



A report card for distance education in the UAE

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Driving progress
through partnership

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Introduction

Following the global onset of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year, schools in the UAE made an overnight shift to mandatory distance learning, which continued to the end of the 2019/20 academic year.¹ Over the summer break, the UAE's education regulators worked closely with state and private schools to establish stringent protocols for students' return to the physical classroom, balancing safety and practicality. Then, on 16 August 2020, the UAE's Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that distance learning for Term 1 would be an option available to all. Emphasising freedom of choice, the MoE announced that:

“Parents have been allowed to freely choose between their children's mode of attendance, face to face at school or through distance learning, for the first term, to achieve stability within the school community and to ensure the safety of our students, while meeting the requirements of physical distancing.”²

The coming weeks and months will no doubt be an important test for the education 'new normal'. However, thinking further ahead, there is also a unique opportunity for UAE regulators to accelerate progress towards a nimble and future-proofed education system. In this article, we look back at the UAE's enforced period of distance learning and overview the key learnings and best practice insights that will shape education policy in the UAE for generations to come.

1 See Circulars issued on 7 March 2020 and 31 March 2020 and Ministerial Decree No. (229) for the Year 2020 Regarding Distance Education, <https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/safetyatschools>.

2 <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/education/parents-in-uae-can-pick-in-person-classes-or-distance-learning-during-first-school-term-1.1064263#:~:text=Pupils%20can%20continue%20with%20online,or%20continue%20with%20remote%20learning.>

Key learnings for UAE education policy

The extraordinary circumstances facing students, parents, teachers, schools and UAE regulators as the pandemic unfolds have been challenging and transformative for all stakeholders. While there appears to be no debate that on-campus education is the optimal learning environment for most students, the pandemic has provided important insights for education policy-makers.

#1 There should always be a plan B

How and in what ways COVID-19 will impact the UAE in the months and years ahead is uncertain. While the UAE has dealt admirably with the global pandemic so far, it cannot be ruled out that a community lockdown of some shape or form may be required again in the short, medium or longer term. A good example of preparation excellence is provided by Singapore, which put an emergency distance learning system in place following the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2005. This system sees teachers receive mandatory distance learning training on an annual basis, including live trial runs for teachers and students alike.³ By continuing to plan for the future, the UAE's education regulators can consider taking cues from Singapore to ensure a seamless transition to distance learning, if and when the need arises.

#2 Technology is a universal student right

If there was any doubt before the pandemic of the importance of digital learning tools for students both in school and at home, there is certainly none now. The UAE is blessed with the highest download speeds regionally⁴ and continued investment in smart learning tools for all students is a win-win policy all round, improving students' tech-literacy, enhancing their future employability, and enabling schools to pivot to a distance education model, as and when needed. To the extent that inequality exists, international best practice demonstrates that there is tremendous support to help students access the devices and platforms required for distance learning. For example, schools in Hong Kong and Singapore loaned devices to families in need with support of corporations and non-governmental organisations.⁵ However, this generosity need not be restricted to a lockdown situation. Appropriate technology for all students is now critical – at all times.

#3 Teachers are the key to distance education

Distance learning supported by online tools does not replace teachers, who are the key to its success. However, online teaching methods require a unique set of soft and hard skills and a bank of suitable digital lesson materials. In terms of best practice, Hong Kong's Education Bureau has maintained a 'One-stop Portal for Teaching and Learning Resources' since 2012, which provides digital resources for educators that can be



3 'How Did the World's Highest Performing Education Systems Approach Distance Learning?', June 2020, National Center on Education and the Economy, p. 1, www.ncee.org.

4 <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-has-the-fastest-home-internet-in-the-region-1.884109>.

5 'How Did the World's Highest Performing Education Systems Approach Distance Learning?', June 2020, National Center on Education and the Economy, p. 2, www.ncee.org.



searched by curriculum subject, grade level, and Hong Kong's four recommended focus areas, while Singapore has a dedicated team of teachers working full time at the Ministry of Education to create digital resources for its 'Student Learning Space' platform.⁶ UAE policy-makers might therefore consider how best to equip teachers with the technical knowledge to ensure they can rise to the challenge of online learning, if called upon to do so. Given the increasing drive to make physical classrooms more tech-savvy, none of these skills would ever go to waste.

#4 Adversity breeds innovation

Despite the pressures on parents, teachers and students of the overnight shift to distance education, the UAE kept calm and carried on, with the local community rallying to support students through their unprecedented 'new normal'. #PandemicCamp was established by two Dubai ex-students, offering free private tutoring in English, Maths and Hindi to students of CBSE schools.⁷ Separately, prominent charity Dubai Cares launched 'Education Uninterrupted', a nationwide fundraising campaign, which called for donations to support the purchase of desktop and laptop computers and tablets for low-income families so that children could participate in distance education courses.⁸ Overseas, skills-based volunteering flourished amidst the pandemic, with

UK charity the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) providing over 17,000 free psychological counselling sessions to children impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown⁹ and UK charity Doctors of the World responding to COVID-19 in 67 countries by setting up mobile clinics and running awareness campaigns.¹⁰ UAE policy-makers should consider ways to harness the grassroots volunteering innovations that flourished under lockdown, and ponder their wider potential to build social cohesion.

#5 Education is a journey, not a destination

Having now had a sector-wide 'trial run' of distance education, UAE policy-makers are uniquely placed to survey the education community, log feedback, and start a meaningful dialogue about future-proofed education models. Regulators should reflect on what can be done better and on opportunities for a more inclusive education framework (e.g., catering to those suffering from long-term illness, people of determination who face particular learning challenges, students from remote areas and elite athletes whose training schedules limit full-time school attendance). The flexibility of a blended education model may well have long-term strategic advantages – and if there ever was a time to explore them, it is now.

6 *'How Did the World's Highest Performing Education Systems Approach Distance Learning?'*, June 2020, National Center on Education and the Economy, p. 2, www.ncee.org.

7 <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-school-besties-give-free-online-coaching-to-children-hit-by-pandemic-1.71581130>.

8 <https://www.dubaicare.ae/supports-us/education-uninterrupted/>.

9 <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/childline-coronavirus-counselling/>.

10 <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/>.

The regulators driving progress amidst the pandemic

UAE Ministry of Education (MoE)

The MoE is the federal ministry with broad competence over public and private education in the UAE.¹¹ Its legal mandate includes establishing and supervising governmental schools and licensing all state and private schools in the UAE.¹² It is tasked with proposing and developing policies, strategies and standards for improving education to achieve the future vision of the UAE, and proposing legislation to ensure the quality of education outcomes.¹³ The MoE responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by:

- accelerating its Smart Learning Program, a joint venture between the Ministry of Education and the UAE Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in cooperation with the UAE Prime Minister's office, bringing virtual classrooms to schools in collaboration with Microsoft Teams;¹⁴
- collaborating with Al Yah Satellite Communications Company (Yahsat) to provide free high-speed satellite broadband services to students and teachers in the UAE who live in areas without internet connection;¹⁵
- supporting the UAE's distance education initiative by boosting free online content to state and private schools across the UAE via the Madrasa e-learning platform, including more than 5,000 educational videos in maths, science and the Arabic language for students from nursery to grade 12;¹⁶
- on 23 June 2020, issuing guidelines on the reopening of educational institutions across the UAE, applicable to all public and private educational institutions (nurseries, schools and universities);¹⁷ and
- on 2 August 2020, completing a comprehensive evaluation of distance learning programmes applied in state schools nationwide and private schools in Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah, based on the recommendations of the Education and Human Resources Council.¹⁸

Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK)

ADEK was established in 2018 as the legal successor to the Abu Dhabi Education Council.¹⁹ It has an expansive legal mandate, including to improve and oversee the quality of public and private education in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.²⁰ ADEK is responsible for licensing entities and individuals who practise in the education sector, developing and implementing professional training programmes, ensuring the quality of education in Abu Dhabi, enhancing and facilitating investment in the education sector, carrying out planning, supervising and ensuring the future development of school buildings, and establishing disciplinary controls for educational entities and their employees.²¹ ADEK responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with numerous initiatives, including:

- utilising its strategic partnerships with Amazon and Alef Education to provide all Abu Dhabi schools and students with the necessary tablets and other devices for remote learning;²²
- facilitating a school-pairing initiative, where lead schools with robust distance learning systems already in place prior to the pandemic were paired with partner schools that needed additional support;²³
- collaborating with teachers and faculty from Zayed University to launch an educational support programme for children of front line healthcare professionals at Sheikh Khalifa Medical City (SKMC);²⁴
- launching an extensive survey to gauge parents' opinions on sending children back to school after the summer break, and identifying preferences for reopening models;²⁵ and
- on 21 July 2020, launching its 'Parents Guide to School Reopening', a comprehensive policy and reference point to support a safe return to on-campus private schooling in Abu Dhabi.²⁶

11 Article 7 of Federal Law No. (1) of 1972 Concerning the Mandates of Ministries and Powers of Ministers.

12 Article 3 of Federal Cabinet Resolution No. (22) of 2010 Concerning the Organizational Structure of the Ministry of Education.

13 Article 8 of Federal Decree Law No. (14) of 2016 Amending Provisions of the Federal Decree Law No. (1) of 1972 Concerning the Mandates of Ministries and Powers of Ministers.

14 <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/details/prime-ministers-initiatives/mohammed-bin-rashid-smart-learning-programme>.

15 <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/fighting-coronavirus-uae-students-teachers-to-get-access-to-free-high-speed-internet>.

16 <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/education/madrasa-links-its-content-with-uaes-distance-learning-drive>.

17 <https://gulfbusiness.com/uae-issues-guidelines-on-reopening-schools-universities-in-september-2020/>.

18 <https://www.moe.gov.ae/En/MediaCenter/News/pages/DLSE20.aspx>.

19 Article 2 of Abu Dhabi Law No. (9) of 2018 Establishing the Department of Education and Knowledge.

20 Article 3 of Abu Dhabi Law No. (9) of 2018.

21 Article 9 and Article 11 of Law No. (9) of 2018 and Article 1 of Executive Council Chairman Resolution No. (24) of 2018 Concerning the Additional Competences of the Department of Education and Knowledge.

22 Ibid.

23 <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/combating-covid-19-coronavirus-cant-impede-education-as-adek-kicks-off-remote-learning>.

24 <https://www.adek.gov.ae/Media-Centre/News/Educational-Support-for-Children-of-Healthcare-Heroes-at-Sheikh-Khalifa-Medical-City>.

25 <https://gulfnws.com/uae/education/coronavirus-abu-dhabi-launches-survey-to-gauge-parents-opinion-on-school-reopening-1.72223498>.

26 <https://www.adek.gov.ae/-/media/Project/TAMM/ADEK/Health/ADEK-PARENT-GUIDE.pdf>.

Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai (KHDA)

KHDA was established in 2006 as the legal successor to the Dubai Education Council.²⁷ It has a broad legal mandate, including developing a comprehensive strategy for knowledge and human development and improving the quality of education in the Emirate of Dubai in coordination with the competent UAE authorities. It is also tasked with establishing educational institutions, attracting private educational institutions to establish branches in Dubai, and licensing and regulating private schools.²⁸ KHDA responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with various initiatives, including:

- launching #InThisTogetherDubai, a portal featuring apps, websites, services and other resources provided free of charge during the distance learning period by private organisations from the UAE and around the world;²⁹
- developing detailed Q&A materials published on its website to comprehensively address questions raised by the school community as and when KHDA received them;³⁰
- working closely with Dubai Future Accelerators, one of the Dubai Future Foundation's initiatives, to implement a series of remote working initiatives, including continuing support for its Rahaal programme, a creative and innovative alternative to mainstream education;³¹ and
- on 5 July 2020, issuing its 'Protocols for the Reopening of Private Schools in Dubai', which requires schools to adhere to 118 protocols issued under 15 categories, to reopen for the academic year 2020/21.³²

Reaching for the stars

When the pandemic hit, the UAE's education regulators were ahead of the curve. The Ministry of Education's Smart Learning Program had been in the works since 2015 and its technology partnerships with the likes of Microsoft facilitated the shift to distance learning. As schools cautiously reopen in September 2020, the UAE's education regulators can continue to drive progress towards a next-generation education model. The building blocks are in place, and with an innovative policy agenda, the sky is the limit.



27 Dubai Law No. (30) of 2006 Establishing the Knowledge and Human Development Authority of Dubai.

28 Article 5 of Dubai Law No. (30) of 2006.

29 <https://inthistogetherdubai.khda.gov.ae/en/>.

30 <https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/studentssafety>.

31 <https://www.dubaifuture.gov.ae/dubai-future-accelerators-goes-virtual-ensure-participants-safety-productivity/>.

32 <https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/news/article?newsId=106319>.

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