

The challenges of conducting qualitative research: Student perspectives from the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Research activity and output is increasingly seen as a mark of excellence. Emerging education sectors often struggle to compete on this stage due to lack of experience or awareness of the process. Student research is an oft under-explored area of this debate and one that requires further attention an analysis. This paper uses a mixed methods approach and an ethnographic case study of two private universities in Dubai, in order to explore the experiences and challenges university students face when conducting research. Set against the backdrop of research output and rankings, this paper addresses key questions and proposes institutional responses to support student engagement, understanding and output.

Keywords: research challenges; qualitative research; UAE; student led research; research design; methodology

1. Introduction

Research activity and output is increasingly seen as a mark of excellence. Emerging education sectors often struggle to compete on this stage due to lack of experience or awareness of the process. Student research is an oft under-explored area of this debate and one that requires further attention and analysis. The central aim of this paper was to explore and better understand the key issues in student research and output. The objectives of the paper were to provide a review of student research activity in the United Arab Emirates (UAE); review the challenges in place; and highlight the responses and strategies adopted by students. Through this analysis and discussion, the paper contributes to literature through a deeper appreciation of student perception and engagement with the research process, and provides intelligence for universities to develop appropriate responses to support this area of activity and output. This paper is written by two authors with varying perspectives and backgrounds. At the time of writing, both researchers were connected to one of the universities discussed in the paper; one as a member of academic staff and the other as a postgraduate student.

This paper presents and discusses research undertaken in the UAE. The authors conducted surveys at two private universities in the UAE and collected a total of 171 responses. Of these, 87 were postgraduate and 84 undergraduates. Analysis of the responses provided a foundation for review and enabled the authors to firmly situate the

ethnographic discussion within the broader context of research challenges. While the research took place in the UAE, the findings and results are of value and relevance across the higher education sector. The context within which this research took place yields some specific factors for consideration but the core challenges are familiar and transferable both within the region and internationally. (Clark, 2006; Schwartz et al. 2009; Ryan et al. 2018). The research fully conformed to the research ethics and protocol of the author's home university; permission was sought from the institutions surveyed and participants were fully informed of the process, their consent was obtained and they had the right to withdraw at any point.

The rationale behind this research paper was in response to two key factors; an increased focus, nationally and internationally to raise research output; and an evident lack of direct student engagement with the issues at hand. The researchers set out to discover the core factors behind the lack of student research output; identify any key local or institutional determinants and then frame the findings within the wider context in order to provide an explanatory focus and relevance to the debate. Despite expectations, student "publication is not a given. It flourishes when it receives serious institutional attention, and skilled support from knowledgeable supervisors and others who understand academic writing as complex disciplinary and identity work." (Kamler 2008, 284). In essence, universities have a responsibility to support research activity and encourage output; both as an indicator of institutional ranking and as a central function of pedagogy.

The UAE is rapidly expanding as a higher education hub. This creates opportunities and also expectations. Despite its relative youth, the UAE has demonstrated a commitment to higher education in general and to hosting international institutions in particular. In 2017, British Council released ‘The Shape of Global Higher Education Volume 2’. This report analyzed international higher education policies across 38 countries. The UAE came second in quality assurance and degree recognition; third in transnational education engagement; and fifth in openness of higher education systems. The structures and processes for attracting and international institutions are in place but for the category of access and sustainability – one that measures funding of international research, among other factors – the UAE ranked eighteenth.

Research output is an emerging and evolving concern in the Arab Region, particularly as the issue of global rankings becomes ever more entrenched as a measure of regional and national quality. In the 2017 QS rankings, only one Saudi Arabian university made the top 250 globally. Three UAE institutions were ranked in the QS top 500 and only one in the Times Higher Education top 500. From a national perspective, in the 2017 QS rankings, two UAE universities were listed in the top 10 for the Arab region.

In 2017, the UAE government launched the National Strategy for Higher Education 2030. This initiative is underpinned by the four key pillars of quality, efficiency, innovation and harmonization. The innovation pillar provides a particular focus on providing competitive funding in order to increase research outputs that contribute to the development

of a knowledge economy. In addition, the Investment in Knowledge initiative is designed to increase the number of PhD students by increasing support for postgraduate funding and linking education to employment. Coupled with the Competitive Research Funding initiative, the drive here is to provide funding for research in key areas and promote collaboration between universities and industry. The findings from the survey will be presented and these will be followed by the ethnographic account, analysis and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

The context for this research is the UAE and more broadly speaking, the Middle East. An emerging educational hub with challenge and potential in equal measure. The external view is perhaps best summed up Demirbag et al. (2011) when they discuss the region as “being in the frontlines of popular media and in the back seat of the academic research” (p. 412). Lages et al. (2015) conducted a study into the challenges of conducting research and publishing in the Middle East (and Africa) and, using a Delphi study addressed key questions:

- 1) What are the major challenges involved in conducting research in the Middle East and/or Africa?
- 2) What are the major challenges involved in publishing such research in high-quality international journals?

- 3) What are the most common reviewers' comments specifically relating to your country of study?

The study, which included 42 respondents, concluded that the main challenges to conducting research were a lack of trust in and suspicion of surveys, country-specific research design challenges and weak university-company links. Challenges in publishing were described as a limited number of region studies to draw upon, limited exposure to the work of international scholars and a need for high-quality writing. This final point was echoed in the fourth question as one of the most common responses from reviewers' comments – the quality of the written work. The findings identified core challenges to publication as data-related issues and lack of priority and support given to researchers. Data validity and reliability was a core concern. “Since most of the measures have been developed in the western world, several of these measures do not make sense to respondents even if translation is conducted appropriately.” (p.11). What emerges from this study, and is indeed reflected in the work presented in this research paper, is the relative infancy, particularly in implementation and understanding, of research activity in the Middle East. Instruments and approaches are often foreign in design and understanding; engagement with the process is limited and the knowledge of how to present and disseminate findings is limited.

The challenges facing university students are varied and significant and range from managing expectations, understanding of process and well-being. (Pyhältö et al., 2012;

Stoilescu & McDougall 2010; Lepp et al., 2016) This paper is an attempt to both address these core issues and provide a framework for departmental and pedagogical response.

The subject of student research and the associated challenges is well documented and explored. Petrella and Jung (2008) argue that “developing and maintaining undergraduate research programs benefits students, faculty mentors, and the university. Incorporating a research component along with a sound academic foundation enables students to develop independent critical thinking skills along with oral and written communication skills. (p. 91). Wallin (2017) reinforces this point by stating that research activity “provides students with a student-centered learning experience that challenges them, and promotes students’ intellectual development by giving them the chance to become authors of their own learning and development.” (p.307). The value of research engagement at student level is evident and of value to both the student and the institution. Wenderholm (2004) states “undergraduate research is widely recognized as having a positive impact on not only the educational experiences of undergraduates, but also in providing research opportunities for faculty at undergraduate institutions. In practice, it is often difficult to achieve success with undergraduate researchers.” (p.73).

Literature clearly identifies the challenges facing students engaging in research activity and data collection. Early career researchers, and student researchers in particular, lack experience and awareness of both the elements of the research process and how to successfully navigate challenges as they arise. There is often difficulty in establishing

rapport with participants and in managing interviews where the participants are resistant or reluctant to engage. (Hosking & White, 2013; Rimando et al., 2015). Researchers often face uncertainty over how to dress in interviews; how to conduct interviews and themselves in the unfamiliar setting; how to select participants and convince them to take part (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014); and how to make participants comfortable during interviews. (Dearnley, 2005; Hoskins & White, 2013).

The research underpinning this paper took place in the UAE and while the findings are applicable across international borders, there are national and cultural issues at play that create an additional layer of complexity for the student researcher. According to Schwartz et al. (2009) the barriers that confront the production and dissemination of knowledge in the Arab world can be summarized into three main points. The first is the censorship imposed by governments on publication; the second is low literacy levels and the third is poor distribution of publications among the Arab countries themselves. With a few exceptions, the vast majority of students surveyed share a cultural and regional connection and yet the issue of culture was not perceived as a unique or fundamental barrier, as much as lack of knowledge of the approach and expectations were.

The research process is often a mystery to students and seen, quite correctly, as laborious and rife with rejection. In this respect, we can perhaps say that the 'culture of the student' is the dominant factor here. The relative inexperience of the typical university student; their lack of connection to the research process; insecurities about their own work and

expertise; and fear of rejection provide a greater foundation for lack of engagement than a unique cultural marker. (Saleh & Krishna, 2017; Moy & Murphy 2016).

Given the nature of the questions at hand, the researchers set out to capture lived experiences of the research process and this created the need to explore a mixed-methods approach. Hammarberg et al. (2016) argue that, ‘when other kinds of data are gathered in order to answer questions of personal or social meaning, we need to be able to capture real-life experiences, which cannot be identical from one person to the next.’ (p.499). Qualitative data collection has become increasingly prevalent and has often been driven in use as a result of the weaknesses of generating knowledge within the positivistic research (Snadberg, 2005). Rahman (2016) defines qualitative research as ‘any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions (p.103). This underlying perspective formed the approach for this paper as it sought to engage with lived experiences of the issues at hand.

3. Methodology

This paper employed a mixed-methods approach. A questionnaire was designed and distributed at two private universities in the UAE and was used to ascertain a base line of understanding and engagement. Purposeful sampling was used to identify these two universities and the criteria involved potential population and the nature of the institution

in question, i.e. the extent to which research activity was an identifiable component of the institution's mission and aims. Given the limitations of conducting qualitative research, in particular in the region in question, the approach was to determine the data set by the potential richness of the available respondents. (McKim, 2017). One of the researchers, a current Masters student, produced an ethnographic and narrative account, outlining the challenges faced whilst engaged in research design and data collection for their dissertation. The role of the student was to both comment on and explore the issues relating to research activity. At the time of the research, the student was engaged in this research process and the ethnographic approach was deemed ideal for this process as it provided an in-depth association to, and understanding of the issues at hand. (Yanik, 2017). The researcher was able to relate to the participants and develop a sense of trust. In order to avoid selection bias, the research questions and approach were discussed and determined by the two researchers, in advance of actual data collection. Mills & Morton (2013) 'see an ethnographic sensibility as offering the researcher and the reader unique insights into the educational worlds in which we all now live.'

The mixed methods approach is well-established and is increasingly employed by researchers. (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Dunning, Williams, Abonyi, & Crooks, 2008). This paper incorporated the survey instrument in order to gauge levels of understanding regarding research and to identify relevant challenges to conducting research. Surveys, "by their very nature are designed to reach a large number of

respondents, but they provide only limited information on each unit of observation. They are thus often ill-suited for the study of nuanced questions...Surveys can help frame questions or identify case sites for in-depth study.” (Park 2006, 118).

The survey tool was developed by the researchers and piloted within their own institution in order to determine the value and reliability of the instrument. The tool was then modified in line with these initial responses and feedback. These initial responses were not used in the research analysis and were for the purpose of development only. The instrument was adapted according to the student level (undergraduate and postgraduate) and tailored accordingly to ensure increased understanding and ease of completion. While the researchers debated the use of an online survey, this was disregarded in favour of the manual approach. Fan & Yan (2010) argue that ‘a low response rate of online surveys has been a concern for many researchers in the last few years; the response rate for web surveys is estimated to be 11% lower than other survey modes’. Uhlig et al. (2014) found that online and internet based surveys were both time and cost efficient for populations in excess of 300 but that paper or mail surveys could be more appropriate for smaller populations. In order to bolster the response rate, the researchers disseminated physical copies of the survey during class sessions. Anonymity was guaranteed but students were given the opportunity to include their contact details for follow up discussion. A total of 87 postgraduate responses and 84 undergraduate responses were recorded and subsequently analyzed. The data was collected in person by the researchers. Surveys were distributed

in person, during classroom sessions at the participating institutions, and the responses were collected and recorded accordingly. Data analysis was then conducted by the researchers and checked to ensure reliability. Only completed surveys were included in the final analysis.

This paper aims to provide additional insight, based on real life experiences, of a qualitative researcher who tried to explore the world of effective educational leadership in the context of a private university in Dubai. In addition, this case study suggests solutions and recommendations that might support qualitative researchers conducting exploratory case studies in real world contexts. This case study is valuable because it informs qualitative researchers, educational establishments and research centres about real challenges encountered at student level. In this paper, the author provides critical reflection on the challenges facing students conducting qualitative research. The author goes on to suggest practical solutions that could ease and intensify the effectiveness of the qualitative research procedures in the UAE and more broadly.

4. Findings

Evidence from questionnaire

4.1 Topic Selection

When asked about the challenges of topic selection and ensuring originality, 84% of postgraduate respondents, who replied to this question, either strongly agreed or agreed

that they experienced significant difficulties in selecting an original research topic.

Comments received focused on the following themes:

- “It is really difficult to choose an appropriate and recent topic to do and to apply in order to find significant results.”
- “The chosen topic is usually governed by the accessibility to data resources and not only interest.”

80% of the undergraduate respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they experienced significant difficulties in selecting an original topic.

4.2 Data collection

When asked about the challenges of data collection in the UAE, 26 out of 43 postgraduate respondents, who replied to this question, (60%) listed this as a significant or major issue.

The situation was similar for the undergraduate respondents with 56% either strongly agreeing or agreeing that collecting data was a challenge.

- “Yes, time consuming, organisation reticence toward any information to be used in my research.”
- “I think yes, schools normally closed and do not open data to the public.”

When asked about specific instruments, 56% of undergraduates either strongly agreed or agreed that conducting interviews with participants and observing real world activity was

more effective than using questionnaires. This question was asked in light of the constraints on data dissemination and the cultural imperative for face-to-face interaction and trust building. (Fandy, 2000).

Interestingly, when students were asked about the value and relevance of research activity, 88% either strongly agreed or agreed that developing undergraduate research skills would be of great benefit to the student and the university. There is a clear perception that research has value and a recognition that it is challenging within context.

5. Evidence from ethnographic approach

In order to more fully understand current challenges and provide a detailed layer of analysis, this paper incorporated an ethnographic and reflective discussion approach. In so doing, the researcher adopted the role of ‘insider’ and explored the reality of the phenomenon from the perspective of a participant (Creswell, 2013) and used a naturalistic approach in real context (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The backdrop for this approach was the author’s dissertation research project which involved conducting a qualitative case study to develop understanding of the effective ways in which leaders transformed their educational establishments to move from probationary to successful status, in accordance with national accreditation requirements. The case study was based on the participants’ practical experiences and visions (Lewis, 2015). The main value of the qualitative case study was not only to collect empirical material, but to

demonstrate different insights and thoughts about how the participants perceive the reality of the studied phenomena and the future of the organizational behavior.

5.1 The challenges of topic selection and getting research approval

Choosing a genuine research topic represents a common challenge for many researchers. As a qualitative researcher, the author faced considerable challenges when it came to deciding on a genuine research topic in the context of the UAE. An initial comprehensive online search was conducted on the educational topics in the UAE context. The aim here was to better understand the current educational challenges and associated approaches and responses.

The author encountered difficulty finding published academic work and research that tackled topics of interest in the UAE context. As a result, the author concluded that there is a significant deficit in published work from this region. Consequently, the author started looking for previous work that tackled the topic of interest, but in different international contexts and countries. Next, the author met with the president of the targeted educational establishment and discussed some of the key challenges in place. The author attempted to find a topic that was applicable and beneficial for the educational establishment. After an effective discussion, a suitable and applicable research topic was agreed upon. As a result, the researcher adjusted their suggested research topic to the establishment's reality and needs. It can often be useful to negotiate the research topic and plan with the establishment's administration. In other words, the researcher must

convince the administration of the benefits of the research in order to get the initial approval. When the establishment's administration became convinced of the value of the research, the practical process was greatly facilitated. Upon receiving the initial verbal approval, the researcher introduced a complete research plan, outlining the methodology, value, ethical considerations and timeframe. When the research proposal was approved by the administration, the author asked the president to provide formal approval in writing, in order to conduct research with the establishment. This approval was provided following a discussion about ethical considerations. Consequently, the researcher complied with the administration's terms and conditions while conducting the research. This written approval was useful for showing the interviewed participants the value and the validity of the study. Therefore, the interviewed participants acted in a responsible manner to the research process. Also obtaining an official written research's approval added to the validity and the credibility of the case study.

5.2 Limitations of using quantitative research instruments

The researcher used an additional quantitative method to collect data. The researcher noticed some disadvantages in using the questionnaire as a means of data collection. For instance, responses obtained through the questionnaires were too broad and general. In other words, the questionnaires' responses did not explain details or demonstrate examples. Also some participants did not respond to the questionnaires in a serious manner. This means that, some of the participants did not read the questions carefully before answering.

Generally, the researcher could not ensure the seriousness and the accuracy of the participants' responses through using the questionnaires. By contrast, the researcher managed to get more specific and precise data through using qualitative methods, like; conducting interviews and observing activities in the real context. This means that using the qualitative methods generated greater accuracy and specific details about the studied phenomena.

5.3 The challenges of conducting interviews and observing activities

Conducting interviews and observing practical activities can be considered the main tools for qualitative data collection. The researcher scheduled participants' interviews through the secretary's office. The researcher encountered many challenges while conducting interviews. Firstly, assigning a suitable time for interviews was difficult due to the participants' busy schedules and the tight working hours of the researcher. The tightness of the daily working hours did not allow the researcher to have freedom in meeting the participants during the convenient morning time. Secondly, participation was voluntary. In other words, the participants had the right to withdraw at any time they wished without giving an excuse. The voluntary aspect led to a lack of commitment towards the research process. The researcher encountered some uncommitted participants who refused to continue the interview process. Thirdly, at the beginning of the process, the researcher found it difficult to build trust and rapport with the participants. For instance, the first participants were reluctant and uncomfortable about giving specific detailed data. They

were uncertain and suspicious about an ‘outsider.’ They asked questions such as, “do you work for a newspaper?”; “Are you going to publish these private data online?”. Such questions were asked by the first three participants who were new to the process. This level of response indicates that the establishment, or indeed these participants, had not had regular exposure to external independent researchers. On the other hand, the later participants were more cooperative and willing in provide details and complete clear answers. The later participants felt more confident about answering the semi structured interview questions because other participants had already answered the same questions. Fourthly, the researcher encountered difficulties in obtaining copies of original documents. At the beginning, the administration was unwilling to give copies of the documents that were not already published online. As a qualitative researcher, it is necessary to include copies of original documents in order to build validity and credibility. Also document analysis is needed as a tool of data collection. Finally, complying with the research time frame was a strong challenge. The researcher could not control the participants’ time to conduct interviews or tailor working hours to fit the participants’ convenient free time. All these factors caused limitations and challenges.

5.4 Different perspectives about interview methods and structure

The researcher collected data through semi structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, collecting notes, documents’ analysis and taking videos. The researcher interviewed a wide range of participants, ranging from senior management to faculty

members to students. The variety of the sample enabled the researcher to explore and to comprehend the way the participants perceive the real academic world and the phenomena under study.

As a reflection on the interview's structure and methods, there are three common perspectives on the interview's methods. These perspectives are Neopositivism, Romanticism and Localism (Alvesson, 2003). The Neopositivist view recommends using structured interviews for studying facts. The Romanticist view advocated using the unstructured interviews in order to focus on meaning (Alvesson, 2003). The Localist perspective supported using semi structured interviews to study social construction of a situated real phenomenon. The Localists believe that conducting an interview provides an effective chance to explore the meaning of the research topic according to the participants' experiences to investigate a situated account (Alvesson, 2003).

As a qualitative researcher, the author had to choose between three broad types of interview methods: structured, semi structured and unstructured. The semi structured interview is considered the most common of all the qualitative research methods (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Qu and Dumay, 2011) due to its flexibility and accessibility. The researcher employed the semi structured interview in order to disclose significant hidden facts about the phenomena and the establishment.

5.5 Interview structure and design

The researcher used two different interview techniques; individual interviews and focus

groups. The individual interviews were useful for members of the college council as it enabled the researcher to obtain more details about the main themes of the study and individual perceptions. On the other hand, focus groups enabled the researcher to have a flexible discussion with students. This technique not only saved time, but it also encouraged participants to demonstrate a wide range of opinions.

The researcher used semi structured interviews as a means to collect data about leadership style and the applied effective practices. According to the Localist perspective, semi structured interviews help the researcher approach the world from the participants' perspective. Therefore, the researcher cooperated with the participants to produce questions and answers through a discourse of complex interpersonal talk (Alvesson, 2003). This interview technique also enabled the interviewees to provide responses in their own terms. Using this technique is effective, when the researcher understands the way the participants perceive the social world under study (Qu, and Dumay, 2011). In addition, semi structured interviews are considered the most common and effective means of gathering data that disclose facts about humans and organizational behavior (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Participants are considered as people who are not reporting external events, but they are also involved in producing situated accounts (Alvesson, 2003). These situated accounts should be understood in the contexts of the participants. Conducting qualitative interviews are relatively open to what the interviewee feels is relevant and important to talk about (Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, qualitative study contributes in

viewing the subject matter from different angles and avoiding any prior bias.

6. Solutions and suggestions

6.1 The researcher's personality and dealing with participants

The success of the research process is based on the art of persuasion and building trust between researcher and participants. If the researcher can succeed in dealing with the participants and the administration, many of the research procedures would be implemented effectively. In other words, the researcher's personality, attitude, communication skills and readiness to conduct the research are considered as key factors that affect the research. Interviewing participants produces situated understanding grounded in a specific context based on the interviewer's character (Qu, and Dumay, 2011). At first, the researcher must develop strong background knowledge about the chosen research topics. Also negotiating the suitable topic with the establishment's administration is useful in choosing the most effective topic that suits the establishment's conditions and interests. Also at the beginning, the researcher must give themselves sufficient time to explore the conditions and background of the institution in question, before deciding on the final research topic.

From a practical perspective, the ability of the author to meet with the president was of great value for context setting and understanding. In this regard, the researcher demonstrated flexibility towards the choice of the research topic to fit the establishment's

context. For instance, the author changed their initial topic after exploring the new conditions and circumstances of the educational establishment. Consequently, the researcher negotiated and introduced a new topic to the administration. The administration agreed on the new proposed research topic because it was more relevant and beneficial to its needs and conditions. In order to convince the administration about the value of the study, the researcher collected recent information about the new proposed topic using different reliable resources.

Effective qualitative research is based on careful planning and effective preparation (Qu. and Dumay, 2011). On the other hand, conducting interviews casually, without having an appropriate preparation could lead to misinformation and misguidance. In other words, poor interview preparations can be described as “a “wasted opportunity” (Hannabuss, 1996). Hence, the researcher ensured sufficient planning and agenda setting. Furthermore, while introducing and discussing the research topic with the administration, the researcher ‘s attitude reflected respect, seriousness, high levels of commitment, sincerity and knowledge awareness about the topic. This personal attitude helped convince the administration. The researcher tried to present themselves in a professional and formal manner. This means that, the outfit and the external appearance of the researcher should reflect the serious attitude of the researcher towards their study. For instance, wearing conservative formal outfits increased the level of respect and the participants’ interaction. Also the researcher’s attitude helped in building trust with the administration

and participants. It was noticed that a successful researcher should be humane and professional at the same time. The effective qualitative researcher should be a good observer, listener, learner, explorer and analyst of reality (Creswell, 2013).

The quality of the interviews can be maintained by keeping positive neutral relationships with the participants (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). This neutral relationship could be strengthened by not expressing personal opinions about the interviewees' responses. Also it is recommended to avoid criticism or nonverbal indications that show agreement or rejection towards participant responses. Moreover, the researcher found that it was useful to accept the participants' suggestions about forming interview questions. For instance, some professional participants were given an opportunity to modify and reform some of the interview's questions. That procedure enriched the interview questions and made them more relevant to the establishment's conditions and needs.

6.2 The effectiveness of the interview technique and structure

The interviewing process encountered many challenges and difficulties. Allocating the appropriate time was hard for the participants and the researcher due to their busy working schedules. The researcher tried to give participants the freedom to choose the right time according to their schedules and adapt accordingly. For some participants, it was useful to divide the interview questions into two parts during two separate meetings. This technique helped in reducing the burden and the stress of answering long questions. Also it suited the participants' busy schedules. Additionally, conducting face to face interviews

enabled the researcher to interact effectively with participants. In other words, it enabled the researcher to paraphrase and explain the meaning of the questions in order to ensure a correct understanding (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, the researcher translated the questions into Arabic to meet the needs of some participants. Also conducting face to face interviews allowed the researcher to make sure that the transcribed written answers represented the participants' real perceptions about the topic.

From a practical perspective, the researcher should steer the interview in order to manage the time and structure. Forming the questions plays a significant role in the interview's success. For instance, the researcher should not waste time in asking questions that could be concluded and answered from the documentary sources. Moreover, asking indirect questions enabled the participants to explain and illustrate the meaningful points that contributed to the organization's success.

In the same context, an effective researcher is like a skillful navigator who directs the participants effectively towards the interview's purpose and aims. This means that, the researcher must learn when to ask questions, and when to pause during the interview in order to keep a balance. For instance, when the participants got onto irrelevant topics or stories while answering the questions, the researcher politely had to interrupt them by saying: "let's move to the next theme," or "what about this theme?" On the other hand, the researcher should naturally be sensitive while dealing with participants. For example, the researcher should pause in the middle of the interview in order to give the participants

time to gather energy and to think about the questions. Using silence can be effective in understanding the interviewees' hidden messages. Also pausing in between questions helped participants to feel comfortable and focused while answering.

Furthermore, it was noted that the first participants felt uncomfortable giving answers. They were suspicious about the purpose of the study so they were not cooperative. Also they naturally felt nervous about giving specific details that could be considered as private and confidential. In order to make them feel comfortable about discussing and giving details, the researcher explained that the main questions and ideas had already been discussed with the president. In other words, the researcher clarified that the main issues and themes were approved and discussed by the president so participants could feel safe to express their own perceptions. Showing the written formal approval, explaining the validity of the study, and the ethical considerations encouraged participants to express their opinions and to give more detail. Also it was useful to conduct an initial extended interview with the establishment's president to see the big picture from the top. Discussing the main themes and dimensions with the establishment's president allowed the researcher to form effective interview's questions. Although the voluntary nature of engagement caused challenges, when the researcher displayed determination and high levels of commitment towards the study, participants felt more confident answering the questions. Generally, the attitudes of participants depended on their personalities and the researcher's personality while dealing with them. Also it was noted that age played a factor and the

professional position of the participants affected their interaction and enthusiasm towards participation. For example, the younger participants were more interactive and motivated to participate and to give more details.

In order to improve the quality of the selected sample, the researcher selected different types of participants that reflected varied nationalities, positions, genders, backgrounds, ages and specializations. That variety enriched the quality of data and findings. Also it enabled the researcher to come up with different opinions and perceptions about the studied phenomena.

7. Conclusion

Although many quantitative researchers consider the qualitative approach as “unreliable” and “inaccurate”, conducting qualitative research enabled the researcher to demonstrate intensive accurate data about participants’ perceptions, feelings, experiences, and values in a real life context.

The researcher successfully compared the effectiveness of using quantitative and qualitative research methods, and clearly identified limitations herein. For instance, the researcher noticed that collecting data using questionnaires was less effective than using the qualitative methods. In addition, the researcher managed to identify practical solutions and techniques that could improve the quality and the effectiveness of qualitative research in the UAE.

In short, conducting a qualitative case study was a challenging mission that demanded considerable time and effort. However, it was a valid experience that opened new horizons towards people's experiences, the complex realities and the challenge of managing crises. The qualitative researcher is a navigator who accepts challenges in order to discover new horizons and dimensions. Effective qualitative research enables the interviewees to disclose the mirror of the reality as well as their perceptions and visions of the future (Dumay, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences and associated challenges, that face students conducting research. Although this study was conducted in the UAE, and indeed reveals some regionally specific factors, it is of value and relevance to the wider community. The researchers set out to write a paper on the challenges on conducting academic research and, perhaps not unsurprisingly, encountered difficulties in obtaining data. The initial questionnaire approach was typically challenging and the process was extended in order to ensure a sufficient level of responses. "Higher response rates lead to larger data samples and statistical power as well as smaller confidence intervals around sample statistics". (Baruch and Holtom 2008, 1140). This approach was time consuming and resource heavy but necessary to provide a foundation for subsequent discussion.

In an emerging research culture, such as the UAE, students and academics face issues surrounding data dissemination and fundamental understanding of the value, purpose and

role of research. While these challenges may be more relevant to the environment and climate, the response and research design necessary, is applicable across borders. Institutions can provide support and training to increase awareness of the challenges and possible responses students, will both encounter and adopt. The authors have demonstrated that conducting research in this context is both feasible and of great value and have provided practical solutions to approaching, managing and completing a successful research project.

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