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SMART LEARNING

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HBMSU's role
is to educate
people in what
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government, says
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DR MANSOOR AL AWAR, CHANCELLOR,
EXPLAINS HOW HAMDAN BIN MOHAMMED
SMART UNIVERSITY IS SUPPORTING
THE UAE'S SMART GOVERNMENT AND
INNOVATION INITIATIVES

BY DAVID INGHAM



Dr Al Awar: Though initially reluctant, faculty have now embraced the university's social platforms.



Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University is preparing to play a major role in the UAE's push to become one of the world's leading knowledge economies. Originally established in 2002 as ETQM College, the institution in Dubai Academic City has set out to offer something quite different from the plethora of existing higher education institutions in the country.

Its commitment to e-learning as the main method of course delivery is one obvious differentiator, along with an emphasis on research and its commitment to total quality management, both in its own operations

and in the content of the courses which it offers.

"We have two competitive advantages: we are the house of quality management and excellence in the Arab World; secondly, we are the house of e-learning in the Arab World and the Middle East," explains Dr Mansoor Al Awar, Chancellor, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU).

"We have offered things nobody else has offered. We offered, in 2006, a masters in something called organisational excellence, a unique program. We offered a masters in something called change and innovation management.

"The vision was clear: If the Arab World would like to advance, we have to adopt the concept of total quality management. We were saying that quality is the spine of any knowledge-based economy in the world."

One thing HBMSU definitely hasn't and won't do is chase student numbers at any cost. This, Dr Al Awar believes, is precisely what is wrong with many universities in the region. "If you see the other higher education institutions in the Arab World, they compete on one dimension, which is the capacity," he says.

"We believe that universities in the Arab World are not contributing to the growth of the economy of their country. On the contrary, they are providing the market with unemployment and unemployment will never become a positive parameter in terms of growth of the economy."

Now, well into its second decade of existence, the organisation has three schools, of Business and Quality Management,



Health and Environmental Studies and e-Education. From the time of its inception, HBMSU has worked hard to establish links with industry bodies and educational institutions around the world.

Its aim is to learn from the best, while ensuring that course content and delivery is relevant to the Arab World. This approach has resulted in programs like the Executive MBA in Islamic Finance. This international degree was developed with University of Catalonia in Barcelona and graduates gain a dual degree from both institutions. "It's a well-articulated, structured program that even the Europeans would recognise," says Dr Al Awar.

Dr Al Awar believes HBMSU has a big part to play in the UAE's push towards smart government and its drive to become the world's most innovative society by 2021. In support of the UAE's innovation drive, HBMSU will launch an 'Incubation Centre' in March. As with its Executive MBA, the institution has reached out to leaders around the world to establish best practices and the highest standards.

"The first thing we did was share our vision with the

“THE VISION WAS CLEAR: IF THE ARAB WORLD WOULD LIKE TO ADVANCE, WE HAVE TO ADOPT THE CONCEPT OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT.”



University of Stanford, the godfather of Silicon Valley, and the University of California, Berkeley, people that had experience,” says Dr Al Awar. “They have agreed, both of those institutions, to come on our advisory board.”

The idea to establish the Incubation Centre was inspired by HBMSU’s master’s program in innovation and change management, which has seen a large number of participants establish successful businesses. University attendees will be at the core of the Incubation Centre’s activities, but the whole Arab World will be targeted. Applications to join the centre will be open from February.

The university’s commitment to e-learning is one of the factors that make it stand out. Around 20% of its faculty are in Dubai, with the remaining 80% located all over the world.

“Those associates contribute to the design of the program; you have a group of intellectual assets that will help you design the course on international norms and standards,” says Dr Al Awar. “You are getting the same standard of education that an instructor is delivering in Berkeley.”

Lectures are, therefore, predominantly virtual, but Dr

Al Awar has no doubts that attendance and interaction are unaffected, if not improved, compared with physical lectures. “The learners are much more privileged than in a conventional classroom,” he says. “Sometimes, if you’re a learner in a group of people you might keep your question to yourself. In a dashboard, anybody can ask a question by writing it and you don’t feel that embarrassment.”

Virtual lectures are supported by self-paced learning and face to face interaction with faculty, which constitutes up to 25% of the total program. Dr Al Awar says that students have no problem embracing e-learning and many faculty, at first lukewarm to the idea, have come round and are now enthusiastically engaging with the university’s social platforms.

“This is something our deans and academicians were very reluctant towards, but what is the point in being a smart university if we don’t have this?” asks Dr Al Awar. “Myself, deans and members of faculty are now responding to student feedback.”

HBMSU has taken several steps that underline its belief in the importance of research. The Centre for Arabization and Program Integrity (CAPI) has been established to translate important international books, programs and learning resources into Standard Arabic. Translators must not only be experienced in the field of translation, but also have a proven understanding of a text’s subject matter.

The university now publishes a total of eight academic journals, covering areas as diverse as education, the public sector and Islamic finance. In February, HBMSU plays host to Innovation Arabia 8, an annual forum for idea exchange, which will feature academic research papers on issues such as quality management, e-learning excellence, HSE and Islamic finance. As Dr Al Awar points out, “innovation and creativity doesn’t come without research”.

With its innovative approach to learning and commitment to total quality management, HBMSU believes it has a vital role to play in the UAE’s transition to smart government. “I think HBMSU has evolved to a level where it is sufficiently established and well-structured to be able to cater for the needs of smart government,” concludes Dr Al Awar. “Our role is to educate people, in how to be able to use smart government and what are the characteristics of a smart government.

“It goes hand in hand with quality management and excellence, because smart government is, at the end of the day, all about services. Unless your service processes have been optimised, you’re not smart.” ■