Steering Education towards Improved Quality

Policy Context

Since the establishment of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, Dubai has developed a distinct identity by creating a niche for itself, making its mark as the fastest growing Emirate in the UAE. Dubai was the first Emirate to develop strategic development plans aimed at offering high-quality infrastructure, an expatriate-friendly environment, minimal regulation, zero tax on personal and corporate income and low import duties. In 1985, Dubai developed its first free trade zone and this model was very successful in attracting manufacturing, warehousing, distribution and high-tech industries to the Emirate based on the availability of reasonably priced skilled labor, a business friendly corporate environment and advanced infrastructure. As a result, Dubai currently has one of the most diversified economies in the Arabian Gulf region and has developed itself into a center for tourism, banking and financial services, manufacturing, re-export, retailing and distribution. Since the 1990s Dubai has recognized that in order to prosper and grow, it needs to diversify its economy so as to replace the contribution made by the oil sector.

In the 1996–2000 Strategic Development Plan, human resource development was featured as one prerequisite essential to achieve sustainable economic and social development. The development focus shifted from an almost exclusive emphasis on the promotion of the industrial sector towards more attention to building human capital, to upgrading the workforce, and to increasing the participation of nationals in the labor market as the basis for developing a knowledge-based, skill intensive economy. In 2000, the free zone clusters were established to promote the development of knowledge industries and business growth and to attract more foreign private companies to the Emirate. This comprised ten interconnected business parks arranged under five industry clusters across the ICT, Media, Education (Knowledge), Sciences, and Manufacturing and Logistics sectors. The Knowledge Village (KV) was established in

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2002 as part of the free zone 'concept' aimed at the development of a pool of qualified local talent.

As part of the implementation of the Dubai Strategic Plan 2010 (DSP-2010) the emerging development focus led to the establishment of the Dubai Education Council (DEC)[1] in 2005 chaired by the Director General of the Dubai Media and Technology Free Zone whose major objectives were to: (i) improve Dubai's educational sector to match international standards without compromising the UAE's cultural and ideological principles; (ii) promote both the building of a knowledge economy and the strengthening of social cohesion through policy steering, and (iii) to separate the role of the land 'provider' from the regulator and policy maker.

In 2006, as part of the Federal Ministry's efforts to improve UAE's education, the Minister of Education began decentralizing education[2] and transferred the full management of the Dubai Education Zone to the Dubai Education Council that, at the time, included the management of public schools and the regulation and oversight of the private education sector. The agreement was developed on the premise that decentralizing the management of education would provide greater flexibility and transparency in devising and executing short and medium term plans which would in turn contribute to improving not only efficiency and quality but also allow faster response to a changing environment, while at the same time maintaining a high level of cooperation and coordination with the Federal Ministry. In 2010 the responsibility related to public schools was returned to the Ministry of Education.

The trend initiated in DSP-2010 was reinforced with the formulation of DSP-2015 that underscored the vision of transforming Dubai into a hub of business excellence by enabling private sector led growth; promoting human capital excellence and preparing Dubai's workforce for a high value, knowledge based economy; enhancing organizational structures and accountability (measurable results) by means of moving from rules/regulations (inputs based systems) to accountability (outcomes based systems) for improved social services. It became apparent that in order to fulfill this vision Dubai not only needed to prepare its workforce but also needed to attract highly qualified professionals and that one condition to make this possible was having high quality education institutions.

One of the pre-conditions identified by the Dubai policy making group to move ahead with the implementation of the "Growth Strategy" was to improve the quality of private schools for Emirati students, especially as Emirati nationals represented a small percentage of UAE's population. Consequently, the national agenda encompassed a vision to focus on Emirati education and skills development in a way that could ultimately maximize their impact on the country. As a result of the perception that private schools offered better quality education, and because the instruction was

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BOX 3

Main Responsibilities of the Dubai Education Council

- Make suggestions on suitable systems for improving education in the Emirate of Dubai by referring those suggestions to the Dubai Executive Council;
- Draw educational criteria for various education sectors in the Emirate and ensure the implementation of these criteria;
- Improve the role of educational institutions in such a way that would boost their participation in the future;
- Launch educational initiatives which would contribute to the improvement of competence and educational standard in the Emirate;
- Cooperate with the ministry of education and other concerned bodies in developing education and spread awareness on the importance of sustainable development of education.

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often in English, the proportion of Emirati students enrolled in private schools has increased from 34% to 57% over the last 10 years. In 2013/14, there were 30,994 Emirati students in private schools, constituting 12.7 percent of the private school student population. That so many Emirati students enroll in private schools is not the result of any policy campaign but a result of the demand by parents for alternatives to public schooling which was seen as inferior to that offered by the private sector.[3]

In addition, a second important area of focus for policy makers in Dubai was to have the capacity in the Emirate to attract highly qualified professionals (indeed, a labor force) from abroad. It was envisioned that in order to achieve this goal Dubai would create the institutional and policy environment required to address the twin challenges of having an adequate number of education institutions needed to absorb the increasing demand for education that would result from the influx of qualified expatriates, while at the same time ensuring that the education provided by these institutions was of high quality thus making the Dubai education system attractive to them.

Consistent with this vision and to improve the quality of service delivery, the Government of Dubai adopted a new governance framework designed to separate service delivery from policy making.[4] This initiative led to the classification of government authorities and agencies, as presented below.

The mandate of the Dubai Education Council at the time was restricted to overseeing the education sector and so lacked the full authority

FIGURE 7

Classification of Government Bodies

Authority	Laws on planning policy Control over the implementation of plans and policies	• The administrative structure of the government of Dubai • Chaired by the Director-General (member of the Executive Board) • Funded by government budget
Service Agency	Executive functions Provides government services	• Management Foundation (part of the structure of general government) • Chaired by an Executive Director • Funded by government budget in addition to service charges
Trading Agency	The provision of government services in business	• The administrative structure of the government of Dubai • Chaired by an Executive Director • Funded entirely from fees and service income
Public Corporation	Business management for the government	• A legally independent entity • Chaired by the Executive Director • Funded entirely by commercial operations
Independent Agency	The follow-up and control of the government and other functions needed for independence	• A legally independent entity • Chaired by the Executive Director • Funded by government budget

Source: Executive Council, Government of Dubai 2007.

to steer and regulate the sector as well as monitor results. This generated the need to establish an Authority with a broader mandate to stimulate and oversee the performance of education institutions.

When in 2006 the leadership of the Dubai Education Council set out to identify the existing contours of the Dubai educational landscape, it realized that the information required to put together a straightforward diagnostic of the sector was limited. This of course prevented it from fulfilling its critical mandate of steering public and private education institutions so as to make them responsive to the vision and challenges of DSP on the one hand and, on the other, prevented it from appropriately responding to requests from private schools to increase fees. To correct this situation a survey was sent to all education institutions operating in Dubai asking for some basic factual information such as number of teachers; students; transition rates; availability of teaching materials; infrastructure; and so on.

The Establishment of the Knowledge and Human Development Authority

The KHDA was established by Law No. (30) of 2006, by virtue of which it became a recognized public Authority having an independent legal

personality, enjoying financial and administrative independence, and maintaining the necessary legal capacity to carry out all acts and transactions necessary for fulfilling its objectives.

In order to support KHDA's roles and responsibilities, the Executive Council established the School Agency[5] within KHDA with the explicit mandate to develop the school sector by, among other functions, determining the targeted outcomes of the school system; supervising school teaching and monitoring performance to ensure the compliance with quality standards; improving the teaching profession and elevating the position of the teacher in society; granting governmental schools more authority and providing administrative support services.[6]

Later on, at the end of 2007, the Executive Council established the School Inspection System[7] known as the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) with a mandate to monitor schools operating in Dubai. Based on what was already available in Dubai, policy makers involved in the formulation of education policies anticipated that families arriving or residing in Dubai would not only demand a curriculum that satisfied their expectations based on their familiarity with what was available in their country of origin but also the kind of quality commensurate to their own high level of professional qualifications. Key features defined by the policy makers and experts involved in the new monitoring system were that it should be flexible and nimble, and capable of responding to a wide-ranging set of needs and demands of families coming from many different cultures and nationalities. The final design of the new inspection system was thus shaped after consulting with local stakeholders, receiving advice from regional and international experts, and by visiting countries with working inspection systems such as the UK, Scotland, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

The main functions assigned to the DSIB in order to enable it to fulfill the above expectations were to: set standards for education quality including the indicators for measuring them; adopt a reporting system to measure and monitor school performance using those standards and to publish those reports; adopt the necessary practical measures to help upgrade low performing schools; conduct studies and analysis on education quality; etc.[8]

In addition, the KHDA Regulation and Compliance Commission (RCC)[9] was created with the single general objective of establishing and ensuring that the minimum expected standards for schools (in terms of infrastructure, safety, and so on) are in place before they issue Educational Service Permits for all institutes in Dubai. The RCC also handles the complex issue of establishing an incentive for schools through the fee framework mechanism: it permits schools to either increase their fees (with non-profit schools seeing profits or savings returned to the

The Inspection Framework successfully captures all aspects of the rich diversity of Dubai's private schools.

…that drive for transparency is recognized as a central operating principle of KHDA today.

school—rather than, say, going to an owner) and/or to expand their school in response to improvements in quality.

The intent of the DSIB was to promote transparency about the quality of schools in a system that was seen to be operating in the dark. There was seen to be a lack of information about the outcomes of the system as well as about the processes that produced those outcomes. With that aim in mind, the inspection framework was introduced as a means to an end, despite the challenges involved in doing so. The approach was in fact heavily criticized by the general community at first but the KHDA persevered nevertheless and now that drive for transparency is recognized as a central operating principle of KHDA today. What remains to be determined is the extent to which on the one hand transparency has indeed entered into the system and on the other is helping to steer schools to improved performance, as we will see below.

These developments were informed by KHDA's over-arching, three-pronged 'mantra' of quality, access and engagement—an approach and philosophy that was underscored when KHDA revisited its strategy[10] in 2009 and 2010 when greater focus was gained on these three aspects. Indeed, everything that KHDA does is related to improving quality and facilitating access through engagement with the community.

Inspection Framework

The initial task required to accomplish the inspection mandate was setting up a range of quality standards in areas considered important for assessing the quality of services provided by schools. At the diagram below reveals, school effectiveness is assessed in term of students' academic and cognitive outcomes as well as the acquisition of life skills and personal development. In addition, the operation of the school as an organization is assessed along three main dimensions related to how the teaching and learning processes are managed at the classroom level; how the school is organized and managed; and the suitability and robustness of the curriculum.

It was decided that schools were to be inspected yearly by a school inspection team put together by DSIB from a pool of regionally, as well as internationally, experienced experts in similar endeavors. The first inspection of schools took place during the academic year 2008–2009. Three weeks before the visit of the team of inspectors, each school prepared and returned an electronic school self-evaluation report provided by DSIB.[11] The self-evaluation is then validated with information collected from parents and students using surveys; through interviews with teachers, school administrators and school personnel; and through direct

FIGURE 8

DSIB Inspection Framework
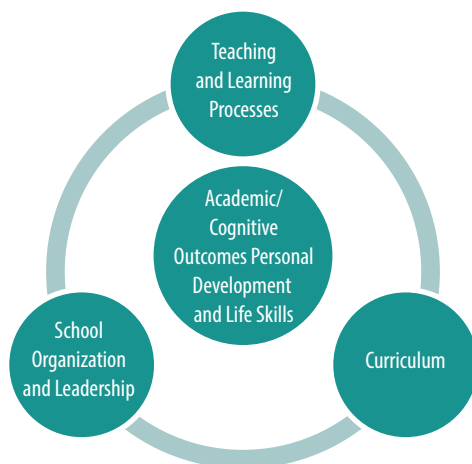
Source: Adapted from DSIB, 2013, p. 124.

classroom observation and review of students work and classifications. The information collected through all these sources is triangulated and collectively analyzed by each school inspection team.

The introduction of inspection was conceived by KHDA's policy makers as one of many policy instruments to incentivize schools and to make them accountable for the service that they provide. Within this framework, it was expected that open information would foster greater competition between education institutions to attract students and at the same time would act as a driver to improve service delivery and enhance education outcomes. The opportunity to be authorized to increase fees was also expected to act as an additional driver to improve school effectiveness and student performance.

In addition, other measures were introduced to complement these initial steps. These included: discussions with the investment community about the demand for schools; the approval of educational permits to open new schools; discussions to approve the appointment of school heads; the regulation of schools to ensure that a minimum quality was respected; discussions with school owners about the terms of the fee framework; and, opportunities for parents to respond to KHDA through surveys on aspects of schools as part of the inspection process, among others. In this way, the important main elements of the system were enhanced and enriched.

The '*What Works*' platform is further evidence of this drive to develop instruments to improve the whole system. As the box makes clear, it was

BOX 4

What Works – from Competition to Collaboration

Several years after the introduction of inspection, a collaborative initiative suggested itself. Supported by both the DSIB and a group of school principals, it was called very simply *What Works*. This series of events brings educators from private schools in Dubai and education professionals together to share and reflect on their good practices, and to provide guidance and support to each other through structured events. *What Works* emphasizes the positive by sharing what good practice looks like in collaboration between schools. It is run by schools for schools with support from KHDA, based on the principle of appreciative inquiry that emphasizes the positive advantages of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

What Works has come about because of the inspection system. It dates back to September 2012 when during a meeting of twenty school heads at KHDA, several proposed the idea of educational conferences whose purpose would be to review good practices identified during the inspection process and to share them across schools. The initial group of four school heads has continued working together and become content advisors for the organization of these events. In 2012–13, more than 1,500 educators participated in the events.

The Event

A *What Works* event is a one-day conference organized around a specific theme. These are identified from topics emerging as important from the inspection process, such as leadership, special needs education, school governance, Arabic and Islamic education, teaching science or math, etc. The first was a generic event after which the leadership group began working towards developing a more focused series of conferences to follow up.

Participants attend a series of plenary and breakout sessions where they listen to teachers and principals who have demonstrated excellence in a specific area of education and are given the opportunity to discuss with them different aspects of their experiences. In addition, schools which moved up their overall performance level on KHDA's annual inspection, showcase their journey in leading their school to a better performance level (from satisfactory to good for instance) and share the key lessons learned, energy and drive with colleagues who are on the same journey. The presentation style during these sessions varies from simple power point presentations by a head/teacher or by multiple teachers and sometimes parents, to simulations that can include students as well.

Key lessons learned through this practice can be summarized as follows:

From competition to collaboration. Until recently, private schools were operating in silos, each working as an island due to the competitive nature of the relationship. People were skeptical that schools will actually work together because they have no common themes or interests, particularly

BOX 4 (continued)

What Works – from Competition to Collaboration

in such a commercial environment. *What Works* was able to break down boundaries and stimulate collaboration across schools in Dubai.

Engaging in development; going beyond measurement. *What Works* has helped to address the needs of low performing schools through informal interventions that are seen to have a greater impact in the 'classroom' going beyond the school inspection rating.

Teachers teaching teachers: For participating teachers *What Works* events present a

professional development opportunity of "*teachers teaching teachers*" using sound and trustworthy evidence coming from their teaching practices; *based on their local experience.*

An intrinsic reward. For many teachers *What Works* has become the first opportunity to present their professional work at a conference of fellow professionals, while they might be used to present to an audience of students and/or parents, getting through the barrier of presenting to professional educators has been for many a rewarding achievement.

conceived as a way of sharing good practices between schools and is now being recognized for its collaborative approach which is helping to break down perceptions of competition between the schools. KHDA fully sponsor the events (though the necessary funding is minimal). Guest speakers, presenters, and the venue are all provided without charge. KHDA has made a specific policy decision not to accept any commercial sponsorship, either from private school operators or education-related companies.[12]

From the perspective of the Dubai Strategic Plan it was assumed that the interaction of incentives and accountability provided by the inspection system would help bring the education sector on par with international standards and best practices and would therefore attract high skilled professionals (and their families). Inspection reports are the instruments that inform the school community with the expectation that parents in particular and the school community in general (including policy makers and government authorities) will use the information provided to make decisions about where to enroll their children, to monitor school performance and to push for improvement in those schools, if need be, and ultimately to make decisions about keeping or withdrawing their children from particular schools, should they be poorly performing. Thus, a strategic policy question to assess the effectiveness of inspection as a policy

This report is also concerned with the range of incentive and accountability mechanisms, including regulatory oversight, investor discussions, the provision of voice for parents and information to them, put into play by KHDA.

instrument is to determine whether poorly performing schools do indeed change practices and internal policies—if they attempt to improve—in response to accountability pressures set by parents, by policy makers and by education authorities including KHDA. But above and beyond just looking at the effectiveness of the inspection regime, this report is also concerned with the range of incentive and accountability mechanisms, including regulatory oversight, private education sector investor discussions, the provision of voice for parents and information to them, put into play by KHDA.

Endnotes

1. The Dubai Education Council was established by Executive Council Decree No. (11) of 2005.
2. Ministerial Decree number 3/97 of 2006.
3. This is in part due to the language of instruction. English is the prevailing language in the labor market in Dubai, so families prefer that their children go to an English speaking school, at least from secondary education onwards.
4. Policy making and service delivery are de facto "separate" but a governance framework ensures consistency and alignment between the two.
5. The School Agency was established through the Executive Council Decision No. 11 of 2007.
6. See Article 5 of Executive Council Decision No. 11 of 2007.
7. The School Inspection System was established through the Executive Council Decision No. 38 of 2007 issued on 25 December 2007.
8. See Article 3 of Executive Council Decision No. 38 of 2007.
9. The Regulations and Compliance Commission has since been renamed the Regulations and Permits Commission.
10. It should be mentioned that the initial strategy was developed through extensive community consultation including YouGov surveys, though it was never publically released.
11. This is an electronic form that schools access via the internet.
12. While it is still too early to measure impact, there is much positive feedback from participants which is very encouraging. How this translates to actual improvements in student outcomes will be difficult to discern but, above and beyond this, what KHDA are attempting to put in place is a shift in thinking in the school ecosystem towards collaboration, networking and sharing good practice.