East.

Although the UAE hospitality and tourism industries are significantly influenced by western notions of development, there are regional variations. The Emirate of Sharjah, for instance, has been progressive in developing tourism products that reflect wider Islamic dimensions through the promotion of its museum and heritage industry (Fox *et al.*, 2006a). The recently established Museum of Islamic Civilization is one pertinent illustration of a move towards more localised tourism products that reflect various dimensions of the Islamic world. However, Dubai has largely developed hospitality and tourism as industries which inevitably appeal to western cultures and societies.

### **The current development of hospitality and tourism products in Dubai**

Dubai’s development ethos seems to be a desire to be “bigger”, “better” and “brasher” than the rest of the world, with the fundamental objective to build a financial and tourist centre to rival those of the west. The city itself is home to range of brands such as the so-called eighth wonder of the world (Palm Island), the world’s tallest building (Burj Dubai), the world’s largest shopping mall (Dubai Mall), the world’s richest horse race (Dubai Cup) and the world’s only seven star hotel (Burj Al Arab). The Burj Dubai will house a hotel designed by Giorgio Armani along with 700 private apartments, corporate offices and the world’s fastest elevator. The tower is the focal point of an estimated US \$20 billion mixed-use urban development initiative, “Downtown Burj Dubai”, which is spread across 500 acres and includes private residences, hotels, entertainment venues, leisure complexes and shopping outlets, including Dubai Mall (RME, 2005). The conceptual relevance of the “world” as a symbolic construct of Dubai’s development ethos has been emblematically endorsed by the micro-reconstruction of the world itself. Over 300 real-estate islands, representing each continent and country within each continent, have been constructed in the Gulf, 5 kilometers from Dubai’s coastline.

Developments in Dubai manifest a host of new-fangled realities in the world of contemporary tourism societies. The conceptual significance of “retailtainment”, referring to a modern trend of combining shopping and entertainment opportunities as a way to entice and playfully connect consumers to a cosmopolitan-based shopping experience, has

patented itself into the consumer landscape of the Dubai shopping mall phenomenon. Malls in Dubai are simply more than places to purchase consumer products. The Mall of Emirates, for instance, accommodates hotels and bars as well as an indoor ski slope with artificial snow. The Dubai Mall has an indoor aquarium and an Olympic size ice-rink. Subsequently, Dubai has in many ways “pioneered a new, almost post-modern, style of recreational tourism incorporating entertainment, shopping, and strikingly designed luxury hotels” (Horner and Swarbrooke, 2005, p. 110).

In contrast to other Gulf countries, Steiner (2009, p. 4) notes that “Dubai is the undisputed epicentre of an iconographic destination development”. His assessment points to Dubai as a novel representation of a “hyperreal” destination (as opposed to a cultural heritage destination) with the capacity to establish progressive initiatives and develop new concepts which appeal to western tourists, as well as signify symbolically loaded messages associated with the strategic reconstruction of tourism spaces. The Burj Al Arab, for instance, built on an artificial island and designed to mimic a sail on an Arabian vessel, is popularly conceived as a tourism icon and is an integral part of the overall image of destination Dubai. Owing to its international media appeal and high social status in the world of iconography, this hotel is arguably a visible expression of “symbolic capital” (Steiner, 2009, p. 9).

However, the concern of this paper relates to the importance of developing Dubai’s “cultural capital”, i.e. its cultural resources and heritage as opposed to instrumentally pioneering a reconstructed social identity, status and tourism space. Nonetheless, limited cultural representation, particularly in terms of a scarcity in heritage resources and institutions, has repercussions for the way tourists and local populations perceive a destination. Although steps are being initiated to conserve what remains of the Bastakia district, a collection of about 40 traditional buildings adjacent to the Dubai Creek and recalling earlier life in the Emirate, the absence of local life and social continuity in the district (Orbasli, 2007, p. 181) makes it a place that could be conceived as being disconnected from its associations with Dubai culture and society. It is noted that only 300 of the 3,000 historic buildings in the city of Dubai survived modern expansion (Paradkar, 2006). Although there are several museums in Dubai (e.g. the Dubai Municipality Museum, Al Ahmadiya School and the Heritage House), the tourism industry does not overtly focus on cultural heritage institutions as the major component of the destination product, especially compared to the neighbouring emirates of Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. In Govers and Go’s (2005, p. 86) content analysis of photographic and textual material of 20 Dubai-based company websites, it is concluded that Dubai’s image as a destination does not “coherently reflect its true cultural identity”. The authors importantly acknowledge that the host culture can be perceptually misinterpreted and misrepresented if the destination image of tourists is not accurate. They note that “it is crucial that both the design of a shared cultural identity and the construction of tourist scripts are rooted in a sense of place” (2005, p. 87).

Despite Dubai’s optimistic tourism development initiatives and the significant expansion of its tourism infrastructure, the industry has indeed been impacted by the global recession. Destination marketing objectives may very well have to re-look at alternative ways of development. According to one recent observation, the hotel industry occupancy rates are believed to average around 73 per cent in the first quarter of 2009 compared to almost 90 per cent occupancy in the same period in 2008 (Bains, 2009, pp. 36-7). Euromonitor International indicated that a change in destination perception is

taking place, where Dubai is starting to target a broad spectrum of tourist segments rather than the exclusive category of western tourists (Euromonitor International, 2008). The rapid increase of low-cost airlines in the Middle East, locally illustrated through such UAE-based carriers as Air Arabia, has meant that broader markets are indeed targeted. The potentiality of budget hotels has already been earmarked by the industry as crucial given the financial need to both accommodate and sustain the rapid development of tourist serving infrastructure (Yaqoob, 2009). Nonetheless, if Dubai does not attract significant numbers in the immediate future, tour operators in Europe and elsewhere could very well start to promote bargain basement holiday offers and cheap package deals through a multitude of standardised charter flight holidays. Such developments could precipitate and thus challenge any productive notion of a socially sustainable tourism environment (Stephenson and Ali-Knight, 2009).

However, Dubai has other alternatives, especially in relation to developing products and concepts that could be economically and culturally sustainable in the long-term. The key concern, therefore, relates its potential to develop cultural products that reflect Islamic principles, especially in a proactive attempt to develop a destination brand based on its “cultural capital” and its religious roots. It would be completely misguided to argue that there has been no attempt to promote Islamic elements of the wider tourism product. Indeed, tourists can visit Jumeirah Mosque and Ibn Batutta Mall which encourage educational experiences concerning aspects of Islamic religion and civilization. Indeed, the Ibn Batutta Mall presents itself as a place in which to learn about the prolific travels of the Arabian traveller who spent 30 years (1325-54) travelling throughout Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Ibn Batutta’s voyage can perhaps be viewed as an “expression of the deeply embedded Islamic practices of seeking knowledge and spiritual enlightenment through travel” (Hazbun, 2008, p. 225). However, the shopping experience, involving the availability of a whole range of world famous branded commodities, overrides any notion that the prime pursuit to visit the mall actually focuses around Islamic elements. Accordingly, the option is to consider more plausible Islamic options. Nonetheless, it is initially pertinent to conceptually understand what constitutes Islamic hospitality (and tourism).

### **The role of Islamic hospitality and tourism**

There are new trends and developments slowly emerging in the region, such as the investment and adoption of business practices and fund-raising schemes based on the Islamic principles of “*Shari’ah*”. This is illustrated in intentions to develop a hospitality market that represents *Shari’ah* compliant hotels (*Emirates Business, 2008a*). Such initiatives illustrate the potential nationals have in establishing and developing forms of hospitality and tourism grounded in principles and behavioural codes that represent national society and culture. Islamic hotels arguably have significant opportunities for accelerated growth, and there has been some recognition of the region. One regional business group, for instance, has identified its intent to develop *Shari’ah*-compliant hotels in the Middle East and South East Asia, especially luxury branded hotel resorts and boutique hotels, which should also attract western tourists whose motivations to travel relate to intrinsic aspirations associated with well-being, conscious-lifestyles and cultural appreciation (*Emirates Business, 2008a*). *Shari’ah*-compliant hotels have traditionally existed in such countries as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Nonetheless, the potential growth of such hotels could also relate to the rise of Muslim travellers in the region.



Islamic hotels contain such features as traditional uniforms for hotel staff, dress code for female staff, markers indicating the direction of Mecca, female and male prayer rooms, prayer mats and prayer beds “*tasbi*”, *halal* food with no pork, conservative television channels, art that does not depict the human form, and beds and plumbing placed away from facing Mecca. Furthermore, finance used to operate the hotel should be compliant to *Shari’ah* regulations and the hotel owner must contribute a proportion of revenue to Zakat (charitable acts) (Bakr, 2008a). The conceptual significance of Zakat emphasises the importance of the sharing of equal benefits and helping others, where financial transactions should not involve the charging Riba, i.e. “predetermined interest” (Maysami and Kwon, 1999).

There is an impending need for UAE institutions to readdress its hospitality and tourism products in association with culturally oriented particularities and distinctions. Although certain emirates have developed cultural associations through specific forms of heritage and museum tourism (Fox *et al.*, 2006a), prominent cultural gaps still remain. There is no proactive movement, for instance, towards product enhancement of “Emirati gastronomy”. Despite the natural existence of UAE cuisine, it is not comprehensively recognised, branded or consumed within the wider context of the hospitality and tourism industry. Such innovation requires investment in product development, research and marketing, integral to a broader trend that ought to consider Emiratisation as a cultural philosophy. However, there is a wider movement in the Middle East aptly labeled the “*halal* revolution”, where there is significant demand for *halal* food products. *Halal* production and consumption is thus no longer a regional practice but a global requirement (Taylor, 2009). This development, together with locally adapted culinary practices, could be re-authenticated into a distinguished cuisine servicing a wider market segment of tourists in many sectors of the hospitality industry.

However, there are some interesting initiatives in the Middle East that illustrate ways in which Islamic hospitality can be developed. One such illustration is the “Traditional Village of al-Saha” located in a southern suburb of Beirut. No alcohol is served to visitors and the entertainment adheres to Islamic principles. Although profit received from the initiative is directed to the management body, al-Mabarrat, which is a philanthropic organisation that administers charities for people in need. The village represents Islamic and Arabic architecture, poetry, music and varied art forms (Mona, 2006). Hazbun (2008, p. 228) believes that such destinations as Dubai would benefit from initiatives of this kind, producing “meaningful experiences” of places and involving the “local community”; whilst at the same time closely integrating the economic and cultural dimensions of the tourism project. Al-Hamarneh and Steiner (2004, p. 25) clearly define the benefits of the cultural attributes of Islamic tourism:

The cultural vision for Islamic tourism includes Islamic religious/cultural and pedagogical and self-confidence-building elements. Part of the vision includes reorienting tourist destinations towards less consumption and “western-culture loaded” sites and toward more Islamic historical, religious, and cultural sites[. . .] Merging elements of the conservative Islamic lifestyle with the modern tourism industry could present new tourism options and spheres.

These authors approach Islamic tourism beyond the “fundamental isolationistic” (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004, p. 25) perception that Islamic tourism is solely about pilgrimage, acknowledging broader ways in which Islamic tourism can embrace elements of religiosity and the sacred. Furthermore, the religiosity elements shed light on Islamic notions of hospitality concerning aspects of congeniality and respect to visitors.

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Accordingly, being a Muslim relates to principles embedded in the Qur'an emphasising the absolute importance of being a "good host" (Din, 1989).

The development and expansion of localised human capital within the hospitality industries may very well help with the process of developing purist forms of Islamic hospitality. Indeed, work by Freire (2009) emphasise the critical role of "local people" in shaping the place brand, while studies by Wang (2008a, b) clearly demonstrate the need for collaborative marketing as well as understanding the complexity and dynamics of the process. However, at the same time, there is clearly a need to appreciate the nature of culture and the market ethics associated with an Islamic perspective. A good starting point for this is the work of Saeed *et al.* (2001) concerning steps towards maximizing value from relationships based on the social justice and the welfare capacity of the society itself. The next sections explore areas and issues to help build the capabilities, attitudes and competences of the sector to meet the challenges and needs of the future. To begin with, it is necessary to examine the worker profile of the UAE hospitality and tourism sector before taking a more micro perspective of skills and traits.

### **UAE nationals working in the hospitality and tourism industry**

Emiratis make up around 20 per cent of the UAE population but expatriate workers hold 99 per cent of all jobs in the private sector and 91 per cent in the public sector. By 2020, the number of Emiratis in employment is forecast to decline even further (Langton, 2008, p. 1). UAE is arguably the most reliant of all Gulf countries on expatriate labour (Fox *et al.*, 2006b). Problems concerning limited opportunities to work in UAE's national industries could in some way relate to decreased motivations amongst younger sections of the Emirati community. Mashood *et al.* (2009) note that popular perceptions held by private sector employers, usually focusing on the work shy and unproductive nature of UAE nationals, are possible barriers to the career development prospects of an Emirati dominated workforce. A recent empirical-based study conducted by UAE University indicated that Emiratis lacked confidence and were apprehensive in competing with expatriates (Yousef, 2009). Irregular hours, disciplined employment practices and limitations on religious and cultural commitments are other possible barriers to the desire to work in private sector employment (Al-Ali, 2008). It has been estimated that between 15 and 20 per cent of UAE nationals are unemployed, a noteworthy concern given a 17 per cent economic growth rate in 2007 (*Emirates Business*, 2008b, p. 21).

The employment of nationals in the hospitality industries is a cultural challenge. Nonetheless, several Emiratisation programmes have been developed to recruit nationals to work within the hospitality industries. The Maharat Programme, for instance, aims to attract UAE nationals to work in the hotel industry and pursue career-progression pathways in the hospitality industry. The nine-week training programme was orchestrated by the Emiratisation Task Force for Tourism, which functions under the aegis of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing. The programme initially attracted over 725 UAE nationals, including a significant number of females, helping them to become employed in five-star properties managed mostly by global hotel chains (Express Hospitality, 2008). Also, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority is encouraging more than 1,000 UAE nationals to be employed in the hospitality sector over the next five-year period (Bakr, 2008b, p. 6). There are sectors under the broader concept of hospitality that have a strong record in encouraging local representation, particularly in immigration and customs where there has been an active attempt by the government to encourage continuous recruitment strategies. Dubai's



expansion of the international airport and the development of a new airport (Al Maktoum International Airport) will further encourage the recruitment of nationals.

The need to identify the skills and management competences required by future UAE nationals is increasingly important to national development and an indigenous-led model of industry advancement. A skilled local workforce would be proactive in senior positions of responsibility within the hospitality and tourism industries, especially within the context of a wider strategic framework concerning workforce nationalization.

### **“Generic skills”: the essential ingredients of hospitality work**

Leaders of hospitality and tourism organisations need to accept the influential role that generic competences have on hospitality work (Baum, 2006; Raybould and Wilkins, 2006; Van Der Wagen, 2006). The industry has seemingly witnessed a progressive change of management styles, where roles relating to “control management” have shifted towards “leadership management”. Technical and operational dynamics of management have arguably become of more secondary importance to human resource skills and customer care. Interpersonal skills are important elements of the hospitality experience and should feature specifically in the training process. It is pertinent to account for generic skills based on a range of broad-based competences: adaptability and flexibility to new and multiple environments; interpersonal dynamics (communicative or otherwise); problem-solving initiatives; and self-management directives (Raybould and Wilkins, 2006).

In understanding the nature and content of hospitality work and given the industry’s historical emphasis on “hard skills” as opposed to “soft skills”, it is asserted that there is a “culturally imperialistic, operating model in place” (Baum, 2006, p. 126). Conceptual notions of “hotels” and “skills required” to work in hospitality institutions are traditionally driven by Eurocentric and Westernised paradigms and philosophies, which perceivably centre on technocratic and nominal service skills rather than culturally communicative and socially situated skills. Traditional approaches to the acquisition and application of skills do not recognise a “glocal” agenda to skills attainment. Baum (2006) infers that competences should be experientially oriented, where hospitality work needs to be founded partly on principles associated with the importance of utilising knowledge and experience within the context of the given environment in which employees operate.

The aim is to seek innovation, creativity and strategic thinking. In an industry which is currently recognised as poorly paid, hard work and low status, where working hours are deemed unsociable (Amoah and Baum, 1997, p. 5), the challenge to recruit and retain appropriate talent will be immense. It will be necessary to recast the stereotype of the industry and professionalise management within the hospitality and tourism industry. Moreover, Rees *et al.* (2007) note that, although Emiratisation (i.e. nationalization/indigenization) of the workforce is an important objective for the UAE Federal Government it should foster change management techniques and practices. Crucially, however, if nationals take up more key positions in the hospitality and tourism industries then this could encourage a model of cultural ownership which reflects more interconnections between heritage, culture and religion.

### **Arab managers: localised skills and traits**

Western perspectives of management need to be conceptually and operationally placed within a local, socio-cultural framework. While much management research has centered on the concepts, terms and practical applications of management within western

industrialised countries, there appears not to be a corresponding amount of either empirical research or scholastic literature on contemporary styles of Arab leadership. This observation is concerning when accounting for increasing numbers of overseas businesses seeking to operate within the Arab world, especially given the nature, role and size as well as growth potential of the Arab service-sector environment, which is rapidly emerging within the wider context of the global business environment. A systematic understanding of the necessary skills and traits needed by Arab managers within such an environment will go a long way towards facilitating recruitment of Emiratis within the UAE hospitality industries. This is necessary to meet the needs of nationals who are bounded by religious, socio-cultural and economic factors, and further challenged by the negative perceptions and stereotypes associated with working in the industry. Such perceptions are augmented by common conceptions of those service sector industries (e.g. real estate, banking and finance) that are popularly perceived to provide upwardly mobile career opportunities and non-menial responsibilities, and professionally challenging task-based initiatives.

Emiratis are relatively uniform in terms of a culture and religion that is predominantly associated with ancient and regional tribal roots. Pertinent to the wider Arab identity issues are Islamic principles of management (Ali, 2002; Saeed *et al.*, 2002). Although favouritism and paternalism are normatively heralded as key signifiers of the managerial practices of Arab-based organisations, it should be noted that group and community interests are still held in high esteem as opposed to approaches (and decisions) based on less nepotistic channels (Ali, 2002). Ali (2002) notes that, the organisational development from an Islamic cultural perspective relates to the importance of the objective or the intention behind the action rather than solely to the end result. In relation to management style concerns, an autocratic style of leadership is thus perceived to be favoured by Arab managers due to the dominant nature of traditional elder leaders in the wider community. That is not to say that a consultative style of management is not evident, particularly given that consultation can partly be historically traced to the decision-making structures of tribal councils and communities as well as to Islamic-based principles of social equity (Atiyyah, 1992). Arab managers may be in an exclusive situation of being able to move easily between the two paradigms, involving a consultative position based on open dialogue and/or an officious position based less on the interchange of ideas and more on centralised forms of communication and closed monologue.

Tradition and affiliation-oriented aspects (e.g. nepotistic-based networks) are heavily influenced by such cultural factors as family obligations and religious duties (Yasin and Stahl, 1990, see Yasin, 1996). Ali (1989) suggests that western values and practices as well as the global mass media influence some Arab managers to adopt more consultative management styles and positions. Nevertheless, managerial practices and leadership styles by Arab managers are culturally bound. Local values and daily norms are often cited as major performance indicators concerning how Arab managers “should be seen to manage” compared to “how they do actually manage”. One major concern fundamentally relates to how hospitality (and tourism) management education needs to change to meet these factors, especially through knowing and understanding the cultural competency “profile” of a UAE manager. One obvious competence that managers will inherently possess is a clear awareness of their Islamic heritage, society and culture, which could be utilised effectively through a localised perspective to hospitality and tourism development.

**Establishing progressive educational practices**

Al-Ali's (2008) empirical study of UAE nationals found that low standard education and knowledge, and lack of appropriate skills, were major barriers to Emiratisation. Amoah and Baum (1997, p. 9) emphasise that there should be a clear strategic relationship between tourism education and the wider educational policy delivery, where tourism education should be delivered systematically and according to national policy. Should Emiratisation occur in hospitality and tourism then the facilitation of training and education ought to be perceived as an incremental planning process. In the current global economic crisis there is certainly a need to take a more proactive role and seek to prepare the workforce for the challenges ahead, and indeed to develop alternative initiatives. Despite the existence of some Emiratisation training initiatives in the hospitality industry (e.g. Maharat programme), tangible outcomes are still not significantly forthcoming. Programmes need to engage trainees and students over a considerable period of time rather than for one fixed term of several months only. Initiatives should embark upon a more longitudinal approach to learning and practical application. If designed with a localised industry ethos in mind, then university degree programmes can arguably provide durability of learning and help to foster a strong sense of national purpose.

Learning is changing rapidly where modes of delivery and programme design are focusing on creativity and innovation, and the development of "soft skills". The evolution of hospitality and tourism education needs to meet not only the traditional challenges of different cultural and contextual requirements but the challenges of evolving operational business models, and the requirements of operational flexibility and evolution. This necessitates the opportunity for hospitality and tourism management students and trainees to be able to craft their own careers with bespoke programmes (industry related or otherwise). Thus, the emphasis would be on shifting the recognised "end point" of the educational experience to embrace life-long learning and to ensure that employability is a key focus of the institution. The end result of this being applied and useful learning as well as a mind set that adds value to the graduate, employer and society in general. Although hospitality and tourism education exists in several institutions in Dubai (e.g. Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management and Middlesex University Dubai), it is still arguably in its infancy and not fully developed with regards to advanced fields of learning in such specialist areas as cultural heritage management, art management, event, festival and venue management and facilities management. Indeed, developments in these specialist areas would indeed be purposeful in the process of advancing localised initiatives and cultural developments.

By supporting the role of education and training, industry and companies can protect and nurture their corporate talent and build more sustainable futures. Soft skills are necessary drivers for employability, contributing to the international profiling of the UAE hospitality industry. This is a critical factor and of vital importance in not only achieving higher levels of service quality and indeed service leadership but in stimulating the confidence and ability of new managers to innovate and develop their hospitality and tourism operations, particularly in a way which is both socially responsible and competitively sustainable.

The effective planning of human resource capital and the implementation of hospitality and tourism education are key outcomes of any successful development plan. Forstenlechner (2008, p. 84) recognises that "educational deficiencies" among young Emiratis are "unlikely to be resolved without a further shift in the education

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environment[. . .]”. Any change may only occur if one considers that the societal role of education is to prepare the economy and industry for evolving the skills, attitudes and competences required to support economic growth and cultural development.

### **Innovation and transformation**

In order to meet future challenges, UAE hospitality (and related tourism management education) will need to focus on applied research, useful learning, relevant skills and knowledge, and a “closeness or partnership” with industry. Such a perspective is driven by business priorities, which revolve around growth, and that such growth is achieved through innovation and creativity as well as a carefully crafted and embedded strategy. Yet given the cultural beliefs, values and dispositions of Emirati society, innovation and transformation ought to be ethnically derived, culturally sensitive and religiously responsive. There is certainly potential for reframing business education in the UAE, especially in relation to hospitality and tourism management. It is accepted that innovation in business is not new; however, what is clear is that there is now a drive to embed innovative thinking into organisational strategic development. Appropriately, Amidon *et al.* (2006, p. 255) claim: “Innovation is needed as part of strategy to transform organisations and compete in a knowledge economy”.

What is vitally significant is that the drive for growth through innovation and the knowledge economy is a key focus for UAE and the appropriate managers will be required to meet these challenges. Moreover, professional hospitality and tourism organisations often consider key competences of potential candidates and thus it is systematic and functional for educational programmes to identify, foster and enhance ranging skills and abilities.

### **Marketing and product development**

Islamic principles are ethically credible tools to apply within the hospitality environment and integrate within the educational curricula. Service encounters with customers, for instance, can be dealt with through Islamic principles and be viewed as a part of one’s Ibadah “worship of God”. Customers and fellow employees can thus be treated in an equitable and judicious manner – with good intentions. Subsequently, customer care programmes and staff/employee development programmes can reflect elements of religiosity: “reverence”, “honorability” and “congeniality”. In fact, it has been indicated that “relationship-building” and elements of “cordiality” are integral to Arab culture where respect, trust and personal relations are key features of the business approach and strategy (Saif, 2009).

Despite overwhelming cultural influences and social change brought about by UAE economic development, nationals do not necessarily have to compromise their cultural beliefs and religious-based attitudes. However, destination management and marketing is essential. It is clear that to effectively develop any form of destination branding or tourist experience there needs to be a co-ordinated and strategic approach to “place marketing” (Metaxas, 2009), and an inherent need to create a “memorable destination experience” (Hudson and Ritchie, 2009). Such an approach will build on the strategic capabilities of the host country as well as the skills, traits, and attitudes of managers and employees of the industry. While internet marketing can provide substantial opportunities for hotels to increase market scale and scope (Au and Ekiz, 2009), and the package holiday industry can influence the choice of destinations (Rewtrakunphaiboon and Oppewal, 2008), it is

the actual experience of the consumer that will further sell the destination. Although work by McCartney *et al.* (2009) in the context of Macau indicates that not all image perceptions impact on destination choice, it is clear that there is a relationship between a positive tourism image perception and destination choice tourism, and therefore increased visits.

Consequently, the development of Islamic and Arab-based managerial skills not only fulfils the cultural dimensions of the country context but also guides towards the foundations of the destination brand, indeed to manage the destination brand in a more systematic and considered way (Hankinson, 2009); together with a focus on developing an appropriate and strategic communications mix directed at enhancing the destination image (McCartney *et al.*, 2008). As such, this vital element should be nurtured and appreciated in policy, practice and education. Such an approach would go some way towards advancing a more “integrative destination-marketing process” (Elbe *et al.*, 2009) with a concerted emphasis on social identity, cultural sustainability and religiosity. Accordingly, the overall object would be to develop positive image perceptions of such destinations as Dubai in ways which are attuned to its Islamic roots, indigenouness and socio-cultural foundations.

### Conclusion

Dubai’s development ethos is a desire to be bigger, better and brasher than the rest of the world. Such an ethos has two knock on effects: firstly the setting of a standard or goal for destinations to emulate or surpass and secondly to ensure the ability to “deliver the promise”. Nevertheless, the promise can only be accomplished if the destination brand can be established, implemented and maintained. It is at this junction that this paper positions itself. It is thus recognised that in a service intensive industry like hospitality and tourism the brand is “lived” by both the customer and “server”. Living the brand extends to not only the employees of the organisation but to the “local” population. Such a phenomenon has major implications for delivering the “right brand” in a consistent and sustainable way. Compounded with this, the fact that concerted attempts to employ local labour would represent a long-term national agenda, and form a strategic objective underpinned by an indigenously led model of employment, there is a need for systemic action. Clearly, senior managerial positions occupied significantly by UAE nationals would reduce financial leakages associated with the employment of expatriate managers. Therefore, as long as the workforce continues to cater for the international consumer and consider the cultural nature of the hospitality and tourism industry, local employment representation will be perceived as a politically appropriate paradigm and a necessary stimulant for socio-cultural identification; both in destination management terms and economic profile. Localised employment constitutes ethnically derived work-based principles, culturally oriented organisational objectives and nationality-based representations.

Within a globally recognised and highly dynamic economy, the role of industry leaders is becoming increasingly crucial for the success of the development plans of the region, including the development of new ideas and initiatives. Furthermore, effective managers are an important source of confidence, not only in fueling the economic prospects of the Emirate but also to encourage, nurture and provide inspiration in product creation and service delivery. The paper thus conceptually establishes a greater contextual understanding of Arab managers and associated cultural traits and religious beliefs, where the challenge in troubled times is to bring about long-term changes

coupled to economic, social and technological development for the region. Accordingly, Islamic forms of hospitality (and tourism) are an important alternative to develop. Moreover, the Islamic elements could help refresh and renew the destination brand through product diversification and innovation.

Even though higher education is still in a relatively evolving state in the UAE, there is an imperative need for teaching programmes to embrace research and scholarship, particularly in terms of related managerial sciences to build a better understanding of the connections between culture, destination management and leadership. Furthermore, there is a need to expand elements of scholastic applications beyond western perspectives to embrace our understanding of local cultural models of learning and development, also presenting more practical and appropriate approaches to managing and developing hospitality in an Islamic setting and context.

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