



## Distance Learning in UAE: An Integrated Smart Experience

*Today, we are witnessing how the world is turning to digital knowledge and keeping pace with the accelerating transformations at all levels. Perhaps the most important of these transformations is distance learning which has brought about a scientific revolution in the field of education. This form of education saves the countries of the world from the collapse of the educational system in light of the spread of the new coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic which has disrupted the wheel of life all over the world.*

With the emergence of a few COVID-19 cases in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), our wise government decided on March 22, 2020, to temporarily implement the distance learning system but later extended the implementation of the policy up to the end of the current academic year 2019/2020. The system is supported by a network infrastructure, which is one of the best in the world. After a period of implementing this new system, the UAE has proved its ability to keep pace with changes at a high speed in times of crisis, confirming its high readiness in this crucial sector of society.

The Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, attended the first day of distance learning for students, as part of the preventive measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His Highness said: «Today, I virtually attended the first remote school day in the UAE. [Some] 1.2 million students joined in from our government schools, private sector schools and our universities. Our education and learning drive will never stop, no matter the circumstances.»

Sheikh Mohammed said that schools stopped but education won't stop, as the UAE is the most prepared country for e-learning in the world. «We heavily invested in smart learning during the past 10 years and today we reap the fruit of this investment with smart systems in our schools and an integrated infrastructure, creating a platform for lessons to be taught to all stages,» Sheikh Mohammed said.

**«We are proud of this educational achievement in the UAE which aims to completely move the Ministry of Education to the stage of a smart ministry and build a technological system that provides smart educational services easily and at any time.»**



### Smart solutions

«Under the guidance of the Council of Ministers, the implementation of the distance education system will continue until the end of the current academic year 2019/2020 in all public and private schools and higher education institutions in the country,» Dr. Amna Al-Dahak, spokesperson for the Ministry of Education (MoE), said in a briefing on the distance education system.

She added: «The decision comes with the aim of ensuring the continuity of education in the country under exceptional circumstances, while maintaining the security and safety of our students and the school community.»

Dr. Amna said that the Ministry is constantly working to «improve the distance learning programs and to further develop them by adding smart solutions and interactive applications for the various levels of study.»

Among the planned additions are the Alef and Alex platforms for the upper-level mathematics, Matvak platform for early childhood stages, and the Nahla and Nahil platforms specialized in raising Arabic reading skills.

### Remote lectures

In turn, universities in the United Arab Emirates keep up with distance education using the best existing technology. Prof. Mesut Idriz, Chair of the Department of History and Islamic Civilization at the University of Sharjah, told Flashes in an interview that distance learning, recently coined as



e-Learning, is not a new phenomenon since several educational institutions around the world and in the UAE, particularly at the University of Sharjah (UoS) already had it.

«UoS has been implementing it in various fields of studies. But what is challenging now is that the current global crisis caused by Covid-19 has caught many; be it the learning institutions, academic and administrative staff as well as the students unawares of this unprecedented short notice for a shift to e-Learning,» Prof. Idriz said.

«However, from the day the UAE government started taking measures to control the spread of the pandemic in the country, UoS, perhaps like most of the

educational institutions, took immediate initiatives and planned accordingly. From the top management all the way to the bottom, UoS implemented all the possible and best methods in training and making each of the staff and the students to not only be conscious of the ongoing plans but also act with the best mold of approaches. UoS worked and continues to work tirelessly around the clock to ease teaching and learning especially now that the final exams for the Spring Semester 2019/2020 are around the corner. The UoS family is fully ready and equipped to carry on this task as well as embrace the classes of the Summer Semester 2019/2020,» he added.

### **Saving time**

Commenting about this educational experience, Yasmine Al-Khalil, an Arabic language teacher at the Al Rushed American School, told Flashes: «The rapid technological changes in the world have made a qualitative leap in the vital sectors and the education sector has received a large share of this development. We are fortunate that UAE has an advanced educational system that is among the most advanced in the world.»

**«The experience of distance learning in UAE is positive and successful. It is an effective model in times of crisis. Many countries in the world can emulate it.»**



Al-Khalil hailed the Ministry of Education for its efforts to counter the spread of the Covid-19 virus by providing the necessary knowledge and educational support to enable students to read and study anytime.

«We are proud of this educational achievement in the UAE which aims to completely move the Ministry of Education to the stage of a smart ministry, and build a technological system that provides smart educational services easily and at any time. Finally, we are fully aware that technology has become an imperative necessity to develop the education sector and open new scientific horizons for the future. The wise government of the UAE has always sought to improve all sectors and facilities in our homeland for all people who live in it.»

### **Integrated methodology**

For her part, the family advisor, Fawzia Abdullah Basahi, told Flashes that as an authorized trainer with the Knowledge and Human Development Authority, she believes that the decision to implement distance learning was taken in the best interest of protecting students from the risk of contracting Covid-19 as well as advancing education in the UAE.

«Students' stay at home must be fully exploited. Students need to work on developing educational methods; for example, following the method of entertaining educational competitions at home, such as reading and increasing of productive instructions for students. These competitions must be accompanied

by a gift for the winner as an incentive for him/her to continue» Basahi said.

As family advisor and authorized trainer, Basahi has used her time during the stay-home period to offer educational training programs and targeted courses online. She applauded the UAE's wise government and decision-makers who took great care for student safety and the development of the education sector in the country.

The COVID-19-induced lockdown that has caused disruptions in the world has served to tell a positive story about the vision that the UAE leadership had when it started investing in technology in the education sector and converting cities into smart cities.

The experience of distance learning in UAE is positive and successful. It is an effective model in times of crisis. Many countries in the world can emulate it and take advantage of the smart solutions that it provides along with the various interactive applications that facilitate the progress of the educational process for teachers, students and their families. After the implementation of the distance learning process, the Ministry of Education is planning to move to a new and more general stage through the application of smart learning that integrates the basics and methodology, and ensures continuous upgrading of the educational system in the country.