

# In conversation with Khalfan Belhoul, CEO, Dubai Future Foundation



*An illustration of Khalfan Belhoul, CEO, [Dubai Future Foundation](#).*

## **What are the top three priorities of implementing the Centennial Plan for Dubai Future Foundation?**

Our leadership has always been ambitious, wise and foresighted, with a vision to place Dubai as the leading city of the future. H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai launched the foundation with the aim of institutionalising the future and that's how our story started.

Our priorities at DFF are set to fully support the implementation of the 4 main pillars of the UAE centennial plan, which are: creating a Future-focused government - a priority that we support through many initiatives such as the future-focused courses that we launch throughout the year at the Dubai Future Academy, the academic arm of Dubai Future Foundation, which offers government employees courses that fortify the most sought after future skills that allow them to imagine and design the future in line with the vision of our leaders. Our very own unique ecosystem, AREA 2071, is one of the most dynamic innovation hubs in the region, attracting talents and entrepreneurs from around the globe, supporting their growth into being positive contributors to the future, and supporting Dubai's diversified knowledge economy. At The Dubai Future Research, our research arm, continues to produce insights and recommendations of the way forward supported by a firm foundation of evidence-based analysis and quantitative and qualitative reporting to enable stakeholders and key decision-makers to anticipate and better navigate the future, guide policy-making and develop key strategic initiatives and strategies. The Dubai Future Accelerators programme connects government and private sectors with talents and innovators from around the world to allow them to solve future challenges and use Dubai as a testbed for their innovations, to be part of

creating a high quality of life for the people of Dubai and the UAE, and further solidify Dubai's position as a leading city of the future.

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## **Considering the ambitious Centennial Plan for the UAE, how does the Dubai Future Foundation engage with the youth and empower the next generations of UAE Leaders?**

Dubai Future Foundation is all about youth empowerment and engagement in creating an inclusive society. We have launched a number of programmes and initiatives that do not only focus on educating the youth with the knowledge of the future and the skills they need to lead the future, through the Dubai Future academy courses, but also on actual engagement of this significant segment of society in creating the future. In line with the vision of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, to inspire innovation and creativity amongst students as an integrated part of their higher education, we launched the University Entrepreneurship Program to create a suitable environment for innovation and entrepreneurship and prepares young students for the future by developing their entrepreneurial capabilities.

## **What is the University Entrepreneurship Program?**

Aiming to achieve the goals of the Fifty-Year Charter's 6<sup>th</sup> Article, the Dubai Future Foundation has taken the essential step in realising the comprehensive vision announced by H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, in creating economic and creative free zones in universities that allow students to carry out innovative businesses and creative activities as an integrated part of their higher education, the University Entrepreneurship Program ('UEP') creates a suitable environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, employs modern technology in various vital and future sectors, and prepares young students for the future by developing their entrepreneurial capabilities through five main stages: learning about successful experiences; identifying opportunities and areas of entrepreneurship; developing personal capabilities and talents; surveying potential business opportunities; and implementing ideas and projects.

12 local and national universities are taking part in the UEP program. So far, the UEP has supported more than 550 students in various ways including prototyping and investment opportunities.

## **What are the steps currently being taken by the Dubai Future Foundation to accelerate the adoption of technologies and digital transformation?**

The need to enable new business activities based on agile regulations emerged to align with the vision of our leadership to accelerate innovation and its application throughout all sectors. Hence, in January 2019, we launched the regulation lab (RegLab), a revolutionary approach on behalf of the UAE in the legislation and application of emerging technologies. The lab works closely with regulators, the private sector, innovators, and business leaders to co-create legislation that is in step with innovation speed. Regulations passed too early may stifle new innovations, while those that come too late may have already negatively impacted people and markets. That is why RegLab works in the regulation space to align regulation speed

with innovation speed.

RegLab was launched as part of the UAE's pathway to becoming a global innovation incubator and a testing ground for future technologies and their applications shaping human life and activity in the future, such as mobility, health, 3D printing, AI, and more.

This initiative aims to create an agile and conducive legislative environment that pioneers "regulation innovation" as we develop new or existing legislation around emerging technologies in line with UAE's Centennial 2071 plan.

In addition to the RegLab, we enable and support government entities across Dubai through many initiatives such as Dubai Future accelerators, which facilitates collaborations between government entities and innovative start-ups to solve challenges of the future. Through the Centre for Fourth Industrial Revolution (C4IR), we aim to develop the tools and applications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the UAE and work towards developing governance frameworks, protocols, and best practices both regionally and globally.

The Centre further aims to support the UAE's strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution and further strengthens its position as a global hub for this era, increasing its contribution to the national economy by means of advancing innovation and future technologies within the government.

***"RegLab works in the regulation space to align regulation speed with innovation speed."***

**In light of all the developments and ambitious plans for the UAE, how will you ensure that the country's values and heritage are preserved?**

Our strategy at DFF is based on our leaders' vision, and as we move forward to implement the UAE centennial plan, we draw strength from Dubai's story.

In 1970 an airport was commissioned by a ruler of a small emirate - Dubai, with sand cleaved to run concrete runways. In around 60 years, this airport became the world's busiest. In 1961, a full decade before the UAE was formed, Khor Dubai, or the Dubai Creek, was dredged to allow larger vessels in to welcome the world. In 1971, a unified nation was created out of tribal lands by leaders of vision and foresight, and the United Arab Emirates was born. In 1979, and with our leadership's visionary foresight, a gateway hub and a global trade link of the world is born in Dubai: Jebel Ali Port became the largest man-made port in the world, connecting global markets and facilitating trade. In 2016, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai established the Dubai Future Foundation to institutionalise future foresight. Our initiatives are human-centric and tackle all aspects of human life, yet our leaders' vision, wisdom, and foresight are embedded in our DNA and in everything we do as an institution that specialises in imagining, designing, and executing the future.

**Do you think that the UAE will be the top incubator for innovative ideas worldwide?**

The foresight of our leadership, and the vision to place Dubai as the leading city of the future and a leading hub for tourism, finance, technology and innovation has furnished for Dubai and the UAE to become a leading incubator for talented innovators from around the globe.

The UAE has three of the most dynamic ecosystems in the region. They have succeeded in putting the UAE among the top most open and welcoming incubators globally: AREA 2071, Fazaa Center for Business Incubators and Accelerators, and Hub 71.

In addition to these dynamic hubs, and inspired by the vision of our insightful leadership DFF has set new and flexible legislation for future technologies to mitigate any adverse effects that may result from the application of these technologies in an unsafe manner and to enhance the exchange of expertise and knowledge while keeping up with the accelerating innovation in technologies.

RegLab aims to provide a set of flexible laws and legislation by working closely with policymakers from federal and local government authorities as well as the private sector and business leaders to develop legislation governing vital future sectors that positively impact societies and support the UAE's role as a global incubator of innovations and creative projects in four main areas: mobility; health; 3D printing; and artificial intelligence.

### **How does AREA 2071 embody the UAE Centennial 2071's plan?**

AREA 2071 is a fast-growing ecosystem with physical and, more recently, virtual activations and events that continuously aim to connect government, private sector, and start-ups beyond commercial engagements and programmes. The objective of these activations is to regularly share information regarding the partner programmes, successful founders, and start-ups in the ecosystem and inspire and support new entrepreneurs and students to start their own journeys. AREA 2071 hosts a myriad of different events to transform the ecosystem into a collaborative and supportive community. Each member of this community is given the opportunity to learn, engage and grow through the exchange of knowledge, building networks, and collaboration. These events include workshops, one-on-one talks, panel discussions, pitch events, hackathons, and open networking events. These events are driven by the needs of the community and cover technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, youth enablement, education, legal, investment, fundraising, soft skills, and women empowerment, to name a few.

Over the years, with over 26 thousand participants from around the globe, AREA 2071 hosted thousands of Workshops, presentations, and talks with guest speakers sharing their knowledge, skills, expertise on specific topics as well as one-to-one meetings, networking events, and casual conversations to enable the exchange of personal experience, stories and growth tips, in addition to special sessions with mentors, founders, and technology experts to work with start-ups on their challenges and help them explore market opportunities, industry prospects, and insights.

### **From your personal perspective, what current project are you working on that you are most excited for, or do you feel has the greatest potential to assist the futuristic UAE government?**

I believe that every single initiative, big or small, launched by DFF is impactful, insightful, and bears great potential for progress in our society.

We are anticipating the opening of the Museum of the Future soon, which aims at further cementing Dubai as a hub for innovation and a testbed for emerging technologies and exploring the future of science, technology, and innovation. In addition to becoming a major tourist destination, the Museum will offer a platform to demonstrate and test the latest inventions and prototypes from emerging start-ups as well as technology giants.

We are also launching the Dubai Future District, announced in 2020 by HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al

Maktoum. DFD is the Middle East's biggest future economy-focused district and part of our unique ecosystem, AREA 2071. The district connects DIFC, Emirates Towers, and Dubai World Trade Centre, and houses an economy research centre, incubators and accelerators, and innovative space for future economy pioneers.

The new district aims at placing Dubai as the world's capital of the new economy and provides financing and legislative facilities and options for businesses from around the globe. With offerings that vary from accommodations to simplified licensing plans to visas, to unique opportunities to grow unique presence for businesses across the region, the Dubai Financial District will shift Dubai's foreign trade through stimulation and revitalisation with the continuous development of all the logistical, legislative and service tools, in addition to building new international partnerships.