

**CURTIN UNIVERSITY  
ETHICS, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**CULTURAL AWARENESS**

**UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**



## **CURTIN CULTURAL AWARENESS**

The cultural awareness notes in this pamphlet are meant to inform staff and students about some of the customs, traditions and etiquette in a country where Curtin University operates. Cultural awareness is about being mindful that similarities and differences exist between people; that people from different cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds may have different worldviews and sometimes dissimilar perspectives on life matters. It is also about being conscious to not assign positive or negative (better or worse) values to what may be different to one's own culture.

The notes in this pamphlet also include general information about some of the laws and regulations that govern particular behaviours in the host country. Some social norms in a host country may be significantly different from the Australian context and we need to be aware that breaking rules around these may be punishable offences. We also need to be aware that some behaviours that are considered anti-social and distasteful, but not criminal in Australia, could violate laws in other countries and be subject to severe penalties.

Curtin University acknowledges the sovereignty of nations and respects the rules and laws in the countries where we operate or have alliances. While we are confident that staff and students will live Curtin values and practise Curtin's signature behaviours, as representatives of the University, we also expect that staff and students will respect the customs and traditions of these countries and not violate their laws and regulations if residing in or visiting the countries.

It should be noted that the profile in these notes is of the dominant culture and not demonstrative of sub-cultures or individual characteristics. As features of societies change and evolve, some cultural normatives are maintained while others alter significantly. These notes should therefore be taken as a general awareness. Also, as this pamphlet provides a general overview of the customs, traditions and legislation, it is advisable to keep informed about any recent changes especially with regard to legislative reforms in the host country.

## **CURTIN DUBAI**

Curtin University's Dubai campus (Curtin Dubai) located at the Dubai International Academic City was established in April 2017 and officially opened on 10 September 2017. The Dubai International Academic City comprises several regional and international schools, colleges and universities from different parts of the world where more than 12,000 students study. The Curtin Dubai campus offers foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate courses in business, science, information technology, and humanities which are licensed by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority, Government of Dubai.

The Curtin Dubai campus provides a unique cross-cultural experience where students become part of an international network that lends social and academic support. The campus is a family-friendly institution committed to ensuring that students and staff with family responsibilities have full access to education, employment and other services. There are flexible study options and several postgraduate courses running during evenings and weekends. There are also adaptable working arrangements to help staff with family responsibilities.

With modern amenities and scenic tourist destinations, Dubai is a cosmopolitan, dynamic city that offers a wealth of experience to students and staff. Located within the Arabian Desert, Dubai is one of the seven emirates that form the country of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Dubai shares borders with Abu Dhabi in the south, Sharjah in the northeast, and the Sultanate of Oman in the southeast. It experiences a tropical desert climate that features extremely hot and humid summers; the winters are warm and short.

His Highness, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is the ruler of Dubai since 2006. Also elected in 2006 by the UAE Supreme Council, he is the Vice President of the UAE.

### **Curtin Dubai campus**



# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is an independent, federal state of seven dominions or emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al Quwain) situated in the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Historically, the UAE was formed from a group of sheikhdoms in this area that converted to Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. From 1892 until independence in 1971, the sheikhdoms were under British protection which meant that while they followed their own traditional forms of governance, Britain had responsibility for their defence and external relations.

Before the discovery of oil in the 1950s, the UAE's economy was dependent on fishing, pearl-diving, sea-faring, herding and agriculture industries. Since oil exports began in 1962, the country's society and economy have been hugely transformed and diversified significantly. Each of the emirates is named after its principal city. A key petroleum producer, Abu Dhabi is the largest and wealthiest emirate. Dubai, the second largest, has a services-based economy, well-known for its tourism, construction, telecommunications, aviation and financial services. The workforce of the UAE is mostly made up of foreign temporary workers from the Indian sub-continent, parts of the Middle East, Asia, Africa and western countries.

Although traditionally conservative, the UAE is one of the most liberal countries in the Middle East, with other cultures and beliefs generally accepted. Politically, however, it is highly authoritarian, governed through a federal, presidential, absolute monarchy. The Federal Supreme Council comprising the individual rulers of the seven states is the highest constitutional authority responsible for general federal legislation and policies. Nonetheless, the seven emirates that make up the UAE maintain a large degree of autonomy in governance. The current president of the UAE is the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the vice president is the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The UAE does not have political parties or democratic institutions.

### Socio-demographics

<b>Population</b>	The UAE has a population of approximately 9.9 million (est. 2016). Immigrants make up about 88% of the total population, according to 2015 UN data (est. 2016). Less than 20 per cent of the population are UAE citizens. Local labour shortages, in conjunction with relatively high wages and the absence of income tax have encouraged a large influx of expatriate workers to the UAE.
<b>Ethnic groups</b>	The ethnic mix comprises Emirati 11.6%, South Asian 59.4% (includes Indian 38.2%, Bangladeshi 9.5%, Pakistani 9.4%, other 2.3%), Egyptian 10.2%, Philippine 6.1%, other 12.8% (est. 2015).

Socio-demographics	
<b>Language</b>	Arabic is the official language. English, Farsi (Persian), Urdu and Hindi are also spoken. English is used widely in business and the public sector.
<b>Religion</b>	Muslim (official) 76%, Christian 9%, other (Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi, Baha'i, Druze, Sikh and Jewish) 15% (est. 2005).
<b>Time</b>	Australian WST – minus four hours.
<b>Currency</b>	Dirham. Au\$ 1= 2.79 Emirati dirham (est. July 2017).
<b>Capital city</b>	Abu Dhabi.

## THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEMS

The UAE's federal constitution provides for an allocation of powers between the federal government and the government of each emirate. Besides the Federal National Council (the legislature) and the Supreme Council of Rulers (the rulers of the seven emirates - the highest ruling authority), the constitution provides authority for the president and vice president of the union, the cabinet (Council of Ministers), and the federal judiciary.

While the emirates are subject to federal laws, they also retain the rights to administer their own internal affairs. For instance, the emirate of Dubai has independent courts (and judges) that are not a part of the UAE Federal Judicial Authority. These courts have a civil division where civil matters are dealt with, a criminal division that deals with criminal cases and a *shariah* division that deals with issues pertaining to Muslims, most of which relate to family matters such as divorce and inheritance. The federal constitution designates Islam as the official religion of all the seven emirates, but also provides freedom to exercise other faiths providing they do not conflict with public policy or Islamic moral values.

## SOCIETY, CULTURE AND ETIQUETTE

As the official religion, Islam has a huge impact on UAE culture and society; it is the basis of the way of life and lifestyles. Islam is the religion of the majority of the population who are mostly Sunni, with a large Shiite minority<sup>1</sup>. However, there is freedom of practice of other religions, worship traditions and values. The Shiva and Krishna Mandir is a temple complex in Dubai which caters for the large Hindu community and the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi is due for completion at the end of 2017. The Guru Nanak Darbar Dubai Gurudwara (Sikh temple) serves Sikhs who are mostly from Punjab in India. As part of its UAE Vision 2021, the country recently created a Ministry of Tolerance (with a female minister) and has a Charter of Tolerance, Coexistence and Peace.

General attitudes in the UAE are based on Arab, Islamic, and eastern cultural values with relaxed conduct, courtesy and consideration for others. Although modern influences are visible, the role of the family and kinship is extremely important and extended families may

<sup>1</sup> Most Muslims are of one of two denominations: Sunni (estimated to be around 85% to 90% of the global Muslim population) or Shia (estimated to be around 10%).

live together or in close proximity. The role of parents and the elderly is highly regarded and families look after their senior relatives well. It is common for unmarried adult children to live at home and for sons to settle with their parents after marriage. UAE society places a high value on women's roles as care-givers.

The modern UAE diet is highly cosmopolitan, but there are strict taboos against the consumption of pork, pork products, alcohol and meat that is not slaughtered according to the Islamic *halal* methods. Traditional dishes use a lot of meat, seafood, grain, dairy, dates and vegetables. The traditional way of eating is by using the right hand and it is customary to share meals with the family while seated on the floor. While modern households use dining table sets at mealtimes, in a traditional setting, the meal may be served on the floor where guests are expected to sit around and share food from a common platter.

There is a strong tradition of hospitality where guests are welcomed and honoured heartily. In accordance with Muslim customs and traditions, gender segregation (separation of men and women) in social and other settings is widely practised. In some households there may be separate areas for entertaining men and women. Meals might also be served separately for men and women.

It is customary to start the meal with the words *bismillah* (in the name of God), usually uttered by the host as a signal to commence eating. When a group has finished eating, praise is given to God by saying *alhamdulillah* (praise be to God). Coffee and tea may be served and incense brought round for guests to waft towards themselves with the right hand. Sometimes a bottle of perfume may be circulated for guests to rub into their hands in place of using incense. The passing of incense signifies the end of the meal, at which time it is polite for guests to leave.

Conversation may usually commence in a good-humoured tone with general talk, often about the health of the other person. Enquiries are never made into the health or well-being of female relatives, especially wives. During formal meetings, it is not necessary to participate in conversation beyond what could be described as 'small talk'. Answering general enquiries is enough until one is known better by the group or individual involved. Trying to monopolise a conversation is considered impatient and rude. Topics such as religion, politics, family affairs or women are best avoided in formal conversations. Expressing admiration for something owned by your host may result in being offered the item or something similar. It is offensive to offer alcohol or pork related items as gifts to Emirati and Muslim households.

It is discourteous to sit with the soles of the shoes exposed or pointing at a person and outstretched legs can be considered impolite. Care should be taken to not sit with one's back to people. If invited into a Muslim household, it is expected that footwear worn outside is removed and placed at the entrance in an orderly fashion unless the host asks one to keep it on. Entering and walking around with footwear within the walls of a home can be seen as disrespectful.

The right hand is used for greeting, eating and gesturing as the use of the left hand for these purposes is considered inappropriate<sup>2</sup>. The most senior person in a group takes up the position to the right of the others. As a sign of respect the most senior person in the room is greeted first. While greetings can be in English in business settings, it is not inappropriate to greet people with '*assalamu alaikum*' which means 'peace be upon you' and return the greeting with '*wa alaikum assalam*' meaning 'peace be upon you, too'. When exchanging business cards, it is best to give and receive cards with the right hand.

Respect for elders is highly valued in Emirati society and is demonstrated through courtesies such as assisting them in seating, asking them to be seated before you or asking them to commence eating before you start. Age takes precedence, even over status. Adult children are expected to care for aging parents and it is not uncommon for married children to visit their parents daily.

## DRESS AND DRESS-CODES

Modesty in dress codes for both men and women is particularly important in the Middle Eastern region in general. It is very common for Emirati women to wear traditional dress such as the *abaya* (an outer garment usually black in colour worn over normal clothes) and a scarf covering the head (*shailah*). More conservative women may wear a *niqab*, which covers the full face except for the eyes, or a *battula*, a facemask that covers the nose. Traditional clothing for men includes the white robe known as a *kandura* (also known as *thawb* or *dishdasha*) which is an ankle length garment usually white in colour, and a head covering called *ghuthra* (headscarf) tied with an *agal* (black headband). Other ethnic groups can be seen wearing traditional clothing from their regions such as the *shalwar-kameez*<sup>3</sup>, *sarees*<sup>4</sup> and also western clothing.

This is a conservative society, so revealing clothes and uncovered shoulders can be offensive. For men, formal work attire such as suits is appropriate, and for women, clothing that covers the shoulders and hems at least to the knees is suitable. It is not necessary for non-Muslim women to wear the *hijab*, or headscarf, unless visiting a religious site. Full modest dressing is required when visiting mosques (*masajid*) and women may be asked to wear an *abaya* and a *scarf*, which is usually provided for tourists visiting major religious sites. Footwear should be removed when entering mosques and proper protocols observed to not disturb those who may be praying. If clothing is deemed inappropriate, visitors may be approached by locals and asked to cover up.

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the left hand is frowned upon as it is used for washroom purposes and therefore avoided in greetings, at the dining table and gesturing.

<sup>3</sup> The *saree* is a female garment from the Indian sub-continent. Ranging from four to eight meters, it is a long wrap worn around the waist with one end draped over the shoulder. The *saree* is worn with a short blouse and over a slip leaving the midriff exposed.

<sup>4</sup> The *shalwar kameez* is also attire that originates from the Indian sub-continent. The *shalwar kameez* can be worn by both men and women, but with variations according to gender. The *kameez*, a long shirt and the *shalwar*, baggy trousers are combined to form the *shalwar kameez*.

## PUBLIC SOCIAL AND BUSINESS CONTEXTS

The call for prayer, the *adhan* is heard from mosque (*masjid*) minarets five times a day calling worshippers to prayer. Many Muslim men perform their daily prayers in the mosques. While men are encouraged to attend congregational prayers, women can do so in their homes. It is highly inappropriate to stand in front of a person performing their prayers. There are separate areas for men and women within the mosque premises. Although Muslims do not have a Sabbath day, Friday is a day for prayer similar to the Christian tradition of Sunday church services. The literal meaning of Friday (*jummah* in Arabic) is congregation. Every Friday, the congregational prayer is offered in mosques and preparations for this prayer go beyond the usual ablutions that Muslims perform before prayers.

The working week is generally from Sunday to Thursday, however some retail and businesses are open six days a week, closing on Fridays which is a day for the congregational prayer. All public offices and institutions are closed on Fridays when congregational prayer is obligatory for Muslim men. In traditional areas, small shops and businesses may close at prayer times every day. Weekends in the UAE are usually Friday and Saturday. Muslim festivals are timed according to local sightings of the phases of the moon, and each year the dates change. The timings of the months in the *Hijri* calendar<sup>5</sup> are based on the sighting of the waxing crescent moon. A new month can only begin if the crescent moon is sighted after sunset.

The appropriate form of greeting depends upon the relationship between those meeting. Acquaintances or members of the opposite sex may use personal or professional titles when addressing each other; friends and relatives use first names. Traditional Emirati greetings may involve kissing the cheeks or the nose while clasping hands. These are usually reserved for close friends, relatives or members of the same tribe. Generally, men do not touch women in greeting unless they are closely related. In cosmopolitan business contexts, though, a hand may be proffered for greeting towards a western woman by an Emirati man. In traditional settings, instead of a handshake, a nod or a gesture touching the heart signifies respectful acknowledgement of women. On meeting for the first time, it is polite to wait for an Emirati woman to extend a hand for a handshake in greeting. Embracing, kissing, holding hands or other forms of affection between the opposite sexes in public is considered offensive and may draw unnecessary attention. Affection towards children in the public however, is highly acceptable.

In business situations, it may take some time before the topic of conversation is directed to the main reason for meeting. The process of reaching a point should not be hurried. Learning a few common words of Arabic, particularly greetings and farewells, can assist in building trust in business relationships. Care should be taken in the use of Australian colloquialisms as they may be difficult to understand, and may even appear offensive.

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<sup>5</sup> The Islamic Hijri calendar is a lunar calendar.



An invitation to dinner at a restaurant is a common form of hospitality extended by a host. Customarily only men may attend such a function, although a separate function for women may be organised to coincide with the event. It is accepted that western women may be involved in some official functions as part of a larger delegation. Emirati women, unless a part of the business group, may not usually be present at official events or meetings. When an invitation is extended, the host is expected to pay and it may be considered offensive if a guest offers to do so.

The best advice if you are not sure on what to do is to observe the behaviour of others around you, or to ask discreet questions about suitable etiquette around the above practices.

## **DAYS AND TIMES OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

**Shaikh Zayed's Ascendancy** – The ascendancy of Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan is celebrated on 6 August. Shaikh Zayed, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and the first president of the UAE (for almost 33 years - 1971–2004), was the main force behind the formation of the UAE.

**UAE National Day** - *Yaum ul Watani* is celebrated on 2<sup>nd</sup> December to mark the union between the emirates.

**Ramadan** – the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar is part of the five pillars of the Islamic faith observed each year depending on the sighting of the moon. Considered a holy month, Muslims do not consume food or drinks between the *fajr* (the dawn prayer) and *maghrib* (the sunset prayer).

**Isra wal miraj** – Marks the Prophet Mohammed's night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem during a single night. He is said to have then ascended to heaven to communicate with God on this night.

**Eid ul Fitr** - Marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadhan.

**Day of Arafat** - Marks the day of the *Hajj* pilgrimage when Muslims gather at the hillside of Arafat, where Prophet Mohammed is said to have delivered his last sermon. One of the five pillars of Islam, the *Hajj* is an annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah that Muslims must perform at least once in their lifetime, if they have the means to do so. The day after *Arafat* is the day of *Eid ul Adha*.

**Eid ul Adha** – Marks the festival of the sacrifice. On the day Muslims sacrifice animals and distribute meat to the needy to commemorate the Prophet Ibrahim's (Abraham) faith in God tested by asking him to sacrifice his son.

**1<sup>st</sup> of Muharram** – The first day of the *Hijri* lunar calendar (Islamic calendar). Muharram is the first month of the *Hijri* calendar.

**Prophet Mohammed's birthday** – Most Muslims mark the birthday of the founder of their religion on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the month of *Rabi ul awal* (the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the Islamic calendar). The Prophet was born in 570 AD in the city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia.

**Commemoration Day** – 30<sup>th</sup> November is a commemoration day to honour those who have fallen in the line of duty for the UAE.

## **CONDUCT SUBJECT TO LEGAL PENALTIES**

**Sex outside of marriage and sexual assault:** All sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is illegal in the UAE and carries penalties of confinement. De facto relationships and civil unions whether with the opposite or same sex are not recognised in the UAE. Therefore sexual acts within these relationships are considered to be sex outside of marriage and adulterous. Only marriage between a male and female is recognised.

Rather than be considered a victim of crime, sexual assault victims may face criminal persecution as the onus falls on the victim to prove the case. It is highly recommended that victims of sexual assault (particularly women) contact the Australian Embassy to obtain guidance on available support as sexual assault may be treated as sex outside of marriage and assault victims may face criminal prosecution. Individuals should also avoid public displays of affection to avoid strict laws around moral decency.

**LGBTIQ+ issues:** Homosexual acts are illegal and may lead to harsh punishment, including imprisonment, fines and deportation. Both civil and *shariah* law criminalize homosexual activity in the UAE. As reported by a United States human rights report in 2011, while there is a death penalty punishment for individuals who engage in consensual homosexual activity under *shariah*, there were no prosecutions for such activity during that year. Persons engaging in homosexual activity were subjected to psychological treatment as it is considered a behavioural abnormality in this region. Cross-dressing is also illegal and foreign residents have been reported to have been deported for this behaviour. The legal and social sanctions against LGBTIQ+ people mean that no formal LGBTIQ+ organisations or recreational clubs exist in Dubai.

**Children born outside of marriage:** Falling pregnant or giving birth to a child outside of marriage can be legally problematic. Unmarried females are recommended to avoid giving birth in Dubai as charges that sexual assault victims face, may apply. Legal problems could range from the refusal to issue a birth certificate, to arrest and imprisonment. Registration of a child born within less than nine months of a marriage may also pose difficulties, regardless of where the conception took place.

**Drugs possession:** The UAE has a zero-tolerance policy on the trafficking and possession of illegal drugs. Penalties can include a death sentence or life imprisonment, even for small amounts. For visitors, the possession of merchandise flavoured with drug related substances (for instance as teas, liquor or lollies) can result in arrest. Some medications available over the counter or by prescription in Australia are illegal in the UAE. Visitors are advised to check on these restrictions before travelling to the country.

**Social media activities:** The UAE has very strict laws with regard to social media. The country's Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) warns on the following cybercrimes:

- Do not post other people's pictures or videos without consent. It could be a breach of privacy or copyright.
- Posts or comments that are abusive or threatening to other people can land you in court.
- Drunken photos that offend Islamic values or morals of the UAE can lead to legal trouble. Do not post pornographic or material that contains nudity.
- Do not tag anyone without consent; tagging without permission can be a breach of defamation and privacy laws, both of which can carry hefty fines and even jail time.
- The TRA warns against offending Islamic morals and values.
- People could face fines of up to Dh1 million if they spread false information.
- Users must not post content which includes hate speech, incites violence or which is threatening or contains graphic or gratuitous violence.

**Smoking and eating in Ramadhan:** Smoking in public is prohibited during the month of Ramadan and non-Muslims are expected to follow the rules of fasting. Non-Muslims can eat, drink and smoke in private; however, restaurants may not be open. Most restaurants and cafes are closed during the day until sunset when the fast is broken.

**Alcohol:** Alcohol is forbidden to Muslims. Non-Muslim residents can get a liquor license to drink alcohol at home and in licensed venues which may only be valid for the emirate it is issued in. Alcoholic drinks are served in licensed hotels and clubs, but it is a punishable offence to drink, or to be under the influence of alcohol, in public. The legal age for drinking alcohol is 18 in Abu Dhabi and 21 in Dubai and the northern Emirates. Drinking alcohol in Sharjah is illegal. Passengers in transit through the UAE under the influence of alcohol may get arrested.

**Imports:** The importation of pork products, poppy seeds and pornographic material is illegal. Videos, books and magazines containing offensive materials may be confiscated. It is illegal to carry weapons or replica weapons, including decorative spent bullet cartridges, into the UAE. Electronic cigarettes are illegal in the UAE and are likely to be confiscated on entry.

## **TRAVEL INFORMATION AND VISAS**

Up to date information on travel, safety precautions and visa requirements is available on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website Smartraveller:  
[http://smartraveller.gov.au/Countries/middle-east/Pages/united\\_arab\\_emirates.aspx](http://smartraveller.gov.au/Countries/middle-east/Pages/united_arab_emirates.aspx)

## **USEFUL CONTACTS**

### **The Embassy of the United Arab Emirates**

12 Bulwarra Close  
O'Malley ACT 2606

Telephone: (02) 6286 8802  
Email: Canberraemb.amo@mofa.gov.ae  
Website: [uae-embassy.ae/Embassies/au/](http://uae-embassy.ae/Embassies/au/)

### **Australian Embassy, Abu Dhabi**

Level 8, Al Muhairy Centre  
Zayed the First Street  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
Postal address: PO Box 32711, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
Tel: +971 2 401 7500  
Fax: +971 2 401 7501  
Email: [abudhabi.embassy@dfat.gov.au](mailto:abudhabi.embassy@dfat.gov.au)

### **Australian Consulate General - Dubai**

Level 25, Burjuman Business Tower  
Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Road  
Mankhool, Bur Dubai  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
**Postal address:** PO Box 124400, Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
**Tel:** +971 4 508 7100  
**Fax:** +971 4 355 1547  
**Email:** [consular.dubai@ustrade.gov.au](mailto:consular.dubai@ustrade.gov.au) (Consular and Passport enquiries)  
**Email:** [dubai@ustrade.gov.au](mailto:dubai@ustrade.gov.au) (Trade and Investment enquiries)

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