



**H.E. Dr. Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi
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Gulf Affairs: What strides have been made in the UAE's higher education sector? Any notable achievements over the past few years?

Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi: Before we address higher education in the UAE, we have to bear in mind that the UAE was only established in 1971. We are a young nation. My late father had to go abroad to Egypt for his education as this was the only option back then.

So the first phase of education in the UAE was focused on ending illiteracy—that was a big achievement. The second phase was about establishing a local higher education system. This began with the founding of United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in 1976. The third—and current—phase is boosting Research and Development (R&D). We want to make the UAE a hub for higher education in the region and greater R&D is a key component of this strategy.

So far, we have had a lot of success in meeting our higher education aspirations. The UAE is ranked no. 1 in the world when it comes to the percentage of international students who are studying here. We also have some of the highest rates of female participation in higher education. As well, at any given point we have up to 150,000 students—both international and national—in the UAE. Two-thirds of these students

are enrolled in private institutions, and about one-third in public universities. In addition to UAEU, we have set up the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) and Zayed University (ZU). In the past five years, we have also seen an increase in the number of patents being awarded in the UAE, a strong indication of the progress we are making in R&D. These are all big achievements in higher education, and *inshallah* we will have many more in the years to come.

Gulf Affairs: How is the Ministry of Education aligning its roadmap with UAE Vision 2021? What role does higher education play in the vision's success and the transition to a knowledge-based economy?

Al Falasi: As the UAE's Minister of State for Higher Education, I am focused on improving the quality of higher education, expanding R&D and fostering greater collaboration with the private sector. I believe enhancing these areas are fundamental to building a sophisticated knowledge-based economy in the UAE.

Education was a strategic imperative of our founding father His Highness the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. In an increasingly integrated global economy, and with the advent of the digital age and technological advancements, education has an even more salient role today.

Furthermore, education plays a key role in inspiring Emirati youth to think differently, be creative and approach problem-solving with a critical mind—these are skillsets of the future that are integral to driving the UAE's sustainable economic growth and development.

Gulf Affairs: In light of the challenges associated with job creation in the UAE, what role is the Ministry of Education playing to help increase employment opportunities for university graduates? Is there coordination with the private sector to create industry-education linkages?

Al Falasi: The Ministry of Education is committed to ensuring employment opportunities for university graduates and recognizes that collaboration with the private sector is essential to meeting this goal.

One of the measures we have taken is to establish the Education and Human Resources Council (EHRC), which is chaired by His Highness Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. As Minister of State for Higher Education, I have the honor of serving as secretary of this council, and all other members are ministers as well. The main objective of the EHRC is to bridge the gap between higher education and the needs of the private sector.

In addition, we are working closely with industry partners to facilitate their contribution of resources and expertise by providing research funding and professional training opportunities, among other areas of collaboration.

The Ministry recently entered into an agreement with Siemens, which has been a trusted partner of the UAE for more than 40 years, to roll out the Siemens Mechatronics Certification Program at select universities across the country. We have also forged a strategic partnership with General Electric that will pioneer a new career-oriented innovation and talent development program for Emirati youth. In addition, we supported the launch of Huawei's education challenge to help plant the seeds of innovative thinking, equip students with the creative skills and foster a culture of entrepreneurship that is integral to the UAE's

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transformation into a knowledge-based economy.

Furthermore, a key area of collaboration with the private sector is setting up a robust internship pipeline to help facilitate greater employment of Emirati university graduates in the private sector. Internships offer a risk-free way of testing different career paths. Currently, two-thirds of internships for Emirati university students are offered by the public sector but only seven percent are in the private sector.

We will also be establishing a private sector council that will focus on a number of areas, including serving as a sounding board for multinational companies to share feedback about what skills are required for particular job functions and specific industries. It will also be crucial to get industry input into skills that will be needed in the future with the objective of preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist—but will 10, 20 and 30 years down the line. There is a debate now underway about whether we invest heavily on expertise or more transferable skills. I believe we need a balance between the two.

Through these efforts, we are helping to ensure that our higher education system better aligns with the needs of the labor market and that our university students are graduating with the experience and skills they need to help realize the UAE's vision, positioning our country for future success.

Gulf Affairs: What is the status today of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the UAE? How is it evolving?

Al Falasi: When it comes to TVET, the challenge is predominantly about perception and culture. In the Middle East, broadly speaking, we have high aspirations for our children. That usually translates to wanting them to be either doctors or engineers when they grow up—this was the case in my family as well. So there is that high yet narrow expectation.

It is also important to keep in mind that our system has historically rewarded traditional forms of higher education such as a bachelor's degree. In some companies and federal universities, a graduate's salary will be mapped based on his or her degree—this is not the correct approach nor does it take into consideration the realities of the labor market. There are TVET graduates globally who get paid even more than those with bachelor's degrees. The expectation that pay must be dependent on degree level needs to change. Pay grades should actually depend on the expertise and skills each person has.

That being said, the perception of TVET programs in the UAE has evolved over the past 10 years. We have seen more and more students consider vocational education over time. TVET used to be for hobbyists—but now that our economy is very industry-based, there is a growing recognition about the need and value of this higher education path.

We also need to become more flexible with our approach to higher education to ensure that students pursue degrees that are most suitable for them—whether that be bachelor's degrees or TVET—and can then find meaningful employment opportunities that align with their interests and skillsets.

HCT is a good example of the TVET model in the UAE. It is an applied institute that resembles vocational education. Although HCT diplomas take two to three years to complete, the number of graduates employed within six months is much higher than for both UAEU and ZU. In fact, HCT graduates are the most employable, even though they do not hold bachelor's degrees.

Gulf Affairs: How is the expansion of private universities and international branch campuses (IBCs) in the UAE changing traditional public education? What impact does this have on the country?

Al Falasi: The expansion of private universities and international branch campuses (IBCs) is having a very healthy impact on the overall higher education ecosystem in the UAE. We are a very diverse country with over 200 different nationalities living here. As a result, our higher education system, too, must be diverse to reflect the varied academic interests of the current and future university student population.

For example, the London Business School (LBS) recently celebrated its 10th anniversary in Dubai. It has the same admissions requirement as its London campus. IBCs like LBS, Sorbonne, and NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) increase the attractiveness of pursuing higher education in the UAE—students receive the same university experience and quality of education but in a location that may be more accessible for them.

You also have to remember that each IBC was invited to the UAE for a specific reason and keeping in mind the future needs of our country's economy. For example, instead of setting up an MIT branch in Masdar, we created a local institute affiliated with MIT. So there are different models of education. Masdar is a collaborative approach, whereas NYUAD and Sorbonne are branch campuses. You really need a mixture of these different higher education models to have a diverse offering.

At the same time, higher education institutes like the American University of Sharjah (AUS) take another approach. The UAE wanted to create a specific university focused on teaching outcomes. AUS has one of the best civil engineering programs in the entire Middle East, among other highly-regarded academic programs.

In addition, we have the benefit of individual emirates' taking an active role in shaping their own higher education ecosystem. In Dubai, there are more management institutions such as LBS as a result of the number of people who work in professional and financial services. Abu Dhabi instead skews more toward R&D, given the number of industrial firms in the emirate.

Gulf Affairs: What is being done to improve the state of R&D and scientific output in the UAE? Can you list some recent milestones or achievements?

Al Falasi: Governments all over the world understand the importance of investing in R&D as it opens up opportunities for faster economic growth and creates sustainable wealth that is independent of natural and non-renewable resources.

Furthermore, there exists a direct correlation between a country's focus on R&D and its economic competitiveness. The UAE government recognizes this and the primary role R&D plays in economic progress as reflected in the UAE Vision 2021 which highlights science, technology and innovation as primary drivers of growth and progress.

It is with these aspirations in the mind that the UAE's Science, Technology & Innovation (STI) policy was announced in November 2015. It offers a comprehensive framework for achieving a true knowledge economy, including targets to increase R&D investment by threefold and increase the percentage of knowledge workers in the country to 40 per cent by 2021.

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In addition, the STI policy includes a set of educational and scientific initiatives that will help prepare our university graduates to align with the needs of the future economy. Specifically, the policy aims to redouble the focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in all UAE educational institutions as well as develop specialized R&D infrastructure to support entrepreneurship.

UAE University in Al Ain has been a pioneer in R&D and subsequently, Khalifa University, Masdar Institute and the Petroleum Institute have been driving scientific discovery in the UAE for many years. These four institutions—one federal and three local—have developed a strong R&D foundation for our country. And with the merger of Khalifa University, Masdar Institute and the Petroleum Institute, we are leveraging their combined resources and expertise to strengthen the country's output of quality research.

Gulf Affairs: What role does Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and digitization play in the UAE's higher education sector? How do you foresee this evolving in the coming years?

Al Falasi: The UAE has always been a leader and first-mover in many areas, but we have lagged behind when it comes to ICT and digitization in higher education.

Historically, the perception was that online learning meant lower quality. Yet we have studies that show that when implemented correctly, the educational outcome associated with online learning is strong. Studies have even shown that with blended learning—a combination of online and in-person learning—retention of knowledge is even higher.

In any case, as our system matures and we refine our regulations, we will grant a lot more autonomy to institutions to more fully embrace ICT in higher education.