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Learning from Afar: ACTVET's virtual learning experience

Promising Practice 2021

Context

Outbreak of COVID-19

Whilst primarily a health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a wide-reaching impact on everyday life. This has been particularly felt in the education sector with schools closing and students around the world missing out on their education.

The response

In UAE however, a strategy known as the 'Schools Business Continuity Plan' had already been developed in order to mitigate risk and reduce disruption to education in high-risk instances such as a pandemic.

Thus, UAE's Minister of Education immediately introduced 'Learning from Afar', an initiative based on the emergency strategy with the aim of ensuring continued learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial focus

The programme initially focused on all grades in Abu Dhabi's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) school system. The TVET system consists of 18 public schools with a total of 7,921 students, two Polytechnics, four Further Education Colleges and four Health Science Colleges with a total of 5,782 students.

Objectives

The main objective of the programme was to allow children and adolescents in Abu Dhabi to continue their education in a safe environment. This involved:

- **Setting up and running a central operations room;**
- **Teaching students, parents, teachers and principals how the 'Learning from Afar' programme worked, including training in online learning;**
- **Having curricula in place designed for flexible use;**
- **Having technical support available both to schools and directly to students; and**
- **Ensuring teachers knew how to implement online teaching, and to make digital resources, online assignment submission forms, and e-books available for immediate use.**

Overview

Implemented by: The Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ACTVET)

Where: Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Theme: Distance learning

Status: Programme active since March 2020

ACTVET's ultimate goal is to increase the number of skilled Emirati youth in rewarding career paths and foster life-long learning and personal development.

Mission statement: *Regulate the TVET sector in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi to build a national workforce that is capable of effectively participating in the sustainable development of the country.*



The 'Learning from Afar' model

With crisis planning and flexibility central to the UAE's education system, when the pandemic broke and the schools closed, the country was already in a strong position with a system for remote learning ready for rapid roll-out. Within 12 hours of the schools physically closing their doors due to the pandemic, the 'Learning from Afar' initiative was launched. Initially focusing on Abu Dhabi, the programme managed to roll-out to 90% of students in the capital within the first four hours of operation.

The initiative centred around the availability of technology and its application to smoothly support 'Learning from Afar' schooling. In order for that to happen, an operations room was set up to provide the technical requirements for remote class teaching, which was supported by an IT Support Centre, a Call Centre, and a Social Media Communications Centre. The operations room was available every day to assist school administrators with their needs through real-time, onscreen support. Administration staff ensured that teachers were available and able to use the technology to teach so that students were able to continue their studies.

Each school also set up classrooms with computers for live streaming. Additionally, teaching staff needed to be tech savvy to deliver online lessons and the curriculum needed to be flexible enough to allow for the new circumstances in which the lessons were taking place. As many of the teachers already had experience and training in online teaching and used e-resources as part of their lessons previously, they reported being fully prepared and only needed to adapt to real-time 'teaching to a monitor'. Some teachers sat at their desks and taught with the camera, while some stood at their whiteboard and taught.

Additional assistance was offered to the students and to the teachers in the form of a direct technical support line.

Outcomes

Continuity of learning

Throughout the highly disruptive COVID-19 pandemic, UAE demonstrated that children can be both protected from the virus and continue to receive a high standard of education. The 'Learning from Afar' initiative ensured the country's education programme continued with minimal disruption to both teachers and students. Additionally, school administration, teaching staff, students and parents adapted well to the initiative, which means the programme has been able to continue until the health crisis is resolved.

Quality assurance and cost saving

The standard of teaching has been quality assured throughout the programme via the Operations Room. This set-up requires fewer inspectors whilst also improving consistency of assessment between the inspectors. Providing the 'Learning from Afar' initiative has, therefore, created unexpected financial savings.

Student support and social contact

The need for students' social contact was factored into the learning timetables to avoid social isolation, and the students reported finding online learning fun and often stayed online after their classes finished to communicate with their classmates. Additionally, an online survey was conducted with all students which was used to influence future 'Learning from Afar' planning, as well as the creation of a 'Top tips for students' guide.

Keeping parents informed

Online parent meetings continued to be held regularly to ensure parents feel involved and have the chance to get their questions addressed. A parents' survey was also conducted, and the results were used to create a "Ten tips for parents" guide.

Involving the teachers

Similarly, teachers were also asked to share their thoughts in an online survey and a Virtual teaching standard guide was produced.



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Challenges and insights

The health crisis changed dynamics, creating common scenarios where both parents and children were working and learning at home in the same environment. Challenges arose around families sharing space in the home and a lack of quiet rooms for study, as well as issues with technology including sharing of devices and connectivity.

On hearing of these challenges, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed AlNahyan, the Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, directed the Ministry of Education to provide every student, in every school throughout the UAE (whether public or private, or a UAE national or not), with a tablet, free of charge.

The future

The ACTVET school system continues to fully function with online learning being carried out remotely through virtual environments. The school system is showing resilience in its approach to maintaining its quality of teaching by facilitating dialogue and giving parents, teachers and students a platform to record any concerns.

Throughout the health crisis, ACTVET has been proactive, agile and innovative in its approach to education. Forward planning and a rich evaluation and learning model has enabled UAE to not only transform its teaching set-up but also further develop and enhance its education system.

Learn more

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