

In conversation with Dr Abdulla Al Karam, Director General, Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA)



An illustration of Dr Abdulla Al Karam, Director General, [Knowledge and Human Development Authority \(KHDA\)](#).

With the pandemic having accelerated the uptake of distance learning and virtual classrooms, there were multiple innovations in education delivery. How did you see educational institutions ensuring excellent education is delivered virtually? What does the KHDA envisage future classrooms to be like, will students return to wholly physical classrooms or would we see hybrid blended learning classrooms?

The pandemic has challenged expectations of what education should be and can be. Future-focused school leaders have told us that the goals of their five-year innovation strategies were met in just six months. Practices that we thought would take months or years, such as an alternative to examinations, came about in days. Students have become more independent learners; parents are more involved in their children's learning, and teachers are able to create more customised learning plans for each of their students. School leaders, teachers and parents have collaborated to adapt and innovate learning for younger and older students, and for students of determination.

Future classrooms may not be classrooms at all. When teachers and students are able to connect virtually, learning can happen wherever they are. The exclusive relationship that has traditionally existed between schools and students, and schools and teachers, is also changing. Some students may want to study at more than one school; some teachers may also prefer to teach at more than one school. Distance learning

has made it possible for this to happen.

Distance learning has served its original purpose of ensuring that education continues through a pandemic. As time goes on, its purpose is also evolving. Online learning will offer schools, teachers, students and their parents greater flexibility in how, when and where learning is delivered. More than ever, physical schools will be places for students and staff to improve their physical and emotional wellbeing; to build friendships and to have fun – an essential tenet of education.

The UAE Vision 2021 set the goal of creating a first-rate education system with mathematics, science, reading and Arabic language attainment targets. With the agenda coming to an end this year, what achievements and weaknesses in schools have you identified? How will these feed into the achievement of the Centennial Plan 2071?

Six years ago, the leadership of the UAE announced ambitious National Agenda targets for Dubai private schools, which included scoring among the Top 10 countries in the world in the international assessment Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

Our education community has never backed away from a challenge. Ever since Dubai first participated in its first TIMSS cycle in 2007, schools have made consistent and significant improvement. What started out as an ambitious target soon became a reality.

In the latest round of TIMSS undertaken in 2019, students from Dubai private schools have met UAE National Agenda targets and scored among the top 10 in the world.

These results are testament to the dedication, commitment and love that Dubai's principals and teachers have for their students, their schools, and their city. They are also a reflection of Dubai's promise to provide students with a world-class education that values wellbeing as well as academics.

In response to each of the four main pillars of the UAE Centennial Plan, we continue to work with international partners and local schools to improve and integrate wellbeing into education in Dubai. In March we will be announcing the results of the fourth year of the Dubai Student Wellbeing Census, as well as the third Adults@School Wellbeing Survey.

KHDA has been creatively using social media to connect with students and teachers. What benefits has KHDA seen emerging from this engagement and how does it see its increasing engagement help towards achieving excellent education?

Our social media presence is part of our overall commitment to meaningful engagement with our community. Our approach is human-centred: we don't regard ourselves as a 'government authority' communicating with 'stakeholders'; rather, we are humans communicating with other humans.

Education operates much like an eco-system, with many different individuals and organisations playing equally important roles that are vital to the health and success of the system as a whole. Social media is a fun and effective way to bring these different groups together towards the shared goal of world-class education in Dubai.

Through social media, we're able to engage with students, parents and teachers. They have direct access to the regulator, which enables them to feel a greater sense of belonging to the whole education

community in Dubai. Likewise, we can use social media to gauge public opinion or to ask for specific feedback.

Through the accessible language, tone and messaging we use on social media, we have built positive relationships with our community. This not only brings our own community closer together, but also shows the qualities of Dubai's private education sector to the wider world.

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While the UAE is becoming an education destination for students in the MENA and South Asian regions, what steps are you encouraging universities and schools to take to appeal to students worldwide, in line with the UAE's Centennial 2071 aim to become a competitive knowledge economy?

Dubai is home to 36 international branch campuses, the most in the world. The focus has always been on quality – while each of these universities are accredited by their home countries, their programmes are also quality-assured by the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) and recognised by the Government of Dubai.

The latest data from Dubai's private higher education sector shows that 25 per cent of university students have come to Dubai specifically to study, attracted by its location, security and employment prospects. Responding to market demands, the sector has seen an 11 per cent uptake in computer science and technology programmes in the last academic year.

With our friends at Dubai Tourism and universities themselves, we are working on an initiative to attract more students from specific regions – such as China – to Dubai.

Dubai's 50-year charter, announced by H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, focuses in part on higher education and building a competitive knowledge economy. Under the charter, national and private universities will become free zones, where students can carry out their economic and creative businesses. Integrated creative and economic zones will be established next to universities to support students in education, research, and finance while setting up their businesses. The end goal is not only graduating students but also coming up with companies.