

Relationality and Learning: Insights from Undergraduate Student Research Assistant Experiences

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Emirati undergraduate research assistants in the United Arab Emirates through journal reflections to understand their motivations, challenges, and the role of mentorship in their growth. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we explain how mentorship, relationships, and team dynamics influence identity and confidence. Findings indicate the importance of culturally responsive mentorship, inclusive environments, and leadership opportunities in fostering resilience, critical thinking, and career readiness. By embedding research assistantships and culturally aligned mentorship into university programs, institutions can create supportive environments that empower students and enhance skills, inclusivity, and academic success.

Introduction

Innovation and excellence in education are central to the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) Vision 2021, emphasizing the development of a strong research culture (United Arab Emirates Cabinet, 2024). While the culture of knowledge production is increasing, higher education institutions in the UAE have traditionally disseminated knowledge (Ryan & Daly, 2019). This is also reflected in the large number of undergraduate programs (1,636 accredited programs; Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2020). However, increasing expectations for publication have motivated faculty in the UAE to involve undergraduate-level students in research. The benefits of undergraduates engaging in research are widely acknowledged, yet how these outcomes are achieved in the UAE remains unclear.

While some universities in the UAE offer undergraduate research assistant (URA) opportunities (Khalifa University, n.d.; New York University Abu Dhabi, n.d.), no research specifically examines URA experiences in the region. Related research on Emirati undergraduate students serving as research assistants shows that relationality—a core aspect of Emirati culture—influences their academic and professional development (Patka et al., 2022). This cultural emphasis on interconnectedness shapes their engagement with faculty and peers, with the potential of fostering environments rich in collaboration and mentorship. As Emirati students evolve from learners to active participants in knowledge production as research assistants, they engage in networks that value collective growth and social responsibility. This study explores the transformative experiences of URAs through journal reflections, offering insight into the complexities of interactions within UAE higher education. In cross-cultural academic settings like the UAE, Western-educated faculty often introduce individualistic mentorship models that can clash with

local values of relationality and interconnectedness. This dissonance reflects the broader messiness of teaching and learning environments and sets the context for this study's exploration of mentorship of URAs.

Benefits and Challenges for Research Assistants

Research assistants, traditionally graduate students, have become more prevalent among undergraduates following the recommendations of the Boyer Commission in the U.S.,¹ which advocated for integrating research into the undergraduate experience as a means of enhancing learning and preparing students for future careers (McKinnon-Crowley & Voyles, 2024). However, URAs require more structured training and mentorship than graduates due to limited experience and competing academic demands (Shanahan et al., 2015).

Research—mainly in Western contexts—shows that URA roles offer academic and professional benefits, such as higher graduation rates, graduate admission success, and career clarity (Hernandez et al., 2018; Wood, 2019). URA experiences build self-efficacy, academic development, autonomy, critical thinking, and motivation (Pawlow & Meinz, 2018; van Blankenstein et al., 2018). They also build technical skills (e.g., data analysis, research methodologies, and academic writing), interpersonal competencies (e.g., teamwork, leadership, and time management [Landrum & Nelsen, 2002]), and scholarly motivation (e.g., boosts confidence and long-term academic interest [Landrum & Nelsen, 2002; Skorinko, 2019]).

Students often face challenges, such as managing repetitive tasks and balancing time commitments (King & Imai, 2023), misaligned project goals, and resource limitations, requiring careful oversight and tailored feedback (Wood, 2019). In contexts like the UAE, barriers may include language proficiency and cultural norms that inhibit student assertiveness. By addressing systemic barriers and providing holistic support, institutions can create transformative research opportunities that advance student development and institutional goals (Becker et al., 2021; Foster & Usher, 2018). Institutions should therefore establish formalized mentorship programs that provide faculty with resources and training, maximizing URA experiences (King & Imai, 2023) and implementing culturally responsive, context-aware approaches, particularly by non-Emirati and non-Arabic speaking faculty.

Furthermore, the unpredictable nature of student-led research often reflects the “messiness” of human experience as students navigate evolving interests, changing methodologies, and unforeseen challenges. The ambiguity of the URA role often leads to initial confusion when accepting the position. These difficulties can be compounded by students' limited research experience and uncertainty about academic expectations. However, defining learning outcomes can help align expectations.

Mentorship for Research Assistants

Mentorship is key to URAs' success, enhancing experiences and outcomes through intentional support (Landrum & Nelsen, 2002; Becker et al., 2021). Effective mentorships foster critical thinking, communication, and research enthusiasm by aligning tasks with individual strengths (Foster & Usher, 2018). Inclusive lab cultures boost satisfaction and productivity (Ahmed et al., 2019). However, mentors must balance training and supervision amid time constraints, ensuring students develop resilience and adaptability—skills essential in academic and professional transformation (King & Imai, 2023). In settings like the UAE, mentorship strategies must also be attuned to students' sociocultural backgrounds, recognizing how collectivist values shape motivation, collaboration, and decision-making—thereby building culturally responsive mentorship approaches and strengthening student engagement and performance.

Culture and Relationships

The interconnectedness of educational spaces, culture, and pedagogy underscores the importance of relational approaches in fostering inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments (Reynolds, 2022). Moving beyond neo-colonial models of education—models that often prioritize Western knowledge and teaching methods while marginalizing non-Western perspectives—requires embedding Indigenous wisdom, relational concepts, and cultural adaptations into educational design. In this relational framework, education is viewed as a collaborative, reciprocal process that values mutual respect and interconnectedness among students, teachers, and communities. Educators can create supportive learning environments by encouraging student leadership, strengthening community ties, and fostering meaningful student-teacher connections. These approaches challenge traditional power dynamics and promote knowledge co-construction, enhancing student participation and ensuring greater cultural relevance in the learning process.

Equally important is the role of peer relationships, bonds, team culture, and friendships in enhancing student retention, motivation, and professional development, with many students identifying social connections as the most rewarding aspect of their involvement (Rademacher, 2022). Empowering and inclusive cultures help students develop ownership, essential research skills, and social capital to support their future success. Recognition from both peers and faculty strengthens students' research identities, fostering confidence, persistence, and deeper integration into academic communities (Baker et al., 2024). Learning, therefore, is not merely an academic pursuit but also a relational process in which peer interactions play a crucial role in knowledge generation and skill development (Deuchar et al., 2024).

Teacher-student relationships are similarly critical to student success, influencing confidence, engagement, and academic performance. Relational pedagogy fosters interactive learning environments where students feel supported and valued (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). When educators demonstrate care, respect, and fairness, students are more likely to engage actively, contribute meaningfully to discussions, and take ownership of their learning, further enriching the academic experience and promoting holistic student development.

The UAE Educational Context

Higher education in the UAE has evolved alongside its growth since its founding in 1971. The first university, United Arab Emirates University, was established in 1976 (United Arab Emirates University, 2025), followed by federally funded institutions like Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University. In the early 2000s, international branch campuses emerged. Notably, the government provides free education at public institutions for all citizens (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The present study was conducted at Zayed University, federally funded and accredited by the UAE Ministry of Education and accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. During fall of 2023, the university enrolled 8,519 students, the majority female (77%) and enrolled in an undergraduate program (98%). In the fall of 2023, the university had 572 faculty members, with the majority (68.36%) holding a doctorate, and half of the faculty members were female (53.32%). Most faculty are from the United States ($n = 70$, 12.24%), United Arab Emirates ($n = 62$, 10.84%), United Kingdom ($n = 60$, 10.49%), Jordan ($n = 50$, 8.74%), and Canada ($n = 42$, 7.34%; Zayed University Fact Book, 2023).

Current study

Much of the existing research is rooted in Western contexts, which may not fully capture the experiences of URAs in other cultural settings. Expanding research globally and emphasizing localized examinations provides a more comprehensive understanding of URA benefits and challenges. This study builds on previous research identifying the benefits and challenges of being a URA. By examining the lived experiences of URAs in the UAE, we examined motivations, challenges, and experiences with mentorship to guide and inform policies to improve URA programs and create meaningful, supportive, and equitable opportunities.

Methodology

Research Context and Author Positionality

As researchers' perspectives shape qualitative findings, disclosing motivations and assumptions is essential (Dodgson, 2019). The study was a collaboration among three expatriate faculty members (two psychologists, one counselor) who are the first three authors. These faculty members recruited URAs based on professional disposition and research interests. URAs worked for a year or more, meeting weekly or bi-weekly, and trained in data collection, analysis, and literature reviews. They were paid AED 39–55 (US\$10–15) per hour through grants or on-campus employment. The fourth, fifth, and sixth authors, full-time student URAs, participated in the study and contributed to analysis and writing.

Participants

Across the three research teams, we had a total of nine URAs. All URAs voluntarily participated in this study. Seven major in Psychology, one in Social Innovation, and one in Accounting. All URAs are Muslim and Emirati. The participants were primarily female (66.66%), aged 19 to 23. Most URAs were in their third year of university, except for one in their fourth. While all URAs spoke both Arabic and English fluently, their work on research was primarily in English, and they completed all phases of this study in English. All participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Materials and Procedures

Before starting the research process, we obtained ethical clearance from Zayed University's Ethical Review Committee (Application ZU24_124_F). In December 2024, students completed four to five journals reflecting on their experiences as a URA in 2024. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

- (1) What were your motivations for working as a URA? What challenges did you experience? If you have taken a leadership part in a study, what motivated you to lead, and how was the experience?
- (2) How has working as a URA supported your education? In what ways has it helped you? Are there any ways it has hindered your coursework?
- (3) What goals do you anticipate reaching through your work as a URA? Are there any goals you have already reached?
- (4) How do you describe your experiences with the mentorship you receive? What are your expectations of the mentorship you receive?
- (5) (Optional) What else would you like to share about your experience as a URA that has not been addressed in the previous journals?

Data Analysis

The authors conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) using Braun and Clarke's (n.d.) six-phase approach with NVivo 14 (QSR International, 2023) for data organization and coding, supplemented by manual paper-based methods. We began the analysis by independently familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated readings, documenting initial thoughts and reactions. Next, we independently generated codes and collaboratively developed a codebook by discussing initial codes, merging repetitive ones, and organizing them into a hierarchy, resolving disagreements through shared interpretations. The initial codes were driven from the data and the journal questions. During our meetings, although we brought our perspectives, the process was highly collaborative, with no major disagreements; discussions served to enrich interpretations, and to identify and refine themes through iterative dialogue. Member checking was conducted to ensure accuracy and clarity of the themes; no significant changes were required.

Findings

Using reflective thematic analysis, we identified five themes: (1) Benefits and learning: “This serves me and my future”; (2) Successes and challenges: “Burning out, but I managed it”; (3) Mentor–student relationship: “I didn’t want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud”; (4) Co-learning and peers: “My new academic family but with more individuality”; and (5) Culture and belonging: “We supported each other through it all.”

Theme 1: Benefits and Learning: “This serves me and my future.”

We define *benefits and learning* as how URAs perceive and experience personal and professional growth. This includes their goals, achievements, and impact on future aspirations. URAs refined research skills, developed academic identities, and viewed the role as a stepping stone for future opportunities.

A key benefit repeatedly emphasized was the development of academic and research skills. Many URAs sought to understand the research process and reported improvements in research, writing, and confidence in presenting their work. This shift from passive learners to active contributors was a significant milestone, as Amna noted, “a big achievement for me.” Beyond skill development, URAs recognized the long-term benefits of enhancing their CVs and strengthening academic profiles for future opportunities. Khalid stated, “I needed more than an exceptional GPA to get into a good doctorate program.” The experience also shaped their academic identity, fostering self-awareness, intellectual curiosity, and a sense of belonging in academia. As Reem reflected, “Being an RA helps you discover more about your identity ... I want to spread my wings and see where they take me.” Financial compensation was acknowledged but secondary to academic and professional growth. While some found it valuable, Theyab noted, “The second motivation was the money. Although it was less than expected, it was still a good side hustle.”

URA experiences helped bridge the gap between theory and practice, improving coursework performance. Ahmed shared, “Applying classroom theories to real-world research solidified my understanding and improved my critical thinking.” The role also enhanced their ability to navigate research tasks efficiently, with Khalid stating, “Basic statistics courses were a breeze. I could complete tasks like finding an empirical paper in 10 minutes.” URAs gained valuable skills beyond traditional coursework; as Reem noted, “There was much I learned that university courses alone wouldn’t teach.” Many developed leadership skills, problem-solving abilities, and confidence in balancing responsibilities. Anwaar shared, “Being in a leadership role as an RA forces you to think critically.” For most RAs, the experience inspired future leadership aspirations: “Maybe one day, I’ll take a leadership role—this feels like mini practice for that.”

For many, the experience was about contributing to a larger academic purpose. Anwaar stated, “At the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal: publishing impactful papers.” Presenting at conferences validated their efforts and strengthened their commitment to academic pursuits. A recurring theme was personal growth. Many described increased confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of

identity. Khalid shared, “I don’t know what to anticipate, but I’ll embrace challenges and come out better.” For some, the experience reshaped their approach to collaboration. Reem admitted, “I always worked alone, even in group projects. After being an RA, I started seeing things differently.” The role also pushed many out of their comfort zones, enhancing social skills and confidence.

Theme 2: Successes and Challenges: “Burning out, but I managed it.”

URAs transitioned from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Initially driven by family expectations and external validation—common in the UAE’s collectivistic culture—their focus shifted to personal, academic, and professional goals. This transformation emerged as they engaged in research, developing a deeper appreciation for the process. Khalid shared, “I started with mundane tasks, but eventually, the work became meaningful. I realized I was not just working for my family or the stipend but for myself.” Many found their curiosity and passion for research deepening over time, with Amna stating, “I’ve always wanted to do something that could make a difference in my community, and I thought research might help me do that.”

Despite positive experiences, URAs faced challenges that tested their resilience. Balancing research with coursework was a common struggle, especially during peak academic periods. Ahmed reflected, “Learning complex data analysis tools and managing time to meet project deadlines required strong communication and organizational skills that I still struggle with.” Over time, they developed strategies to manage their workload, contributing to their growth.

Navigating unfamiliar research concepts was another hurdle. Most RAs initially felt overwhelmed by technical terms, as Khalid humorously noted, “The weird terms never stopped coming—‘Chi-Square,’ ‘ANOVA,’ or ‘T-Test’—but we persevered.” Seeking clarification was also challenging, as URAs feared appearing incompetent. Khalid also shared, “The biggest challenge was asking for help. Another RA and I would text after every meeting, ‘What ... are they talking about!’” However, they gradually recognized research as a learning process requiring guidance and collaboration. Many overcame these struggles, becoming more confident in managing complex tasks. Khalid summarized this transformation: “We adapted and improved. Now, I can take on challenging tasks, manage them well, and even know when to say no to avoid overcommitment.”

Theme 3: Mentor–Student Relationship: “I didn’t want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud.”

This theme explores the mentor’s role, their impact, and the relationships formed, comparing initial expectations with actual experiences. Mentors were described as more than research guides; they provided encouragement, support, and inspiration while balancing academic rigor with relational care. Khalid reflected, “The mentorship I received was IMPECCABLE! I don’t think others understand how lucky I am to have my mentors. I received guidance beyond mere academia.” Anwaar shared, “The mentors I have worked with in this RA role have honestly set the standard for how mentors should be. They have fostered a healthy environment where research and creativity can flourish.”

Mentors transformed students into confident researchers through constructive feedback, intellectual challenges, and emotional support. Reem noted, “They’ve always shown me that I’m a valued part of the team. That support has given me so much confidence and has made this experience even more meaningful.” Khalid added, “They never aimed to change who I was but to refine who I am and develop skills that will equip me to succeed in my future occupation.”

Students valued the balance between structure and autonomy, which boosted their confidence. Theyab shared, “Our mentor took my fellow RA and me through the research process step by step, while also giving us space to provide feedback and thoughts, which I greatly appreciated.” These interactions made them feel like valued contributors, not just assistants. Amna emphasized, “I’ve never had trouble communicating with my mentors—whether I’m struggling, need help, or just have a ton of questions. They’re always approachable and willing to guide me.” Many appreciated detailed critiques that refined their skills and encouraged independent thinking. Ahmed reflected, “My mentors provided guidance, constructive feedback, and support, fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth.” Several credited their ongoing passion for research to the intellectually stimulating environment their mentors created. Reem noted, “She goes beyond the ‘standards’ by making it educational yet intriguing.” The non-hierarchical structure fostered open dialogue, collaboration, and interactive learning.

Despite admiration for their mentors, some URAs struggled with expectations and the fear of disappointing them. New tasks, personal insecurities, or self-imposed pressure often made them hesitant to ask questions or admit uncertainty. Khalid admitted, “I was simply too afraid to ask how to do it. I didn’t want my supervisors to think they hired a fraud.” However, none mentioned actual disappointment from mentors, suggesting these fears were self-imposed. Ultimately, many overcame their insecurities through continued mentorship and support. Amna expressed deep appreciation:

My current mentors are everything I could wish for and more. They’ve set such a high standard that I only wish other mentors could learn from them. Their support, teaching style, and passion for research have made this experience not only educational but something I look forward to every day.

This transformation highlights the power of mentorship in shaping students’ academic and personal growth. While challenges arose, the support and guidance from mentors helped URAs build confidence, refine their skills, and develop a lasting passion for research.

Theme 4: Co-Learning and Peers: “My new academic family but with more individuality.”

Given that they all worked within teams, this theme encompasses all the URAs’ reflections on their peer relationships, learnings, and struggles.

Many felt a strong sense of responsibility toward the team and mentors and expressed a deep commitment to contributing meaningfully. A defining aspect of their experience was the opportunity for co-learning. They appreciated their team members and found them a support and source of motivation; as Maitha shared, “Having a friend who was also with me along this journey has motivated me greatly, as we kept

on pushing each other to do more, regardless of any doubts we had.” They also reflected on how their peers made challenging tasks more manageable; as Amna explained, “Of course, there were some tough moments, but having a partner made a big difference. We supported each other through it, so I never felt like I was carrying all the pressure alone.” This camaraderie and shared experience created a collaborative and compassionate work atmosphere, reinforcing that research was not an individual endeavor but a collective pursuit, which helped them develop a stronger sense of community, personal responsibility, and confidence.

Despite the support and peer learning, the competitive and high-achieving environment led to feelings of intimidation for some, especially when working alongside peers with more experience, causing self-doubt. Theyab reflected, “I didn’t want to just be satisfactory to my fellows or just complete tasks—I wanted to excel. But at times, I felt intimidated by others who were more experienced.” Amna admitted, “Sometimes being surrounded by amazing and more experienced RAs can make me feel less confident about even taking part in some tasks. I feel pointless like I won’t be much of a help.” However, over time, students transformed their perspectives, embracing challenges and appreciating the presence of others with different strengths as a contribution to a more prosperous and dynamic research environment. Amna eloquently summarized, “Instead of comparing myself to others, I’ve started learning from them and seeing it as an opportunity to grow.” Anwaar reflected, “I truly do believe employing students with different levels and skills helps to foster productive work dynamics.” This shift is noticeable in reflections such as, “At the end of the day, we are all working towards the same goal, but we can all learn from our differences.” Over time, students began to reframe this comparison as an opportunity for growth.

Theme 5: Culture and Belonging: “We supported each other through it all.”

The interplay between community and individuality emerged as a defining theme. While students deeply valued the sense of belonging and collective identity within their teams, they recognized the importance of individual contributions and self-reliance.

Many described experiencing internal conflict between collectivist cultural values—prioritizing team success and group harmony—with the more individualistic demands and responsibilities. They initially approached their research work with external motivations, like fulfilling family expectations or enhancing their CVs. However, as they became more involved in research, their motivation shifted towards personal fulfillment and academic growth. This shift from external validation to intrinsic motivation sheds light on the essence of cultural aspects.

The collectivist mindset shaped how they saw their contributions as integral to the team’s success, reinforcing a sense of duty and responsibility. Reem admitted, “I don’t want all to go down because of me.” Maitha articulated this struggle: “I constantly feel like I’m not good enough, but I don’t want to let my team or mentor down either.” Amna shared, “I don’t want to disappoint my mentor. I don’t want to disappoint my teammates.” These fears may have also contributed to their feelings of inadequacy and impostor syndrome, primarily as they worked alongside more experienced peers. Some struggled with self-perception, feeling they were constantly falling behind. Amna shared, “Many times, I’ve felt like

I'm lacking something—like I don't know enough, or I'm not good enough compared to others." Others described feelings of self-doubt and impostor syndrome, particularly when assigned leadership roles. "I have taken a leadership part, where I am a team leader. This mainly happened due to others in the team assigning this role to me. However, I feel inadequate and that I am doing a lacking/subpar performance," admitted Maitha.

Although they struggled with tasks and self-doubts, they reflected on how their teams were a source of strength and support. Many overcame on-the-job struggles and self-doubt by leaning on their research team. Research teams became more than just academic spaces—they became support systems that helped navigate professional and personal challenges. Reem shared, "We supported each other through it all." Having mentors, teammates, and friends to rely on helped mitigate self-doubt and reinforced a sense of belonging. Anwaar noted, "Luckily, the team was very understanding and forgiving." Friendships formed through collective struggles, helped navigate challenges, and contributed to a positive sense of community. Amna expressed, "We created a specific atmosphere where we not only learned from each other but also supported one another through the process."

Although students did not necessarily use the word *gratitude*, many reflections expressed gratitude, possibly due to their culture, which encourages the expression of appreciation. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunities, guidance, and friendships gained through their experiences. As noted earlier, Khalid reflected, "The mentorship I received was impeccable! I don't think others understand how lucky I am to have my mentors. I received guidance beyond mere academia." Anwaar shared, "Honestly, I was overwhelmed by all the support from both professors. I am eternally grateful for all the advice and time it took to teach all of us RAs."

The findings of the experiences of Emirati URAs align with previous research yet add a unique cultural dimension. They reiterate valuable educational benefits, enhancing students' research skills, confidence, and professional growth. Participants reported that their experiences helped them apply classroom theories to real-world research and develop critical thinking and skills, aligning with previous studies on the benefits of undergraduate research (Hunter et al., 2006; Lopatto, 2007). Additionally, mentorship played a significant role in fostering success, autonomy, teamwork, professional socialization, and leadership development (Eagan et al., 2013; van Blankenstein et al., 2019). The benefits of their experiences were due to the exposure to the research process, the mentorship, and the sense of community within the research teams.

Discussion

Similar to findings from Western research, URAs in the UAE faced time constraints and skill-based challenges; however, they did not experience challenges such as logistical and financial barriers, limited institutional support, and a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Orton et al., 2025), given they were all Emirati who attend a public university that fully funds their education and were approached for recruitment by the faculty members. Despite challenges, students developed resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability through their experiences, reframing challenges as learning opportunities, mainly as they learned to ask for help and developed on the job, transforming confusion into competence. Nevertheless, they also struggled with the dual role, as mentioned in previous research (Weeks et al., 2015), but realized that it enhanced their time management skills and made them assertive and adaptable.

A unique aspect of this study is the cultural dimension, as Emirati URAs navigated their roles within a collectivist society and Western-modeled academic structures. Applying an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) highlights how overlapping identities—such as nationality, gender, and student status—influenced their experiences, revealing how cultural norms, institutional structures, and mentorship intersected. Emirati culture emphasizes collaboration over competition, hierarchy versus equality, and collectivism rather than individuality. The URAs' strong sense of duty to mentors and peers reflected individual dispositions and broader cultural norms around respect and group harmony. They prioritized group success over individual responsibilities and built confidence through collaboration, friendships, and mentor support. Interestingly, their reflections on some of their experiences revealed a deep appreciation for the mentors, opportunities, and friendships they gained; these may be due to cultural factors that reinforce gratitude and hierarchical values. As students progressed, their motivation shifted from external rewards—such as stipends and family pride—to intrinsic purpose, aligning with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the collectivist context and the interplay of their student-in-a-Western-modeled-institution and Emirati identities heightened pressure to support the group and avoid disappointing mentors, contributing to self-doubt and imposter syndrome. The intersectionality influenced their motivations, pressures, and sense of belonging, and the findings reiterate the need for culturally responsive mentorship and pedagogical models that reflect students' intersecting identities and sociocultural realities.

Mentorship played a significant role in shaping their growth. Rather than being hierarchical, these relationships were described as affirming and supportive, echoing hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2010), which centers relationality, connection, and holistic development, as students expressed gratitude for the mentors and acknowledged their investment in their personal and professional development. Ultimately, their experiences led to self-actualization and self-development. The students' autonomy and sense of responsibility which lead to their achievements while collaborating with their peers and mentors reflects the essence, trust, and commitment. Students also described learning through iterative, collaborative processes—“figuring things out” alongside peers and mentors—reflecting the engaged pedagogy further, fostering learning from one another, and embodying Freire's (1970) notions of dialogue and praxis: learning through cycles of action and reflection. URAs emphasized their

development through their continued trials, implementing the theories, experiential learning, peer support, and mentor feedback. These experiences suggest that research assistantships grounded in relational, culturally responsive mentorship that supports academic and personal development can cultivate competence and confidence, particularly in cultures that value interdependence.

The findings reinforce existing literature on undergraduate research by demonstrating that research assistantships cultivate academic identity, critical thinking, and professional preparedness (Thiry et al., 2012). However, the study uniquely highlights how intersectionality and relationality shape students' motivations, challenges, and responses to mentorship, suggesting that research programs should consider cultural contexts when designing support systems for URAs and rethinking traditional roles in education.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

This study highlights the crucial role of URAs in fostering research skills, confidence, and academic identity within the UAE. The findings are particularly relevant for non-Western societies transitioning from collectivism to individualism, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive research programs.

To enhance URA experiences, universities should enhance their policies to establish structured programs with clear expectations, mentorship training, and defined career pathways (Shanahan et al., 2015). Research assistantships should be integrated into curricula as credited courses or paid internships, ensuring accessibility. As our data suggested, expanding financial support through stipends and dedicated research funding can further encourage student engagement. Furthermore, faculty should be incentivized to involve undergraduates in research projects, co-authorship, and conference presentations. Encouraging student participation in international research opportunities can broaden academic and professional horizons.

Culturally responsive mentorship is essential, especially in the UAE's Islamic society where most faculty are Western-educated or from Western countries. Faculty mentors should be trained in balancing academic rigor with emotional and social support while fostering collaboration. Developing mentorship models with multiple faculty and peer mentors can create a supportive research community. Given Emirati students' collectivist background that shapes their motivations, emphasizing collaboration and group harmony over competition (Chen et al., 1998), mentorship should align with these values by promoting teamwork and social responsibility. Furthermore, mentorship models that include multiple faculty and peer mentors can help build supportive research communities.

Additionally, strengthening institutional support for undergraduate research will support student learning and career readiness. Universities can further support students by offering peer networks, mental health resources, and recognition programs to reduce stress and imposter syndrome, ensuring students feel supported by trusted systems rather than relying solely on the recognition expected from busy mentors who may not necessarily be aware of their needs.

The results of the current study should be viewed with limitations. The small sample size and reliance on self-reported reflections introduce potential biases, particularly as mentor involvement in reviewing journals may have influenced responses. Additionally, the study's focus on a single institution restricts broader applicability. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative studies across institutions and cultures to examine URAs' long-term experiences, trends, and challenges. To mitigate biases, future studies could explore anonymous reflection methods or reduce mentor involvement in reviewing student reflections. Nonetheless, this study addresses a critical gap in understanding the experiences of Emirati research assistants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that collaborative learning, culturally grounded mentorship, and support shape Emirati undergraduate research assistants' academic growth, highlighting the need for relational pedagogy and culturally responsive research environments to foster confidence, motivation, and resilience. As UAE institutions navigate the space between collectivist values and Western academic models, tailored support systems and inclusive research environments remain essential for empowering undergraduate researchers.

Notes

1. The Boyer Commission was a panel of scholars in the United States which, in 1998, issued a landmark report calling for a transformation of undergraduate education at research universities.

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