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Editor's Introduction: special issue on gender

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This first special issue of *LTHE* focuses on gender: how male and female gender (whether considered as an inherent or a socially constructed characteristic of a person) is involved in learning and teaching in Gulf higher education contexts. Gender is a topic which is of concern in all sectors of education throughout the world, but it is particularly hotly discussed in the Gulf context, where traditional gender norms, from clothing to behaviour to life aspirations, have been crucial to the sense of social identity. The last fifty years have brought changes, resulting in, for example, a great preponderance of female students in higher education. Traditional norms have continued in many areas (for instance in the gender segregation of state higher education in several Gulf countries), but have also evolved somewhat to accommodate new realities. As an example of this, expatriate faculty seem to be viewed in certain contexts in the Gulf within the established gender system as male or female, and in other contexts simply as teachers, regardless of gender. This state of affairs is shaped by currents in the different societies of the region and by government policies: Saudi Arabia's King Abdul Aziz University recently announced that it would accept female entrants to Engineering courses (Saudi Gazette, 2011), while Iranian universities currently appear to be excluding females from Engineering courses and males from Nursing courses (Bennett-Smith, 2012). On the other hand, gendered higher education systems are also mediated every day by interactions between faculty and students (within and outside the classroom) as well as between students and their family or peer group.

In this context, it is timely to review some current and in-depth evidence from local research which examines how these processes are playing out in the region. The evidence presented in this special issue of *LTHE* includes quantitative and qualitative data from female and male students and faculty in Gulf universities and colleges. As usual in *LTHE*, the papers consider learning and teaching in a range of subject areas: some of the papers here focus on students in General Education, Information Technology, Education or Humanities; others consider samples of students across all subject areas.

Doiron's paper presents his research on a 'gender digital divide' among UAE students: a difference in competence and confidence in using information and communication technology. Doiron presents survey data from a national students of both genders studying in various subject areas, and identifies areas of IT use where one group or the other perceives themselves as being less skilled. The findings have important implications for educators seeking to provide equal opportunities in the developing knowledge society.

Hudson's research takes quite a different approach to gender, studying the perceptions by Western expatriate faculty of the role which gender plays in Gulf contexts of which they have extensive experience. This study reveals insights not only into student issues, but also into how Western expatriate faculty view these issues, in the light of their own socio-cultural background as well as in response to their experience in a teaching context which is always, to some extent, foreign to them. Hudson's analysis of actual classroom experiences narrated by expatriates shows how these Western educators represent gender relations to themselves, and how they try to engage with students (in adaptive or challenging ways) in negotiating norms for gender relations in the modern UAE.

Thomas, Raynor and Al-Marzooqi use a mixed methods approach to analyze a large sample of student achievement data from one institution. They compare university GPA scores for male and female students, as well as for married and unmarried students, and analyze these statistically to search for patterns in achievement. They then also draw on interviews with married students of both genders to provide a deeper insight into how gender can influence academic outcomes. As well as supporting previous findings that female students show higher achievement than males, the data also illuminates the perceived challenges and benefits which married life brings to UAE nationals of both genders. This paper highlights the fact that gender is not simply a matter of being male or female: one's gender brings a whole range of associated social expectations which are specific to the local community and so will vary between countries and between different sections of society, as well as changing over time.

Dickson's and Le Roux's research extends some of the issues from Thomas et al.'s study, in looking at a particular area in which male Emiratis are underrepresented. The authors study a fairly small cohort of male students who may well, on graduation, come to constitute 10% of UAE national males in their profession: primary school teaching. Dickson and Le Roux discuss the risks for UAE society of this state of affairs, and use interview data to explore the challenges faced by male Emiratis considering a career in education, as well as their suggestions for attracting more applicants and increasing student retention. Their findings show how discourses around the male role in the family and in society can work over a period of years to influence choices of major and career (cf. Gallacher et al., 2010). Their discussion of the implications of their findings is particularly interesting as they are able to suggest some realistic and locally appropriate strategies to deal with what seems at first sight a discouraging situation in this area of higher education.

Ibrahim's paper tackles the question of how gender issues, specifically those related to women, can find a place in the curriculum. Writing from experience of establishing a Women's Studies department in the GCC's neighbour country, Jordan, and drawing on scholarship in feminism and Islam, she outlines the issues which are most pressing, the progress which has been made in formulating and discussing these issues among Muslims in the West and in the Arab world, and strategies which may be adopted in the Gulf context to establish the academic credibility and social legitimacy of such a programme.

Mabura's reflection provides one faculty member's account of how gender issues may be explored through students' reading and discussion, and how students in one Western and one Gulf setting have responded to these issues. Discussing her teaching with the stories and novels of a transnational writer, Leila Aboulela, in classes in the US and in the UAE, she shows how these two groups of students, and the various individuals within them, find elements to relate to in what they read, while their responses also show the influence of their varying cultural, religious and social backgrounds.

I would like to thank the reviewers for this issue, who included Omnia Amin, Marion Engin, Liz Faiier, Felix Grant, Mira Al-Hussein, Sabrina Joseph, Janet Martin, Berrington Ntombela, Ingrid Piller, Derik Smith and Kenneth Zuercher. Their awareness of conceptual, methodological and cultural issues and their insightful comments and suggestions helped the authors to refine their papers and maintain the level of rigour and academic currency for which *LTHE* has become known.

LTHE is now listed in an increasing number of academic databases including [UlrichsWeb](#) and [Google Scholar](#). We welcome registrations and submissions for *LTHE* at any time via our website (<http://lthe.zu.ac.ae>); submissions (articles, reflections and reviews) come from educators across the range of academic disciplines, and may deal with any aspect of learning and/or teaching in universities or colleges in the Gulf region. As announced previously, we are planning further special issues of *LTHE*, as well as general issues showing the range of scholarship in this area in the Gulf. Submissions for general issues are welcome at all times, and the next general issue will be published in Spring 2013. All

papers submitted to *LTHE* should include evidence from Gulf further education contexts: please see full guidelines on our website, then register as an Author and submit your paper through the website.

In Fall 2013 we will be publishing a special issue on the use of new technologies to support student learning aims, with a focus on mobile/ubiquitous learning. Expressions of interest for the special issues, including an outline of the planned paper, should be [emailed to the Editor](#) with the subject line *LTHE special issues* followed by a keyword (in bold below). The topics currently planned for special issues are:

- the use of new **technologies** (e.g. social media, multimedia), with a focus on mobile/ubiquitous learning. (Deadline for submissions: end of September 2012).
- **assessment** of learning or teaching in courses/programmes in the Gulf: which factors influence assessment, and what benefits for learners, teachers and others can be observed when using new assessment methods?
- **interdisciplinary** initiatives in teaching and learning support. How can perspectives from different subject disciplines be integrated to provide deeper learning experiences for students?

In addition to the above, we welcome proposals by academics in the Gulf region to guest edit special issues on other topics of their choice. For further information about any of the above, please [email the LTHE Editor](#).

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