CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is a priority sector in the UAE where Government treats it with so much preference that it has a dedicated Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR). However, from an objective perspective, despite the efforts, higher education still faces challenges; most significant being: (1) speed in technical and scientific excellence, a challenge posed by developed countries (2) aligning graduates with the labor market (3) the challenge of meeting and keeping up with educational strategic needs of a frequently evolving sector (4) dislocation between universities programs offered and requirements of UAE labor market and (5) weaknesses in existing government database. Most of these challenges can be easily overcome by more efficient coordination between policy and practice. In this paper, the following principles and approaches are strongly put forward as solutions to aligning educational policy goals in the UAE: (a) Quarterly sub-review of curriculum and harmonizing all reviews by end of each year (b) tailoring courses offered by tertiary institutions to the Labor market (c) establishment of concrete collaboration between schools of higher learning and Labor market (d) empowering the appropriate authority in doing more in the area of database update and (e) accelerating development in technical and scientific education with the view of attaining excellence. These new strategies, if adopted, would (a) throw overboard the hurdles preventing wider expansion in the education sector (b) create a situation where graduates from schools of higher learning would suit demands of UAE labor market. (c) Higher education students would be more motivated to work towards their respective carriers seeing the harmony in their studies and macro-economy viz-a-vis society (d) attaining excellence in technology and science would be the order of the day, hence, moving at pace with developed countries. This paper concludes by

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cautioning that potential obstacles foreseen in achieving the outlined goals are very minimal on condition that the appropriate oversight organization is adequately resourced and empowered to be effective and efficient.

KEYWORDS: *Higher Education, Engineering, Modern Technology, Self-Employment.*

HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES

Higher education is defined by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as the education imparted in the universities, colleges of technology, and other institutions of post-secondary education and includes all research institutes, experimental stations, and clinics operating under the direct control of or administered by or associated with higher education institutions (OECD 2002).

Assigning the whole portfolio exclusively in the name of Higher Education and Scientific Research in UAE, is indeed a clear indication of the unreserved commitment from the side of the government to reaching high in this area indispensable area of human endeavor. Both Emirates Competitiveness Council (ECC) and National Qualifications Authority (NQA) in their recent reports; The Heart of Competitiveness: Higher Education Creating the UAE's Future, Issue 6, and April 2014 and UAE Education System: Overview of Performance in Education February 2013 respectively, have made mention of numerous achievements witnessed so far in the arena of Higher Education in UAE. It would be interesting to know that they have hitherto acknowledge some challenges needed to be addressed with the sole purpose of realizing the dream of UAE Vision 2021 to make the country a leading nation in the world. This is a good signal indicating willingness to make amends to the identified lapses proven beyond reasonable doubts.

Challenges identified by this research are discussed thus:-

Higher Education participation is on the go in UAE. For instance, there was rise from 185 in the year 2000 to 25% in 2008.**(20 UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education. Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution).** Despite this appreciable rise in enrolment in higher education, it is unfortunate that technical and scientific education do witness less patronage from students both UAE national and expatriates. The commission for Academic Accreditation CAA report 2011-2012 has revealed that: 50% of students enrolled in UAE Higher Education pursue degrees in business or engineering fields; 60% of the accredited academic offerings of higher education providers are in business, engineering and health sciences; 60% of the UAE nationals studying abroad enroll in business administration or engineering programs. It is a clear manifest that science and technology education is at the rear in terms of participation by the students in the institution of higher learning. Reaching the zenith of development and rubbing shoulders with the world think-tank can only be achieved through advancement in these areas of human endeavor which is at the receiving end in UAE higher education. Survey studies have revealed that students enrolling in higher education do avoid technical and scientific courses due to the critical thinking involvement much needed in these fields. They do prefer courses they describe in their submissions as cheap and soft, involving less critical thinking and less time

consuming as well. Through the research it was also realize, quite a number of students and even most of the members of the public faulted the idea of categorizing engineering under non-technical courses.

According to encyclopedia Britannica 2014, "Technical Education, the academic and vocational preparation of students for jobs involving applied sciences and modern technology. It emphasizes the understanding and practical application of basic principles of science and mathematics rather than the attainment of proficiency in manual skills that is properly the concern of vocational education. Technical education has as its objectives the preparation of graduates for occupations that are classed above the skilled crafts but below the scientific and engineering professions. People so employed are frequently called technicians". From this definition, it will be clear that attainment of greatness in the modern technology requires technical education. Majority of students enrolling in courses for instance engineering are doing so with the sole aim of being recognized as professionals and from another angle it could be realized that placement of the two individuals, one in engineering and the other in in technical education is not the same, for engineer as a professional usually has the higher placement that the latter when it comes to field of work. This is also another subtle factor making a great deal of students to be placing more preference to engineering courses for example to technical courses. The same story applies to scientific education as well. It is good to know but simultaneously disheartening that usual technical education is being considered as an alternative for people that failed to make it to professional courses and even Arts, Social sciences, Administrative and Management courses. In the candidates' perception, technical education is hardly available at degree level contrary to the former. And it does happen that the candidates and their guardians aim at courses offered at degree level or their wards should obtain degree.

Likewise, scientific education does get similar treatment from students. This is a field of education that involves in-depth research leading to a breakthrough innovation.

Second issue posing challenge to the Higher Education in UAE is failure to match the graduates with the labor market demand. The first challenge discussed above leads to this problem. OECD report 2012 put forward that close examination and analysis of the higher education programs offered in UAE by accredited institutions revealed an obviously existing gap between higher education institutions and the skill needs of employers. Clear cut demarcation between rational reason of why one is enrolling in higher education and the designated outcome markedly exists among students of institutions of higher learning. Not only in the name of aiming to be employed, the issue of self-employment should also come under scrutiny. So the markets do really suffer from this negative aspect.

The daily evolving sectors do also pose challenge to higher education again. Ability of the institution to withstand this challenge by updating curricula to meet up those challenges is inevitable for taking higher education to the next level. Research has shown that in the part of the institution while making effort by some of them to come with new disciplines in order to stand the test of new world order, discouragement through non-participation by the students in those newly developed courses is painstaking factor of challenge. On the other side of the coin, the instructors and/or the institution concerned actually render little or no effort in dusting off the misunderstanding of the students. So it usually ends up by having

exodus of students from those courses to the so called popularly known courses. Usually a seemingly a form of compromise do exists here. Thinking of the income that could be lost if students are not admitted for their chosen fields of study is a hindering factor towards putting a stop to this culture.

Other challenges include dislocation between universities programs offered and requirements of UAE labor market as deliberated above and weaknesses in existing government database thereby the relevant authority not mounting due surveillance to check this problem and making sure of unconditional compliance to the provisions thereto.

Solutions towards square-facing and expunging the listed challenges are summarized below:-

- It is indeed a great achievement for the UAE to have separate body with full portfolio overseeing the affairs of higher education. This makes it much easier for implementing the amendments and realizing positive outcome with greater efficiency. The government should prescribe same or even a better treatment to the individuals with technical education. Thereby, treatment in the market should be strictly based on what one can offer. What are the innovations one can bring forth? Definitely this would make candidate for higher education to start having rethink. Enlightment is an indispensable ingredient to realizing that. Publicizing achievements attained or innovations brought forth by technical education sectors would definitely make it an attaractive sector for the youth. This is different from the traditional practice of annual rewards given to the achievers in professional fields only.
- The government should give scholarships in those areas of interest to her citizen and even international students to work together with the nationals in a common sphere as complementary unit of a single indivisible organism. Therefrom interest in the enrolment in the field would skyrocket beyond the level of expectations, hence the ultimate breakthrough in term of further development. Researches done by those scholars on scholarships would be beneficial.
- In case of self-sponsored individuals, the higher institutions of learning via government instruction should make those courses cheaper, hence the increase in the level of enrolment.

CONCLUSION

The UAE government has what it takes to achieve her vision of 2021 in higher education sector due to the spectacular effort made. For the relevant authority to have acknowledged some lapses despite achievement, indeed it is a spectacular call to duty and readiness to check those lapses. Certainly, if the gap between the higher education and labor market is addressed, there will be a vibrant showcase of unprecedented achievement. Addressing the dichotomy between technical and professional courses would ultimately help in addressing the challenges.

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