



Teaching in the UAE: Advantages and Challenges From the Perspective of Irish Transnational Teachers

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Executive Summary

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has prioritized building a strong and effective K12- education system, investing significantly in both public and private sectors to meet the demands of its diverse population. With a small population of Emirati citizens and a large expatriate community, the UAE relies heavily on transnational educators to staff its schools, particularly in the private sector. This policy paper examines the experiences of Irish expatriate teachers in the UAE, with a focus on Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), to better understand the interplay of opportunities and challenges they encounter.

Irish teachers, drawn by competitive salaries, career advancement prospects, and lifestyle benefits, represent approximately %10 of the UAE's international teaching workforce (Ministry of Education, 2024; Ryan, 2019). However, their experiences also reveal systemic pressures, including job insecurity, administrative burdens, and cultural adaptation challenges. By analyzing these dynamics, this paper aims to inform policies that enhance job satisfaction and retention while leveraging the UAE's strengths as a destination for global educators.

Background

The last two decades have seen public education in the UAE increasingly shift towards English-medium education, resulting in a substantial rise in the employment of anglophone teachers, across all levels of the education sector (Gallagher, 2019). Teachers classified as “native English speakers” are in particularly high demand, with this category typically including nationals from Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and Ireland (Hopkins et al., 2018). In addition to teachers working in public schools

that follow the curriculum of the Ministry of Education, the UAE also presents many opportunities for teachers to be employed by international schools, which follow a diverse range of curricula. The UAE's English-medium schools drive significant demand for qualified English-speaking educators. Teachers from around the world, including those from Ireland, are drawn to opportunities in the UAE—particularly in emirates like RAK—as part of a growing cohort of self-initiated expatriates and global middle-class professionals pursuing international careers (Soong & Stahl, 2021).

Thirty years ago, Gardner (1995) wrote about the challenges and affordances of recruiting quality teachers internationally within the context of the typical short-term employment contracts for expatriate teachers offered in the UAE. Today, the context remains largely unchanged, with residency rights for the majority of expatriates in the UAE still tied to three-year renewable employment visas (GDFRAD, 2021). This policy fosters a sense of transience and impermanence for all non-national residents (Elsheshtaway, 2021), although it is worth noting that longer-term 10-year visas are now available to certain residents who meet specific criteria (Gallagher, 2024).

Limited research has been conducted on the experiences of expatriate teachers working in the UAE, particularly those from Ireland. Existing studies highlight significant challenges for expatriate teachers, such as feelings of being undervalued by parents and school leadership, as well as exclusion from decision-making processes that directly affect their classrooms (Mohammad & Borkoski, 2024; Kippels & Ridge, 2019). Such challenges may contribute to the high turnover rates among expatriate teachers in the UAE (Herrera & Proff, 2022).

The global mobility of teachers has significant implications for both their home and host countries, particularly in contexts where teacher supply is a concern. According to a 2019 survey by the Embassy of Ireland in the UAE, there are an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 Irish teachers working in the UAE (Ryan, 2019). However, reliable data on this population remains scarce, and academic literature on the experiences of Irish teachers in the region is limited (Moriarty et al., 2019). Much of the available information comes from informal sources, such as newspaper articles and social media. For instance, a 2019 article in a prominent Irish newspaper reported that many Irish teachers attending a meeting with Ireland's Minister for Education expressed no immediate plans to return home, citing concerns about financial security and the high cost of living in Ireland (Ryan, 2019).

Moreover, Irish newspapers have reported that teacher supply is a major challenge for schools in Ireland (O'Brien, 2019), amounting to "a teacher supply crisis" due, in part, to easier access to teaching positions overseas (Harford & Fleming, 2023, p. 1).

The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. What factors do Irish expatriate primary school teachers perceive as advantages to teaching in the UAE, particularly RAK?
2. What factors do Irish expatriate primary school teachers perceive as challenges to teaching in the UAE, particularly RAK?

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach, combining interviews and surveys to gather comprehensive data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups: Irish teachers currently working in the UAE and those who had returned to Ireland after teaching in the UAE. Participants were recruited through social media platforms and personal contacts. A research assistant carried out all interviews using video conferencing software to ensure consistency and accessibility.

Building on the initial findings from the interviews, a primarily quantitative survey was developed to capture perspectives from a broader audience. The survey was disseminated widely through social media, teachers' magazines in both the UAE and Ireland, and WhatsApp groups within teacher networks. It included a variety of question formats, such as Likert-scale, slider scale, and ranking-style questions, to capture diverse responses. The survey was administered using Qualtrics software to streamline data collection and analysis.

The interview questions were designed around key themes aligned with the research objectives. After the first ten interviews were completed and preliminary findings began to emerge, the survey instrument was crafted to further explore and validate these insights. This sequential approach ensured that the survey was informed by the qualitative data, allowing for a more nuanced and targeted investigation.

Participants

Twenty participants agreed to participate in the interviews, 17 of whom were still in the UAE; three had returned to Ireland. Of the participants, seven were currently working in Abu Dhabi, one was working in Al

Ain, and five were working in Dubai. Four were working in Ras Al Khaimah, while three had returned to Ireland having worked in Abu Dhabi (1), Dubai (1) and RAK (1). Seven were male and 13 were female, and they indicated working in or having worked in both government and private schools.

123 participants responded to the survey, but not all respondents responded to all questions. 78.3% (out of 106 responses) indicated that they were still working in the UAE. Of those, 67 participants indicated in which emirate they were currently working. The majority of these respondents were based in RAK, with 43.28% of respondents. This was followed by Dubai (32.84%), Abu Dhabi, (16.42%), Sharjah and Ajman. Of 108 respondents, 76.85% were female and 23.15% were male.

Ethical considerations

This study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human participants and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (RP-312-2024). Before the interviews began, the purpose and procedures of the study were clearly explained to participants, who then provided written informed consent. Similarly, survey participants indicated their consent by clicking the survey link, acknowledging their willingness to participate. To ensure confidentiality, all data collected from both the interviews and surveys were anonymized. This means that no personal information is included in the results or discussions. Additionally, any computer files containing identifiable details were encrypted to safeguard participant privacy.

Data analysis

The interviews were prepared for analysis by being transcribed using Translingua, a software program designed for this purpose. The transcribed data were then examined through an iterative process of thematic analysis. During this analysis, codes were assigned to specific segments of the data, such as phrases and sentences, which were subsequently organized into broader themes. The following themes emerged from this process:

Set 1 (occurring very frequently) – Motivations (Pull Factors towards the UAE)

- motivations for coming to the UAE (lifestyle standards, financial reward/ freedom, change, wanderlust (travel/ adventure), career opportunities)
- motivations for staying in the UAE (opportunities for growth and career development, interpersonal connections and diversity, lifestyle)

Set 2 (occurring less frequently) – Irish connections (Push factors back to Ireland)

- what was missed about Ireland from a personal perspective (interpersonal connections, events and occasions)
- what was missed about Ireland from a professional perspective (autonomy in employment, community)

Set 3 (occurring infrequently) – Similarities and differences

- similarities between teaching in both contexts (national identity, pedagogy)
- differences between teaching in both contexts (administrative workload, student profiles)

Participants also reflected on how their teaching practices, skills, and attitudes toward teaching evolved—or remained consistent—across different contexts. While the study uncovered a wide range of insights, this policy paper focuses on the most significant benefits and challenges identified through the iterative thematic analysis. Below, these findings are presented and illustrated with quotations from some of the most representative participant responses. The survey data were systematically collated and cleaned to ensure accuracy, enabling the generation of descriptive statistics for each question using spreadsheet software. Where relevant, findings from the survey data are reported below to corroborate and complement the insights derived from the interviews, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes.

Findings

Advantages of Teaching in the UAE

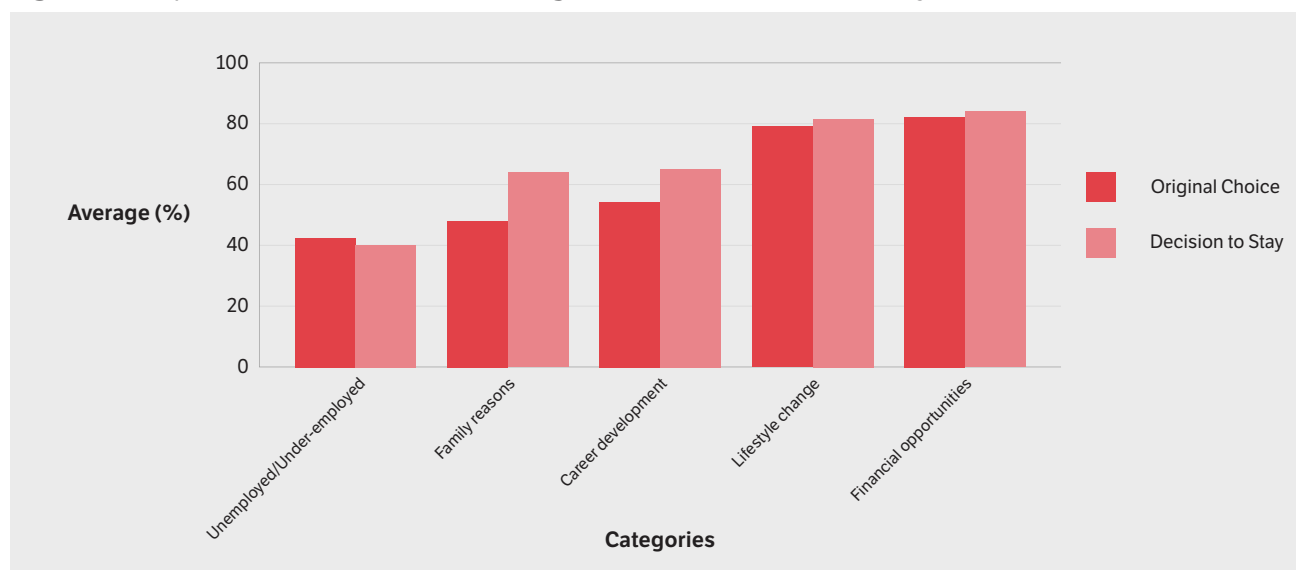
Participants reported the main advantages of teaching in the UAE to include economic and lifestyle factors, and career opportunities. In the survey, participants were asked to rate the importance of five factors influencing their initial decision to work in the UAE using a 0–100 slider scale. The factors included career development opportunities, financial incentives, lifestyle preferences, family considerations, underemployment/lack of employment opportunities in their home country, and an open “other” category for additional motivations. While the number of respondents for each factor varied between 31 and 63, and a further 12 opted for the “other” option, financial opportunities came out as primary, with 83 as the average score selected by participants. This was followed by lifestyle changes, which had an average score of 79.7. Career development was less

important, with an average score of 54.8, followed by family reasons with an average score of 48.6, and underemployment or unemployment with an average score of 42.7. Respondents also had an opportunity to indicate which of these factors influenced their decision to stay in the UAE, if applicable. This showed similar scores overall, with financial opportunities and lifestyle changes still the most important factors, but a small increase in career development and family reasons. This comparison is shown in Figure 1.

Economic factors

Irish expatriate teachers were primarily motivated by financial reasons to move to the UAE. The majority of participants in interviews mentioned salary or financial safety as their primary reason. Moreover, interviews revealed widespread agreement that the cost of living on a teacher’s salary in Ireland, particularly in relation to rental accommodation, had become untenable. For example, Participant 5 said that they were “paying most of my wages on rent. The things that I wanted to do, like

Figure 1. Comparison of factors in teachers’ original choice and decision to stay in the UAE



I couldn’t afford to do, I just kind of felt like I was working to pay rent.” Participant 7 referred to the relatively good salaries associated with working in the UAE, when they said, “When I saw the money, I was like, I can’t turn this down. I intended to come for only two years [...] And that didn’t happen.” Participant 14 noted the appeal of the overall salary package: “And then of course, attractive salary packages and benefits with healthcare and annual flights, all of that in one bundle is definitely, was an appeal to myself.”

Economic factors were further supported by the survey results. Participants consistently highlighted financial opportunities as a significant factor influencing both their initial decision to work in the UAE and their choice to remain there. This trend was consistent across all age groups and genders, as indicated by their responses.

Lifestyle factors

Many participants also said that they experienced an improved standard of living in the UAE overall, from

healthcare to travel. For example, Participant 3 stated that:

I love Dubai. Yeah, I think I've got a better standard of living. I'm being paid much more. I have more opportunities here for, even within my job, more opportunities for growth, for development, opportunities for progression ... we have a very good standard of living here.

Participants felt motivated to come to the UAE because they believed that they would experience positive changes by moving here. Participant 11 stated that they “always had an interest in the Middle East”, so that when given the opportunity to pursue life changes, they were very open to coming to the region. Participants 2 and 3 highlighted the appeal of the UAE's warm winters, which they found to be a welcome contrast to Ireland's cool, damp climate. This sentiment was reinforced by the survey data, which strongly indicated that lifestyle factors played a significant role in both their initial decision to work in the UAE and their choice to remain there.

Career opportunities

Many participants emphasized the professional growth they experienced after relocating to the UAE. For instance, Participant 9 shared, “I moved up the professional ladder in the UAE [...] I was a middle leader for eight years, and then I had done my senior leadership qualifications.” This theme of career advancement was a recurring point in the interviews, underscoring the UAE's appeal as a place for professional development. Participant 4 also stated that “you've got so many opportunities for development and sort of promotions as well and different challenges, so I just have been developing the whole time.” Participant 3 agreed in saying that “I have more opportunities here for, even within my job, more opportunities for growth, for development, opportunities for progression.” Participant 20 agreed when she said that “I think what's kept me is there's fantastic professional development opportunities here. I've been really lucky. I've been really well supported in both of the schools that I've worked in to progress and to develop and to go on Continuous Professional Development.”

A small number of teachers reported experiencing heavy workloads in Ireland while also feeling stalled

in their career progression. Participant 1, for example, cited this combination as her primary motivation for initially seeking employment in the UAE. She said, “And I was dedicating a lot of time outside of school and not progressing anywhere in my career [...] So originally, yeah, it was for career progression.”

Challenges of Teaching in the UAE

Irish teachers in the UAE reported several key challenges, including high levels of job stress stemming from administrative demands and performance pressures, difficulties in navigating cultural differences, struggles with work-life balance, and concerns about job security.

Administrative burden

Teachers who had worked in other countries prior to the UAE consistently highlighted the heightened administrative and organizational demands of teaching in the UAE compared to Ireland or other international contexts. A recurring theme was the intensity of daily tasks, particularly around lesson planning and documentation. Participant 5 emphasized, “there is a lot more planning and there's a lot more like meetings and there's a lot more admin,” while Participant 18 noted, “I think like the planning over here is very intense in comparison to home.” Participant 9 succinctly summarized the experience: “Loads and loads of admin, paperwork, and longer days.” These accounts underscore the systemic pressure for meticulous preparation and compliance within UAE schools, which many described as far exceeding expectations in their previous roles.

Performance expectations

School inspections and classroom observations in the UAE are frequent and rigorous, a practice that several participants identified as a significant source of stress. For example, Participant 6 described the pressure poignantly:

I worked through the night sometimes, like for if inspections were coming up Every time there was an inspection, I stayed up most nights just preparing things, laminating things, you know, writing up plans, trying to do everything that I thought I was supposed to have done and still not feeling like I had it all done.

Participant 1 mentioned, “Everyone’s trying to one-up each other at times when it comes to inspections or, and not just between teacher to teacher, but even school to school, area to area”. Similarly, Participant 16 states, “I think the biggest challenge for me teaching wise has been dealing with the inspections. The inspection framework here is very different to the inspection framework I’ve been used to and it’s also much more regular, so we’re inspected annually.”

Participant 13 also mentioned, “So I think definitely that’s probably one of the big disadvantages, you know, that for a school principal or even for a teacher is all that sort of accountability that you have.” A number of respondents alluded to a feeling of working in a customer service role rather than within the craft of teaching, as they felt they were being expected to deliver a product and especially align with parental expectations.

Cultural Understandings

A small number of participants highlighted the challenges of adapting to cultural differences in UAE society, particularly as they influenced classroom dynamics. For instance, Participant 8 noted that these cultural differences significantly impacted teaching practices and added pressure to teacher-parent relationships. They saw culture shock as “probably one of the biggest barriers” to teaching in the UAE, as it can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Participants 3, 11, and 16 recognized that cultural adaptation is an important aspect of growth for transnational teachers. For example, Participant 16 said that for teachers new to the country, “lack of understanding of the culture is probably one of the biggest barriers”. Participant 18 highlighted the importance of passing on information about suitable or unsuitable learning activities to new teachers. They stated, “even things like new teachers starting this year. Over the past year I have learned things that you can’t say, or you can’t do or whatever. You remember it when you see them coming in new this year and they were saying, ‘Oh, I didn’t know you couldn’t do that.’”

Work-life balance

A recurring theme in the interviews was the challenge of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Many participants described the workload in the UAE,

particularly in international schools, as significantly heavier compared to Ireland, often leading to feelings of overwhelm and burnout. Participants 3, 8, and 9 specifically noted that the demands of the job made work-life balance difficult to manage, with some expressing concerns about the risk of burnout. Participant 5 reflected on this tension, stating, “I think the workload and the length of the day... I know all my posts on Instagram look glamorous, and it seems like I’m having a great time, but the work is hard. You do work hard, play hard, I think.”

Additionally, Participant 16 highlighted the added stress of adjusting to life in a new country, which further complicated work-life balance. She explained, “The bureaucracy around the move here was very time-consuming. My school, for example, didn’t offer teacher accommodation, they provided a housing allowance instead. This meant my partner and I had to find our own place. We spent our first month in a small hotel room, juggling the demands of new jobs while also trying to navigate the housing market and find somewhere to live. It was a challenging start.”

Security of employment

Many teachers reported a lack of job stability in the UAE, primarily due to the prevalence of limited-term contracts, which stand in stark contrast to the more secure, long-term teaching positions available in Ireland. In Ireland, teachers with permanent roles are entitled to career breaks, during which their positions are protected for up to five years. This creates a significant disparity between the short-term, often precarious contracts in the UAE and the career-long security offered in Ireland. Participants frequently expressed stress over the possibility of sudden termination, with many describing feelings of insecurity. For instance, Participant 9 remarked on being made to “feel like you’re replaceable,” while Participant 2 shared that they were constantly on edge, fearing the loss of their job at any moment.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations aim to enhance job satisfaction and employment continuity for Irish expatriate teachers in the UAE while

leveraging the region's existing strengths, such as economic opportunities, lifestyle benefits, and career progression pathways. First, it would be helpful to enhance job security through longer-term contracts. As such, offering multi-year or renewable contracts to high-performing teachers to foster stability and commitment could be a key strategy. Retaining experienced staff reduces the financial and administrative costs of frequent recruitment while ensuring institutional knowledge and cultural familiarity remain intact. Schools with long-term staff benefit from smoother onboarding, reduced curriculum-related training needs, and stronger teacher-parent relationships built on trust.

Reducing workloads and increasing teacher autonomy is also key. Streamlining administrative tasks by hiring more staff for these tasks and limiting non-teaching responsibilities to alleviate job stress would aid teachers. Empowering teachers with greater autonomy over lesson planning and classroom decisions, which can improve job satisfaction and reduce burnout, is also a meaningful strategy. While a certain level of standardization is necessary across schools in order to implement curricula according to their philosophies and vision, effective teachers need to be free to implement their own pedagogies in accordance with the needs of their students. The workload could also be balanced by trusting experienced teachers enough to reduce the number of inspections or observations, and also the frequency and intensity of observations for those who are performing well. This shift would align workloads more closely with those in systems like Ireland's, where participants reported better work-life balance.

It would also be beneficial to strengthen pre-employment orientation. This could be done by developing comprehensive orientation programs that address practical challenges, such as navigating housing markets, understanding local bureaucracy, and adapting to cultural differences in classroom dynamics. Providing clear guidance on these issues can ease the transition for new hires and improve retention. Lastly, leveraging the UAE's existing advantages by promoting its economic incentives, career advancement opportunities, and lifestyle benefits in recruitment campaigns can be fruitful. However, these advantages should be balanced with

policies that address teachers' concerns, such as job security and workload, to create a sustainable and attractive professional environment.

Conclusion

The findings from interviews and surveys with Irish transnational teachers have shed light on both the advantages and challenges of working in the UAE. While Irish teachers widely recognize the economic benefits, lifestyle improvements, and opportunities for career advancement as significant draws, they also face notable challenges that impact their professional and personal well-being. To address these issues, targeted policy and practice adjustments should be considered. Key areas for improvement include reducing job stress, enhancing job security, increasing teacher autonomy, and providing more comprehensive pre-employment orientation. By addressing these concerns, the UAE—including emirates like Ras Al Khaimah—can foster a more supportive environment for teachers, ultimately improving retention rates and ensuring a more sustainable and fulfilling experience for educators.

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