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Gulf Affairs: KHDA was established in 2006 as the quality assurance and regulatory authority that oversees private education in Dubai. What have been KHDA's main achievements since its launch a decade ago?

Warren H. Fox: The government has worked hard to attract internationally-renowned universities and colleges to set up international branch campuses (IBCs) in its various free zones. Executive Council Resolution no. 21 (2011) established that higher education institutions in the free zones be brought under KHDA's authority. Now all the academic qualifications of students from approved institutions are certified by KHDA, which in turn are recognized in Dubai by all public and private entities for all purposes.

In 2008, KHDA also established the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB). This is an independent board of higher education experts from around the world. UQAIB makes recommendations about whether to issue academic authorization to new institutions, as well as whether to renew authorization for existing universities and colleges. It also approves all new degree programs before they are first offered to students. Importantly, the quality of any branch campus or degree program must be equivalent to its parent institution. This is known as the Equivalency Validation Model (EVM).

At the same time, the EVM approach is flexible and recognizes different national accreditations within home countries. This makes it easier to attract international providers and students. Dubai can now boast being an attractive destination for international higher education, and 80 percent of students report high levels of satisfaction at IBCs.

KHDA has partnership agreements with other Quality Assurance (QA) agencies in the US, the UK, Australia, Malaysia and Hong Kong. KHDA has cooperated in QA reviews, shared processes and data, exchanged information and collaborated with staff from QA agencies in these countries.

KHDA has also set up the Quality Beyond Boundaries Group (QBBG), an international group of key higher education hubs and major Transnational Education (TNE) providers. QBBG connects QA experts from around the world to support the modern global education journey, and it encourages countries to collaborate within a multilateral partnership approach. KHDA's higher education initiatives in quality assurance have been presented at prominent international conferences including Going Global, The Economist, OBHE and WISE.

Attracting, as well as retaining, high-quality international students is key to the UAE's goal of developing a skilled workforce. To that end, the federal government has amended labor policy to allow students to work part-time, which has helped students cover living expenses and tuition costs. In addition, new resident visa policies have made it easier for universities in the free zones to issue visas to foreign students.

Gulf Affairs: What are the main challenges facing higher education and vocational training in the UAE today? What is KHDA doing to help address them?

Fox: The main challenges facing higher education in the UAE today relate to ensuring that qualified school leavers meet the admissions requirements of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), especially in English and math.

The National Agenda was announced at the beginning of 2014 by H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid. Two major targets were announced: By 2021, the UAE will be among the 15th and 20th highest performing countries in TIMSS and PISA, respectively. This will support Dubai in achieving the goal of being in the top performing regions, and it will also ensure school leavers meet the admissions requirements of HEIs.

Students from outside the UAE wishing to enroll in HEIs in Dubai, and who do not currently meet admissions requirements, have various options. They can access a range of foundation or vocational programs that will prepare them for a successful transition to higher education.

Gulf Affairs: What is your quality assurance approach toward HEIs and their programs? What regulations are in place to ensure success?

Fox: UQAIB's EVM tracks the quality of the various branch campuses in three key areas. Firstly, the degree programs and parent institution of the IBC must be accredited by the official higher education system in that country. Secondly, the standards used in the home country must be acceptable to Dubai and the international higher education community. And finally, there must be evidence that the quality of a HEP branch and its programs are equivalent to its home HEP. Such evidence would preferably include existing

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cross-border quality assurance provisions from the HEP home country.

Broadly, our aim at KHDA is to continuously improve quality rather than to simply meet certain minimum standards. While an institution may meet the quality assurance requirements of their parent institution's QA body, both KHDA and UQAIB encourage the sharing of good practices whenever possible. We currently have examples of practices that were first developed at Dubai IBCs and were later exported to home institutions.

In order to support the sharing of good practices, KHDA has developed a series of UQAIB Good Practice Guides that help institutions determine the ways in which various quality assurance-related issues can be developed in the Dubai context. These guides do not expand the scope of the UQAIB requirements, but instead addresses issues that are already found in the current version of the UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual. The guides are not prescriptive, and they focus on providing exemplar options that can be adapted by each institution to meet their individual needs. Good Practice Guides are currently available to support HEIs in areas such as: the assessment and moderation of student work, external evaluation of standards of student achievement, grievance procedures, industry and market engagement, localizing the curriculum and student feedback.

Gulf Affairs: Dubai has the largest number of IBCs in the world, whereas neighboring Abu Dhabi chose to limit its IBC offerings. Can you explain Dubai's approach?

Fox: The semi-independent nature of the UAE has led individual emirates to develop free zones, which exempt organizations operating within each zone from federal regulation. One structure has been developed under KHDA's umbrella to regulate free zone institutions in Dubai; another structure has been created to regulate those located in free zones in Ras Al Khaima (RAKFZ).

Regulatory structures have evolved to license and accredit institutions in free zones that do not require the Council on Academic Accreditation's (CAA) approval. UQAIB was established to be complimentary to the CAA, and the UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual was written in this manner. KHDA works with the CAA on a variety of matters pertaining to higher education—from data sharing to new HEP applications in the emirate.

While the federal quality assurance mechanism licenses institutions based on meeting a common set of minimum standards, UQAIB's policy simply ensures that each foreign institution provides an educational program equivalent to that of its home campus. Awards from IBCs are from the parent campus and are internationally accredited. IBCs that are CAA-accredited institutions offer degrees from the UAE, and these awards carry local rather than internationally-accredited degrees.

It is up to each institution to decide if they need local accreditation. However, most IBCs opt for international accreditation, which students appear to prefer. Enrollment in UQAIB-reviewed institutions has grown over the last eight years, an indication of strong student satisfaction. The Dubai Higher Education Landscape publishes enrolment data, and this can be found in our publications section on the KHDA website.

A national qualification framework has been established, and this will help develop a process to increase

the recognition and validity of training at all levels for the benefit of students. The federal government and each of the emirates collaborated on this initiative. It's a significant step forward for solidifying the UAE's position as a regional education hub.

Gulf Affairs: Course offerings in Dubai's private universities seem to focus on subjects related to business, law, communications and technology. On what basis are these course offerings determined?

Fox: KHDA makes sure that HEIs offer programs that align with Dubai's Vision 2021.

Gulf Affairs: Research output is central to how HEIs are assessed in more developed countries. How does KHDA measure research output in Dubai? Can you share some key successes?

Fox: Many of the HEIs were initially established several years ago as teaching institutions. Increasingly, research activities have become a focus area for faculty and students. Partnerships link some of Dubai's IBCs with various industries and organizations, mostly in Europe and Asia.

Research is known to be at the heart of sustainable development worldwide. As the UAE, and in particular Dubai, diversifies its economic resources to reduce reliance on oil revenues, there's a growing awareness about the importance of academia and industry working more closely together.

To this end, KHDA has facilitated the establishment of the Dubai Research Steering Committee, which was launched in 2014. The Committee's objective is to raise the level of research-related collaboration among higher education campuses, to share available resources for the greater benefit of all and to enhance ties to local industries. Within a short time, the Research Connect @Dubai newsletter was set up to showcase local research, and its first edition included 30 articles. More than 40 articles will be found in the second edition, which will be published soon. All that being said, what is lacking is a clear list of national priorities for research as well as a competitive funding program similar to those found at HEIs abroad.

Gulf Affairs: From your perspective, what are some of the priority issues GCC countries should focus on when it comes to improving their higher education systems?

Fox: The first would be to provide a first-rate higher education sector. The second would be to ensure that degree programs provide students with skills that are catered to the knowledge economy. The third, and final priority, would be to foster a learning environment that supports the development of happy and empowered students.