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POLICY PAPER · EPIC-PP-2026-027

Beyond the Classroom

Education, Skills and Learning Outcomes in the UAE

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October 2026

Beyond the Classroom: Education, Skills and Learning Outcomes in the UAE

Access has been won; the test now is what students learn and how well it prepares them for work

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates has achieved near-universal access to secondary education and rapidly rising participation in higher education. UNESCO data published by the World Bank put the gross tertiary enrolment ratio at about 64 per cent in 2024, up from about 53 per cent in 2018, with women enrolling at a markedly higher rate than men. This paper examines whether learning outcomes have kept pace with access, drawing on OECD PISA results, UNESCO and International Labour Organization (ILO) data published by the World Bank, federal legislation and official announcements. It finds that outcomes lag access. In PISA 2022, UAE students scored 431 in mathematics, 417 in reading and 432 in science, below the OECD averages of 472, 476 and 485; the OECD judged results to be about the same as in 2018 in mathematics and science, and lower in reading. Public spending on education was about 3.9 per cent of GDP and about 14.8 per cent of government expenditure in 2021. The state has responded with a run of reforms: a compulsory education law in force since January 2023, optional standardised university entry testing from 2023 to 2024, a restructuring of education ministries in July 2024 and a mandatory artificial intelligence subject in government schools from 2025 to 2026. The paper identifies the main gaps as learning quality, the gender gap in male participation in higher education, and the limited public data linking qualifications to employment. It closes with recommendations.

Keywords: UAE; education; skills; PISA; learning outcomes; tertiary enrolment; compulsory education; education spending; school inspection; youth employment

1. Introduction

For two decades the central education challenge in the UAE was access: building enough schools and universities for a fast-growing population. That challenge has largely been met. The question now is quality, meaning what students learn and whether it prepares them for an economy that the state wants to be driven by knowledge and technology. This paper asks how far the UAE has moved from access to quality and what the evidence shows.

Section 2 reviews access. Section 3 examines learning outcomes. Section 4 covers spending. Section 5 traces recent reforms. Section 6 looks at the transition to work, Section 7 identifies gaps, and Section 8 sets out recommendations.

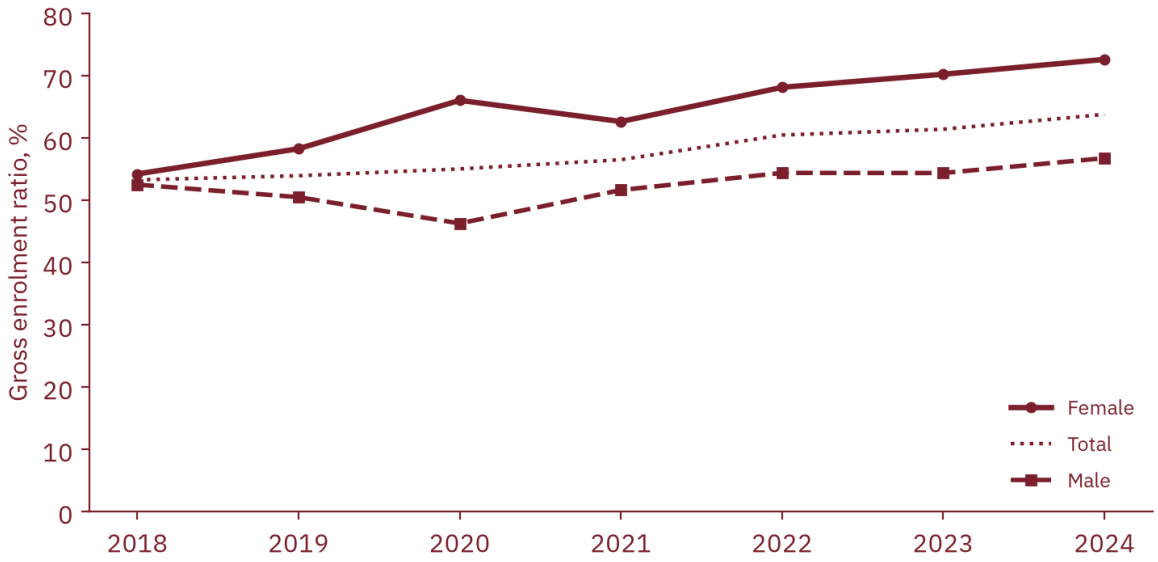
2. Access

UNESCO data published by the World Bank put the gross secondary enrolment ratio at about 102 per cent in 2024, consistent with near-universal participation (gross ratios can exceed 100 per cent because they include students outside the official age group). The gross tertiary enrolment ratio rose from about 53 per cent in 2018 to about 64 per cent in 2024 (Figure 1).

The rise has been driven by women. The female tertiary ratio rose from about 54 to about 73 per cent between 2018 and 2024, while the male ratio rose from about 52 to about 57 per cent. In 2024 the female ratio was about 16 percentage points higher than the male ratio.

Federal Decree-Law No. 39 of 2022 on Compulsory Education, in force since 2 January 2023, makes education compulsory for UAE citizens from primary school until the completion of their schooling and for expatriate residents until the end of the primary stage, according to the official government portal.

Figure 1. Gross tertiary enrolment ratio by sex, UAE, 2018–2024



Source: World Bank, WDI (UNESCO UIS): SE.TER.ENRR, SE.TER.ENRR.FE, SE.TER.ENRR.MA, retrieved 25 Oct 2026
Chart: EPIC: Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre

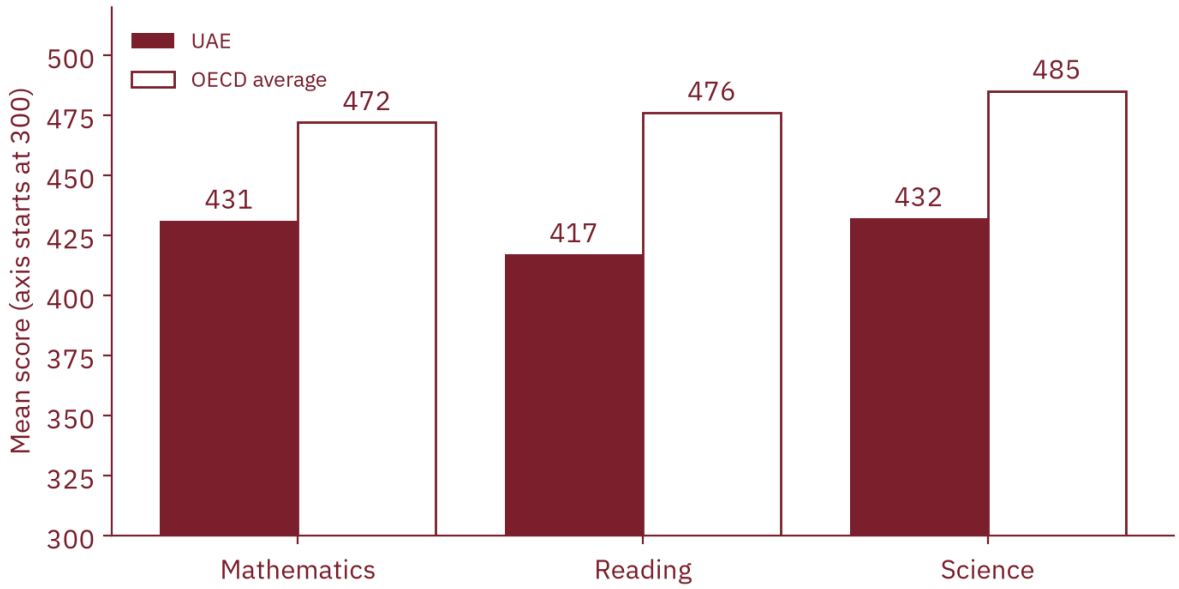
3. Learning outcomes

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests 15-year-olds in mathematics, reading and science. In PISA 2022, UAE students scored 431 in mathematics, 417 in reading and 432 in science. The corresponding OECD averages were 472, 476 and 485, so UAE scores were between 41 and 59 points below (Figure 2). The OECD's country note judges average results to have been about the same as in 2018 in mathematics and science and lower in reading, where scores were below those of any previous PISA round in the UAE. Only 51 per cent of UAE students reached the baseline proficiency level (Level 2) in mathematics, against an OECD average of 69 per cent, and 52 per cent did so in reading, against 74 per cent. Girls

outperformed boys by 7 points in mathematics and 45 points in reading. The OECD reported that UAE data met PISA technical standards.

Within the private school system, inspection gives a second view. Following its 2023 to 2024 inspection cycle, Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) reported that 81 per cent of Dubai students attend private schools rated good or better. Inspection ratings measure school quality against a local framework and are not directly comparable with PISA scores.

Figure 2. PISA 2022 mean scores, UAE and OECD average

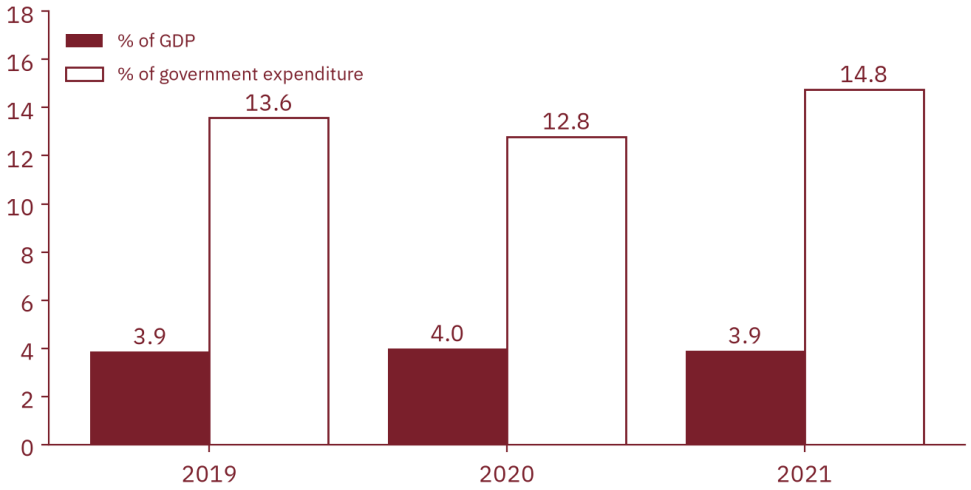


Source: OECD, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), 2023: mean scores, United Arab Emirates and OECD average
Chart: EPIC: Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre

4. Spending

UNESCO data published by the World Bank show public expenditure on education at 3.86 per cent of GDP in 2019, 3.98 per cent in 2020 and 3.89 per cent in 2021, the latest year available (Figure 3). As a share of total government expenditure it was 13.6 per cent in 2019, 12.8 per cent in 2020 and 14.8 per cent in 2021. The series covers only three years, and no later official figure was found in the same series, so trends should not be inferred from it.

Figure 3. Public expenditure on education, UAE, 2019–2021



Source: World Bank, WDI (UNESCO UIS): SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS, SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS, retrieved 25 Oct 2026; no values published before 2019 or after 2021
Chart: EPIC: Emirati Perspectives and Insight Centre

5. Reforms

University admission. In February 2023 the Ministry of Education made the Emirates Standardised Test (EmSAT) optional for university admission from the 2023 to 2024 academic year, allowing institutions to use other approved assessments and set their own thresholds.

Ministerial restructuring. In July 2024 the federal government restructured education. The Emirates Schools Establishment and the Federal Authority for Early Childhood Education were merged into the Ministry of Education, which now covers early childhood to secondary education, and a separate Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research was established. A new Quality of Education Centre was given responsibility for measuring student performance and the quality of educational outcomes in public and private institutions and for publishing reports. A General Secretariat was tasked with building educational data infrastructure linked to employment and labour market data.

Artificial intelligence in schools. In May 2025 the government announced that artificial intelligence would be taught as a subject in government schools from kindergarten to Grade 12 from the 2025 to 2026 academic year, supported by a national AI literacy curriculum framework.

6. From school to work

ILO modelled estimates published by the World Bank put youth unemployment (ages 15 to 24) at about 6.4 per cent in 2024, after a peak of about 13.5 per cent in 2020. Female labour force participation was about 53 per cent in 2024 on the same source. These are whole-population estimates covering both nationals and migrants, so they say little about how well UAE graduates in particular move into work. No official series linking qualifications to employment outcomes for graduates was found.

7. Gaps

Learning quality. The gap between UAE and OECD average PISA scores of 41 to 59 points is large, about half of students fall below baseline proficiency in mathematics and reading, and reading results declined between 2018 and 2022.

Male participation. The 16-point gap between female and male tertiary enrolment, together with boys' weaker PISA reading results, points to male disengagement from education.

Data on outcomes. There is no regular public data on graduate employment by field and institution, which makes it difficult for students to choose and for policymakers to judge programmes.

Spending data. The public spending series stops in 2021.

8. Recommendations

1. **Make learning outcomes the headline target.** Set public targets for PISA and national assessment results, broken down by school sector, and have the Quality of Education Centre publish progress annually.
2. **Address male disengagement.** Commission research into why young men are less likely to enrol in higher education and pilot targeted pathways, including technical and applied programmes.
3. **Publish graduate outcome data.** Report employment and earnings of graduates by institution and field of study, using the data infrastructure the 2024 restructuring assigned to the Council's General Secretariat.
4. **Update spending statistics.** Report education expenditure to international databases annually.
5. **Evaluate the reforms.** Publish independent evaluations of the 2024 restructuring and the AI curriculum after their first full cycles.

9. Conclusion

The UAE has largely solved the problem of access. Secondary participation is near universal and nearly two-thirds of the relevant age group enters higher education. The harder problem is learning quality, where PISA results show a substantial gap with OECD averages. The recent reforms point in the right direction, but their success will need to be shown in student results and graduate outcomes, measured and published.

About this paper

This paper was prepared by the EPIC Research Team as part of the daily papers programme. All figures were verified against the sources listed below on 25 October 2026. Claims that could not be verified were removed. See the accompanying sources and verification notes.

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