

Designing Inclusive Learning Experiences to Reduce Dropout Rates in Emirati Foundation Programs

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Abstract

Foundation programs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represent a critical transition stage between secondary and higher education, yet early academic disengagement and withdrawal remain persistent concerns. This study examines how intentionally designed inclusive learning experiences can enhance student engagement, academic performance, and retention among first-year Emirati students in foundation-level English courses. Grounded in principles of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014), constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and research on student retention and engagement (Tinto, 2012), the study investigates the impact of early diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, structured collaborative learning, and scaffolded formative feedback implemented over one academic semester. A mixed-method classroom-based inquiry was conducted using attendance patterns, assessment performance data, withdrawal trends, and student perception surveys. Findings indicate improved attendance consistency, narrowed performance gaps across proficiency levels, increased learner confidence and a measurable decline in withdrawal rates compared to previous cohorts. Students reported greater clarity of expectations, stronger academic belonging, and reduced assessment anxiety when provided with structured support and iterative feedback opportunities. The study argues that dropout prevention is closely linked to classroom-level instructional design rather than student deficit. By embedding inclusive pedagogical practices that anticipate learner diversity, educators can transform transitional learning environments into supportive academic spaces that promote persistence, engagement and resilience within foundation programs across the UAE.

Keywords: inclusive education, foundation programs, dropout reduction, Universal Design for Learning, student retention

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Introduction

Foundation programs occupy a distinctive position in the UAE higher education landscape because they connect secondary schooling, English-medium university expectations, and students' emerging academic identities. For many Emirati students, the foundation year is not simply a remedial bridge. It is a transition in which learners encounter new assessment practices, independent-study expectations, and classroom participation norms that can influence confidence and persistence.

Dropout and withdrawal in this context are more than administrative outcomes. They may reflect accumulated experiences of absence, assessment anxiety, weak belonging, or uncertainty about whether higher education is a place where the student can succeed. Retention scholarship emphasizes that persistence is shaped by interactions between students and institutional environments rather than by student motivation alone (Tinto, 2012). In foundation classrooms, teaching design, feedback practices, and peer relationships can therefore influence whether students continue to attend and engage.

This study examines inclusive learning experiences as a classroom-level retention strategy for Emirati foundation English students. Inclusive learning is defined here as planned teaching that anticipates learner variability, offers multiple ways to access content, structures collaboration, provides usable feedback before final assessment, and communicates that all students can progress. The study involved 180 Emirati foundation students and considered four evidence sources: attendance, course grades, withdrawal outcomes, and a student perception survey. The purpose was to connect inclusive pedagogy with measurable retention indicators and to show how the course itself can become an early support environment.

Literature Review

Foundation programs are designed to prepare students for the linguistic, academic, and self-regulatory demands of tertiary education. In English-medium institutions, foundation English courses often function as high-stakes gateways to degree progression. Transition pedagogy argues that first-year curricula should deliberately scaffold belonging, engagement, and academic success for diverse commencing students (Kift et al., 2010). Within the UAE, attrition may involve academic difficulty, personal circumstances, institutional fit, and perceptions of future opportunity (Ashour, 2019). These factors suggest that retention strategies must address academic and relational needs together.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a proactive framework for reducing barriers. It encourages multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression so that learning environments are accessible from the beginning (CAST, 2024; Meyer et al., 2014). In a foundation English class, barriers may include unclear assignment expectations, fast-paced instruction, limited examples of successful work, few opportunities for practice, or classroom norms that discourage lower-proficiency students from participating. Inclusive pedagogy does not reduce academic rigor; it clarifies routes toward rigorous outcomes.

Constructivist learning theory further supports this approach. Learning develops through interaction, practice, and reflection, while scaffolding enables students to perform beyond their current independent level (Vygotsky, 1978). In foundation English classrooms, scaffolds may include model texts, sentence frames, staged writing tasks, peer rehearsal, guided vocabulary practice, and short feedback conferences. Collaboration is especially valuable when roles, task

steps, and success criteria are explicit because students gain more opportunities to use language while also recognizing that peers experience similar challenges.

Feedback and assessment confidence are central to retention. Students who receive low marks early in the semester may interpret them as fixed evidence of inability if feedback is delayed or difficult to use. Effective feedback clarifies goals, current performance, and next steps (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and supports self-regulated learning when students can apply comments to improve work (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Engagement and belonging also matter. Kahu (2013) frames engagement as a construct shaped by student and institutional factors, while Strayhorn (2012) identifies belonging as a basic educational need. In foundation programs, inclusive classrooms can strengthen belonging by normalizing help-seeking, structuring respectful peer interaction, and making progress visible.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates UDL, constructivist learning theory, and student retention theory. UDL provides the design principle: learning environments should anticipate variability and provide multiple routes to participation and expression. Constructivist theory provides the learning mechanism: students build understanding through guided practice, scaffolding, interaction, and reflection. Retention theory provides the outcome explanation: students are more likely to persist when they feel academically integrated, socially connected, and capable of success.

In the conceptual model, inclusive instructional practices are the intervention conditions. These practices include diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, formative feedback, flexible participation, and mentoring conversations. Engagement, academic confidence, and belonging operate as mediating processes, while attendance, course performance, and persistence are outcome indicators. The model assumes that inclusive design reduces dropout risk by making the learning environment more predictable, supportive, and responsive before disengagement becomes irreversible.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative classroom-based design with descriptive and correlational analysis. This design was appropriate because the research focused on measurable indicators: survey responses, attendance records, course grades, and withdrawal status. The sample consisted of 180 Emirati students enrolled in foundation-level English courses at a UAE higher education institution. Students represented different foundation levels and initial English proficiency groups.

The inclusive learning intervention was implemented across one academic semester. It began with diagnostic assessment to identify language needs, confidence levels, and possible risk indicators. Differentiated instruction then adjusted task complexity, support structures, and learning materials. Collaborative learning was structured through pair work, group roles, peer review, and guided discussion. Formative feedback was provided through rubrics, examples, teacher comments, revision opportunities, and short conferences. Academic belonging support included flexible participation routines and mentoring conversations that encouraged attendance and reframed difficulty as part of learning.

The student survey contained 25 Likert-scale items across five constructs: engagement and motivation, inclusive instruction, feedback and assessment confidence, belonging and

collaboration, and persistence and dropout reduction. Four data sources were analyzed: survey responses, attendance records, course grades, and withdrawal data. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics summarized perceptions and outcomes, Pearson correlations examined relationships among constructs, and multiple regression estimated predictors of persistence intention. Ethical considerations included confidentiality, voluntary participation, aggregate reporting, and secure handling of sensitive academic data.

Table 1

Instrument Constructs and Reliability

Scale	Items	No. of items	Cronbach alpha
Engagement Motivation	Q01–Q05	5	0.907
Inclusive Instruction	Q06–Q10	5	0.901
Feedback Assessment Confidence	Q11–Q15	5	0.918
Belonging Collaboration	Q16–Q20	5	0.906
Persistence Dropout Reduction	Q21–Q25	5	0.924
Overall Inclusive Learning Scale	Q01–Q25	25	0.959

Results

Reliability results showed strong internal consistency across the five survey constructs and excellent reliability for the overall 25-item scale. This supports the use of construct means in correlation and regression analysis. The participant profile showed a balanced gender distribution, representation across foundation levels, and varied initial English proficiency, reflecting the learner variability typically found in foundation English classrooms.

Students reported positive perceptions across all survey constructs. Mean scores were above the scale midpoint, indicating agreement that inclusive learning practices supported engagement, differentiated learning, feedback clarity, belonging, and persistence. Attendance improved from a pre-intervention mean of 75.39% to a post-intervention mean of 88.02%. Course grades improved from a pre-intervention mean of 68.04 to a post-intervention mean of 79.01. These descriptive gains suggest stronger behavioral engagement and academic performance after implementation.

Withdrawal was approximately 8% during the intervention semester compared with a historical baseline of around 18%. Correlations were positive among engagement, inclusive instruction, feedback confidence, belonging, attendance, course grade, and persistence intention. Regression results indicated that inclusive instruction, feedback confidence, belonging, and attendance were significant predictors of persistence intention, while engagement and course grade were not significant when the other variables were included. Overall, the results support the view that persistence is influenced by academic, emotional, and relational dimensions of the classroom experience.

Table 2
Participant Profile

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	93	51.7
Gender	Male	84	46.7
Gender	Prefer not to say	3	1.7
Age Group	18–19	98	54.4
Age Group	20–21	64	35.6
Age Group	22 or above	18	10.0
Foundation Level	Level 1	54	30.0
Foundation Level	Level 2	72	40.0
Foundation Level	Level 3	54	30.0
Program Track	Engineering/Technology	44	24.4
Program Track	Business	52	28.9
Program Track	Education	28	15.6
Program Track	Health Sciences	36	20.0
Program Track	Applied Media/Other	20	11.1
Initial English Proficiency	Low	48	26.7
Initial English Proficiency	Moderate	93	51.7
Initial English Proficiency	High	39	21.7
Previously Considered Withdrawal	Yes	42	23.3

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Survey Constructs

Construct	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Engagement Motivation	180	3.85	0.91	1.2	5.0
Inclusive Instruction	180	4.05	0.86	1.2	5.0
Feedback Assessment Confidence	180	3.99	0.92	1.0	5.0
Belonging Collaboration	180	3.88	0.85	1.8	5.0
Persistence Dropout Reduction	180	3.92	0.97	1.2	5.0

Table 4
Attendance and Academic Performance Indicators

Outcome	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Attendance before course (%)	75.39	8.59	49.2	96.0
Attendance after intervention (%)	88.02	6.23	71.4	100.0
Course grade before intervention	68.04	9.93	41.8	92.0
Course grade after intervention	79.01	7.64	58.7	97.9

Table 5
Correlation Matrix

Variable	Engagement	Inclusive Instruction	Feedback Confidence	Belonging	Persistence Intention	Attendance	Course Grade
Engagement	1.0	0.64	0.56	0.64	0.62	0.65	0.53
Inclusive instruction	0.64	1.0	0.58	0.62	0.59	0.44	0.44
Feedback confidence	0.56	0.58	1.0	0.53	0.63	0.45	0.56
Belonging	0.64	0.62	0.53	1.0	0.61	0.49	0.53
Persistence intention	0.62	0.59	0.63	0.61	1.0	0.64	0.49
Attendance	0.65	0.44	0.45	0.49	0.64	1.0	0.38
Course grade	0.53	0.44	0.56	0.53	0.49	0.38	1.0

Table 6
Regression Predicting Persistence Intention

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	Std. beta
Constant	-3.592	0.838	-4.29	< .001	
Engagement	0.032	0.083	0.39	0.699	0.03
Inclusive instruction	0.162	0.078	2.09	0.037	0.144
Feedback confidence	0.285	0.069	4.12	< .001	0.271
Belonging	0.208	0.079	2.64	0.008	0.183
Attendance	0.051	0.010	5.16	< .001	0.328
Course grade	0.004	0.008	0.51	0.611	0.031

Discussion

The findings support the argument that inclusive instructional design can contribute to dropout reduction in Emirati foundation programs. Improved attendance suggests that students were more willing to participate when lessons were structured, relevant, and supportive. Since attendance is often an early warning indicator, improved consistency gives instructors more opportunities to provide feedback, build confidence, and prevent disengagement.

The improvement in course grades is also meaningful. Foundation students with lower initial proficiency may be discouraged by early assessment experiences, particularly when success criteria are unclear. Differentiated tasks and formative feedback can interrupt this pattern by creating manageable steps toward improvement. The findings therefore support the claim that inclusive design does not lower expectations; instead, it provides clearer and more equitable routes toward meeting them.

Survey findings show that students valued feedback clarity, collaboration, and belonging. These are not simply preferences; they are mechanisms through which retention may be strengthened. When students understand expectations, they are less likely to feel helpless. When they can practise before assessment, they are less likely to interpret anxiety as failure. When they work respectfully with peers, they are less likely to feel isolated. In this sense, the foundation classroom can function as an early retention system.

The results also suggest that dropout should not be understood only as a student decision or administrative status. If withdrawal can begin with classroom confusion, fear, or disconnection, then teaching design becomes central to prevention. Inclusive pedagogy should therefore be treated as part of student-success infrastructure. For foundation programs, practical implications include embedding diagnostic assessment, visible feedback cycles, structured collaboration, belonging-building routines, and early progress monitoring into normal teaching practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how inclusive learning experiences can reduce dropout risk among Emirati students in UAE foundation programs. The intervention was associated with improved attendance, stronger course performance, positive student perceptions, and a lower withdrawal rate than the historical baseline. The central contribution is the argument that retention begins in the classroom: students are more likely to persist when expectations are visible, support is timely, feedback is usable, and the learning environment communicates belonging.

The findings have practical implications for foundation programs seeking scalable approaches to student success. Inclusive design can be embedded through early diagnostic tasks, differentiated materials, structured peer learning, formative feedback cycles, mentoring conversations, and routine monitoring of attendance and confidence. However, the study should be interpreted with caution because classroom-based research is shaped by instructor practice, semester conditions, and student characteristics. Future research should examine multi-institutional samples, longitudinal progression beyond the foundation year, and qualitative accounts of how students experience belonging, feedback, and persistence. Overall, inclusive pedagogy offers a practical and theoretically grounded pathway for helping students stay, improve, and believe that they belong in higher education.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that AI-assisted writing tools were used in drafting and refining the language of this manuscript. Usage was limited to improving clarity and academic expression. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally derived from the author's research.

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