Destination 2071: reimagining education and getting UAE to the top of class

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The UAE education sector is one the leading private education markets globally and represents a fascinating petri dish of different curricula, brands, influences and themes, making it the most diverse education landscape in the world.

Already a leader in the region, how does UAE meet its centennial goal to be become a world leader in education by 2071?

The UAE is in a fantastic position to make that jump. This article explores some of the elements we believe can deliver fundamental change and improvement.

The UAE is already in a formidable position:

- most diverse education landscape in the world with multiple curricula and influences;
- world leading in K12;
- many leading education providers already here;
- ideal location at a global intersection (all the talk of the demise of the physical campus is overblown and whilst there is a role for blended learning models it will not replace the physical coming together of students and faculty); and
- far-sighted and ambitious government leadership.

The following are the areas where we see opportunities for the UAE to make a quantum leap in world education rankings. Some of these ideas are ones that could apply to any country in the world.

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K12

The UAE K12 sector is already a global leader in many ways. The pandemic showed how well equipped it was to make the move to remote learning, having invested heavily in EdTech for years beforehand.

We believe the school or university of the future will continue to be a physical campus experience, with elements of blended learning and perhaps a minority of students learning remotely. Of course there will be room in the ecosystem for entirely online education delivery models but we believe this will complement and not replace the physical campus.

The student experience, see below, will become ever more important across K12 and Higher Education.

An opportunity exists to reimagine the relationship between the school campus: generally built at enormous expense with state of the art facilities with the wider community, be it using sports facilities in

the evenings, adult education etc. In essence placing the school campus at the heart of the community; not just an 8am-4pm building.

Student experience

Oftentimes education institutions in the region have a very top-down approach with insufficient focus on the students, their campus experience and the wider pastoral role of the education provider. Students perform better when they feel they are genuinely part of an education community rather than just headcount.

How many education providers put the resources required into pastoral care and place it at the centre of the student experience?

How many education providers have reliable data and knowledge in relation to where their former students went to? At Higher Education ('HE') level it is very limited. This information is gold from the point of view of curriculum design, feedback in relation to the student experience as well as building up a proper alumni programme.

Leadership

Leadership within HE institutions in the region has been described as being transactional rather than transformative. There is an emphasis on process and bureaucracy as opposed to taking a lead on transforming HE and its outputs.

HE needs to be more proactive and shape the debate about its future, rather than being reactive and just a passenger on the journey.
Teaching methods are often uninspiring, delivered in a method that our grandparents would be familiar with. In order to grow, there needs to be more space for creative influence, disruption and a 'business as unusual' approach.

Regulatory innovation

The UAE could decide to create the most dynamic and nimble regulatory environment in the world. The regulator mind-set would need to pivot from gatekeeper to stakeholder; i.e. it would look to see how it can support education providers in their quest to implement quick and innovative changes (whilst maintaining quality) and the regulator's KPIs would be adjusted accordingly.

The long laundry lists of 'do's and don'ts' that education providers must observe would be radically cut to the most essential only. COVID-19 has shown that a lot of these requirements are completely unnecessary; the show went on without them.

Trust is a critical part of the equation here. If the regulator moves from being a gatekeeper it must place trust in the education providers that they will step up to the plate and do not need to be micro-managed. The institutions. in turn, must show maturity and move away from a sometimes infantile approach where they are afraid to think for themselves and always look to the regulator for answers.

A nimble regulatory environment with greater autonomy for the institutions has all the hallmarks of the

leading education systems in the world. It will create the space needed for innovation and transformation.

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Quality

A related regulatory topic is of course quality. The UAE is already making a concerted effort on this front and it is absolutely vital to continue to work on this if UAE is to become a world leader in education. Quality does not mean, however, that the regulator needs to micromanage the education providers or force them into box ticking exercises that keep up appearances but in which no-one really believes. Again, if we look at the leading education markets, the institutions have a lot of autonomy and a significant amount of trust and latitude is given to those with proven track records; we think this is the best model to instil maturity and self-reliance in our education leadership teams.

Skills versus competencies

There is a worldwide fascination with credentials as opposed to skills. The education system that equips its students with skills will excel. This will require a change of mind-set from parents, industry and broader society. It also includes instilling cognitive and emotional skills to better cope, in order to create flexible and dynamic citizens of the world.

Collaboration

A critical factor that is currently lacking here is collaboration and addressing this is imperative if UAE is to aspire to No.1 status.

To break it down further we are talking about collaboration between:

- education providers: competitors can also collaborate on areas of joint interest for the betterment of the entire sector and this is common in other leading jurisdictions but almost non-existent here;
- education providers and regulators: in order to have a dynamic collaborative relationship and foster regulatory innovation. The Ministry of Education is making strides in this regard which is very welcome; and
- education providers and industry to address: (i) respective needs of education, society and industry and the type of graduates produced: and (ii) R+D funding and collaboration (see below).

Vocational training

Technical and Vocational Education and Training ('TVET') is an area that is underdeveloped in the UAE which is surprising given the presence of so many industrial heavyweights here. Unfortunately, there is a stigma associated with vocational training around the world generally with a few notable exceptions like Germany.

The benefits of vocational training are indisputable and will help propel key engineering and precision manufacturing industries. In order to create the impetus for this it will involve changing the mind-set of students and parents (who heavily influence student's course choice and perceptions), deep engagement with industry and a policy led approach from government and regulators.

R+D

The countries that are top of the education charts, as measured by the rankings organisations, have a common theme of high spending on research and development.

Currently in UAE there are a handful of universities engaged in R+D. Funding has traditionally been a problem, particularly for private international branch campuses; the vast majority of R+D funding coming from government (emirate and federal level) and being pumped into a few public backed universities.

Recently there have been some positive developments in this area whereby public funding has been made available for both public and private universities and awarded by way of competitive tender. This model bodes well for the future and if the amounts are significantly increased, in association with the establishment of government funding agency/research council and a co-ordinated policy, it will be lead to a thriving research environment.

Public funding is the most important factor but private funding from industry and alumni is also an important piece in order to make funding for research more sustainable in the long-term. How do we encourage international corporations with offices here to spend some of their R+D budgets in UAE? A new and imaginative approach is required, whether it is something like the offset programme (where defence contracts awarded to foreign companies included a commitment by the company to do some of the manufacturing for that project in UAE), encouraging private sector matching for research council funding (very popular internationally) or another model. The homegrown industrial heavyweights also have an important role to play here.

Leakage

A lot of UAE K-12 students move abroad for their higher education. How do we address leakage and keep a higher percentage of them here? If the other issues discussed in this article are addressed, we believe it will lead to an uptick of resident students deciding to stay here for university.

Conclusion

In summing up, there are lots of reasons to be optimistic that the UAE can reach the top of the world class by 2071. It is currently in an ideal position from which to launch and all of the above action areas are

deemed entirely achievable if a full blooded approach to tackle them is taken.

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