



eLearning: A Cure to the Middle East's Higher Education Problems

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Before considering difficult questions such as whether quality is really relevant in the context of higher education or whether students are entitled to be thought of as customers, perhaps it is worth tackling much more fundamental questions:

- What would you do if you had a region with a population that exceeded 400 million but that still had more than 60 million illiterate men and more than 65 million illiterate women?
- What would you do if the education system did not cater to everyone's needs and operated more on the preservation of meaningless standards as opposed to helping raise standards of learning?
- What would be the solution to a failing higher education system that is based on a brick-and-mortar mentality rather than the provision of learning opportunities?
- What should be the reaction to external reports, from organizations such as the United Nations Development Program's that have been highly critical of the failing education provisions in the Middle East region?

This is the challenge the Middle East region faces at the moment. Most countries are wrestling with serious issues of capability, capacity and effective education provisions. The best way to describe the previous initiatives undertaken by various governments to overhaul their higher education systems is akin to setting up chairs on the sinking Titanic's deck. There is a constant injection of immense resources to solve various chronic problems, but with little effect. The traditional mind-set of managing volume rather than providing learning experiences still prevails, the focus on credentials rather than enablement is still prevalent, and peripheral issues such as physical environment and facilities instead of knowledge and learning development are still the main focus of academic leaders.

In many instances, there is a mentality that considers quality to be a process of raising the bar, putting out too many conditions and raising fees in an exorbitant manner. The motto that many higher education institutions adopt is "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

A new vision is born

The political leadership of some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and in

particular the Emirate of Dubai, has decided to address these issues and look at alternative ways of addressing the chronic problems of higher education provision. Having been convinced the Middle East region's higher education system needs a major overhaul and should include radical thinking, the questions that started to come down from the political level included:

- How can we address the requirements of a modern economic environment that is propelled by knowledge as the commodity product?
- How can we create opportunities for all in terms of education and learning?
- How can we create educational provision mechanisms for talent development that serve all of the key areas of economic activity?
- How can we raise standards of education and learning by driving quality and excellence?
- How can we put in place a high-value, cost-effective education system?

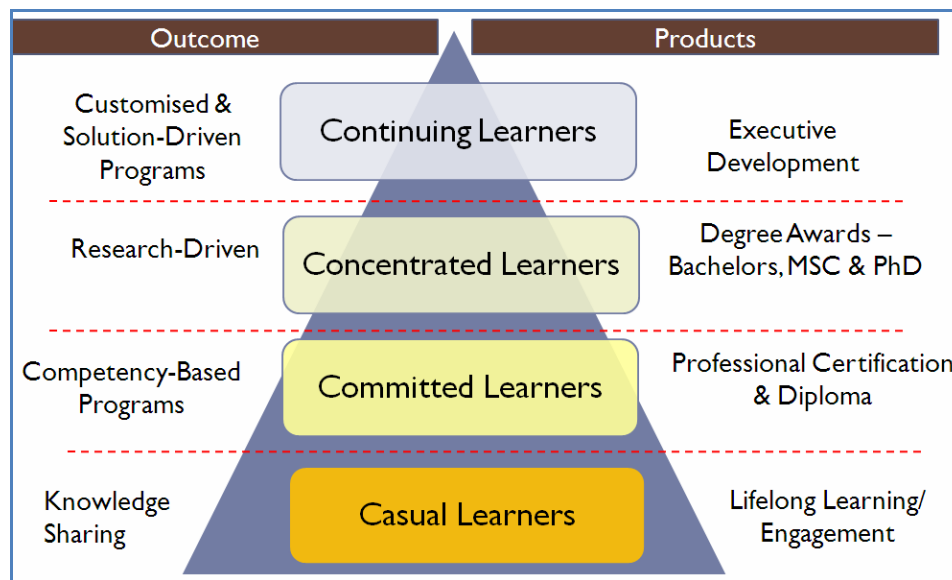
The eTQM College

The strategy adopted in the Emirate of Dubai progressed one step at a time. The eTQM College was launched as a pilot project in 2002 to look at alternative solutions to the long list of problems and challenges determined by government authorities, existing provider universities, regulatory bodies and employers. The eTQM College was launched with the following principles in mind:

- To focus on lifelong learning as opposed to educating for life.
- To make learning affordable and change the motto to "if ignorance is expensive, education should not be so."
- To provide wider access by creating opportunities for all.
- To make learning flexible by incorporating different styles of learning and differing requirements.

Figure 1 illustrates the model adopted in 2002 that breaks the mold in terms of lifting barriers to learning, creating open access, emphasizing lifelong learning and focusing on the development of executives.

Figure 1: The learner-centered model



The figure shows that at the basic level, everyone is entitled to learn and progress through life. In most cases, learning can be associated with what people do in their professions and work environment—hence, the emphasis placed on building competency, attaining professional development and equipping individuals with the knowledge capability to allow them to add value in their workplaces. Academic programs in the traditional sense represent only 20% of the total population of learners.

It is important to note there is an extremely high percentage of executives who have been disconnected from education and learning for many years. The common claim is the lack of time and learning opportunities. There is an additional factor that prevents executives in the Middle East from pursuing learning—they are expected to know everything about everything. It would seem odd if they are seen attending classes and focusing on self-development.

This taboo was challenged by creating a virtual executive club (VEC) that supports executive development by removing all of the barriers and perceived challenges they face in terms of time, concentration and relevance. Additionally, a knowledge product was developed using the notion of “for me only,” which allows executives to consume knowledge at their own pace, place, time and convenience.

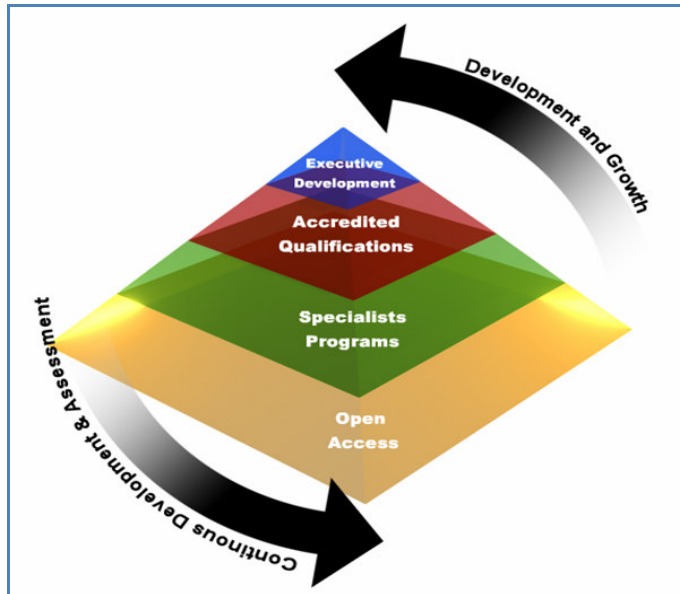
One size doesn't fit all

If learning is a common right, then surely the approach is to move away from the one-size-fits-all doctrine and create individual needs at the heart of everything a modern university ought to be doing. The approach should be driven by the voice of the customer through a pull mechanism rather than the push mentality most higher education institutions

use. Not only was the decision made at the onset to eliminate the word “student,” but the word “education” was also diluted to make learning the key element.

The learners were segmented according to different levels of their journeys and different requirements. As Figure 2 shows, there are casual consumers of learning who are happy to dip into learning experiences at their convenience without any specific goal and significant commitment.

Figure 2: The eTQM College’s lifelong learning philosophy



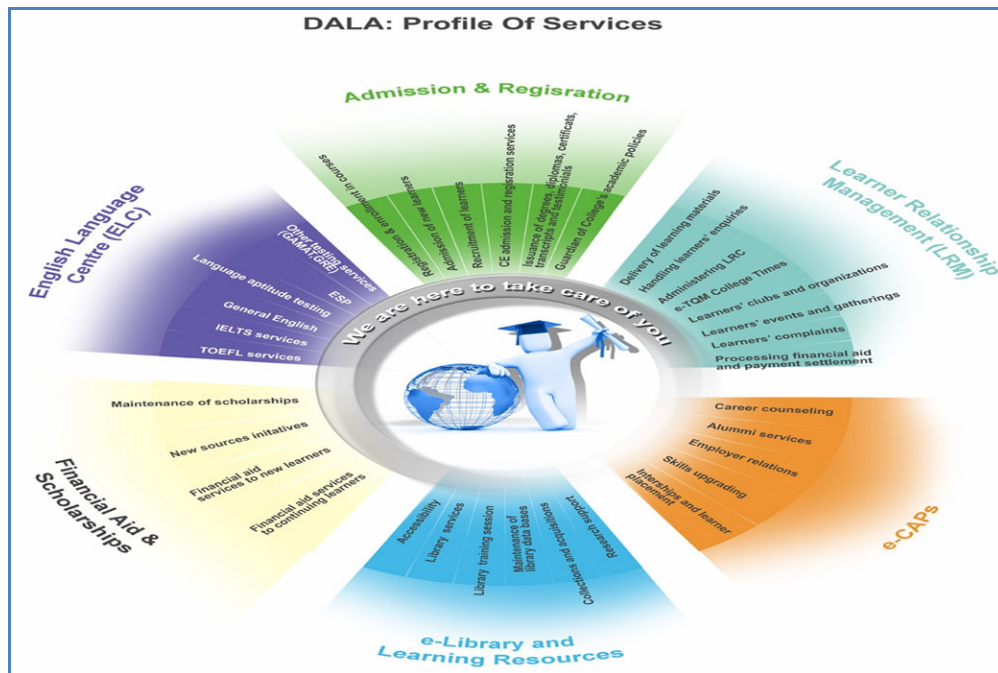
There are also committed learners who are progressing in their careers and have specific needs to support their roles. The conventional students who seek academic qualifications have been categorized as concentrating learners. In most cases, these learners have taken time to focus on their university education without any other disruptions. The final category, the executive level, is referred to as committed learners. This category is for individuals who do not necessarily seek to be certified or academically qualified but wish to replenish their knowledge needs so they can continue to be up to date in their management and executive thinking.

Promoting e-learning

To meet the requirements set out by the political leadership in 2002 and bearing in mind the challenges traditional higher education institutions are face, e-learning was chosen as an alternative to classroom-based teaching. The decision was made to use blended learning that would increase the chances of success (see Figure 3). Blended learning lets a learner be in the driver’s seat through self-learning combined with distance learning. The real value add with lifelong learning is the changing role of academicians by helping them

become learning mentors and coaches as opposed to teachers. Bearing in mind that e-learning requires a change in behavior, some of the learning was allowed to continue using conventional, classroom-based input, which gets reduced as more and more learners build confidence and take responsibility for their own learning.

Figure 3: Learning support environment



The problem with e-learning is it will not work in the context of a conventional approach. Furthermore, it is not effective if the higher education institution's philosophy is still driven by a brick-and-mortar culture. For this reason, the eTQM College was designed with the mind-set of reengineering the learning environment and to ensure:

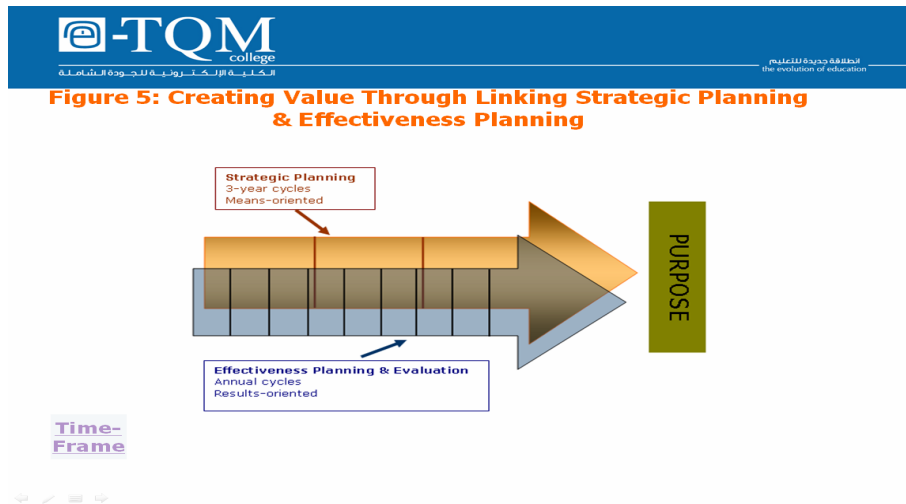
- The whole cycle of learning experiences is learner-centric.
- A process-oriented approach supported by quality at its core was adopted at each stage of the learning value chain.
- A horizontally integrated perspective was adopted, with creative processes, delivery processes, relationship-based processes and support processes working in harmony (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: eTQM College’s blended learning approach



In terms of governance and quality impact, a comprehensive and integrated model was introduced. This learning-centric approach used value as the currency for dealing with learners and creating high levels of satisfaction. Quality at the core means the robustness of the management systems, curriculum-development approaches, delivery approaches, support infrastructure and services are of the highest quality standards possible. Quality is measured through a balanced scorecard perspective (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Creating value through linking strategic with effectiveness planning



This has enabled the eTQM College to build confidence, rely on innovative thinking, operate as a seamless value chain, build positive relationships with its learner community and function as an open system with a wider impact.

Do we have the means to rejuvenating higher education in the Middle East? Yes, we do. After nearly eight years of innovation and experimentation, eTQM College is now officially the first online university in the Middle East (www.hbmeu.ac.ae). It is an institution

that has challenged the status quo and demonstrated there are alternatives that could cure the problems that have hampered progress and advancement in higher education for many years.

The eTQM College—now called Hamdan Bin Mohammed eUniversity—practices quality in all aspects of its operations. It functions like any other business enterprise by focusing on learner experiences, value creation and knowledge as a commodity product, relationship management, performance impact and competitiveness as one of the main goals. The university has received a lot of international recognition and has benefited from engaging high-quality individuals and credible institutions that are like-minded.

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