



Private Schools in Dubai The Evolving Government and Private Sector Relationship

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Summary

Dubai has one of the most privatised education systems in the world. Schools follow one of 13 different curricula and there is considerable variation amongst them in terms of the quality of education they provide. Working with private school investors and operators, the Government of Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) seeks to improve school quality and advance the interest of parents and students. In this way, Dubai's 'soft infrastructure' can be further developed to complement the existing hard infrastructure.

Dubai's Education System

Dubai is one of seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates, located on the southern shores of the Arabian Gulf. In just over half a century, it has evolved from a traditional farming, fishing and pearling community, centred around a centuries-old trading post, to a leading global trading and tourism hub and the Middle Eastern headquarters of many international companies. Its development has not been restricted to just ports, factories, residences and transport connections; it also embraces a cultural environment that supports a large and diverse expatriate population in addition to its local citizenry. To cater to the needs of a demanding and burgeoning population, many public and private schools have been established.

The current Dubai school system consists of 79 public schools administered by the federal Ministry of Education and 148 private schools offering a range of different curricula. Even though the public Ministry schools offer a free education for UAE nationals, more than half of all UAE national students are enrolled in private schools. UAE national parents choose private schools for their children because they believe private schools offer a better quality of teaching and learning, better English language instruction and preferred peer networks.

In contrast, nearly all expatriate families enrol their children in private schools in Dubai to further their education because admission to public schools is not permitted. More than 87% of the entire school student population is enrolled in private schools, making Dubai one of the most privatised education systems in the world. There are 13 different curricula to cater to the diverse needs of the expatriate population. Indian, UK, US and private Ministry of Education curriculum schools dominate the landscape. With nearly 200,000 students in private schools, this sector has annual revenues in tuition fees of over three billion dirhams per year (approximately 860 million US dollars).

Hard and Soft Infrastructure – Key Economic Drivers

When many people think of Dubai, visions of iconic landmarks, such as the Burj Al Arab, Palm Jumeirah, Burj Khalifa and numerous shopping malls, spring to mind. However, Dubai's significance stems from far more than its outstanding iconic features and its geographical location; it is a thriving metropolis with a significant economy and an international business hub. Amongst its many features, the city hosts well-designed residential areas, state-of-the-art office accommodation, networks of wide roads and modern public transportation facilities. The establishment of this hard infrastructure, sitting alongside a regulatory environment conducive to business, including many Free Zones, has attracted many international companies to establish their regional headquarters in Dubai.

While hard infrastructure is necessary, it must be accompanied by soft infrastructure to create an economic centre that can compete on a global scale. Good quality schools, safety and security, cultural attractions, social networks and cultural attributes are essential elements within the soft infrastructure of a city like Dubai. A city that is safe and where its people feel protected and secure, with outlets for people to meet together socially in a convivial and tolerant atmosphere, and which is considered a suitable environment in which to raise a family, will attract a sufficient number of people with the requisite expertise and skills to drive its growth. Dubai is such a city. It is imperative to establish both hard and soft infrastructures to ensure future growth.

Over the past two years, there has been a change in focus in relation to the economic development of Dubai towards stimulating the economy through attracting industry and building its human capital resources. An essential part of this change requires good educational infrastructure across schools and higher education institutions. In other words, if schools provide a good quality of education, expatriates will be more likely to move to Dubai with their families to work. At the same time, resident expatriate and UAE national children will benefit from a higher standard of education. Thus, the combined effect will increase the human capital available to service Dubai's growing economy.

The quality of Dubai's schools is relatively good. Recent international assessments provide evidence that the quality of education is better, on average, than other countries in the region although not as high as the OECD scale average. Both the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted in 2007 and the Programme of Student International Assessment (PISA) conducted in 2009 highlighted the benefits of education provided by Dubai's private schools. Against the backdrop of uprisings in neighbouring countries during the 'Arab Spring', the combination of good quality schools, a growing economy and a stable political environment in Dubai has resulted in heightened interest over the past year from families to move here.

Regulation of Education

The move towards a global knowledge economy has heightened the need for governments around the world to invest in education and improve the quality of schooling. For the public school system, this generally involves supporting improvements in teaching, updating curricula and investing in new infrastructure. Additional measures in western countries include providing funding directly to private schools and entering into public-private partnerships to fund school improvements and encourage innovation.

There is no doubt that education is viewed as a public good universally; it is essential for all children to have access to quality schooling that enables them to fulfil their potential. Advocates of public schools promote equity and the ability of any child, no matter his/her social background, to gain academic success on the basis of his/her capabilities. Advocates of private schooling promote the rights of parents to choose a particular school for their child. In an education system like Dubai's, where there is no public school option available for most children of school age, appropriate regulation of private schools is required to ensure students are being given an acceptable quality of education as well as to ensure schools are complying with relevant laws and regulations. Conversely, in the west, the regulatory supervision of fee-paying private schools is relatively limited and declining as private schools tend to be providing a good standard of education. In addition, a competitive market ensures that schools satisfy the demands of parents and students as the public system is always a fall-back option.

The regulation of private schools in Dubai is aimed at promoting quality and providing access to schools for all children. Private education, particularly where for-profit schools are in the majority such as is the case in Dubai, is inherently different to public education and needs to be regulated differently. The World Bank noted in its landmark report *The Road Less Travelled* that engineering solutions, such as changing the curriculum, need to be counterbalanced with other measures of accountability and incentives to generate education improvements in the developing Middle Eastern and North African regions.

KHDA has heeded this advice and strengthened the evolving government / private sector relationships using these additional measures of accountability and incentives. KHDA has commenced Dubai's participation in international assessments to benchmark the performance of Dubai's schools against other countries and enable comparisons to be made between schools and across curricula. In the most recent PISA study, specific feedback has been provided on the performance of students at each school to help schools examine those factors that can help improve their scores in the future.

Results of school inspections, now in their fourth year, provide parents with information about the relative quality of schools and allow them to make an informed choice about schools for their children. This transparency of information from an objective team of educational experts has generated significant improvements in the quality of schooling over this short period. It serves as an effective accountability mechanism for schools to work hard to build a positive relationship with parents and students. It also ensures that important local factors, like the teaching of Arabic and Islamic Education, are being effectively covered by schools. Without this transparency mechanism, schools may reduce their focus on quality and let their standards slip to the ultimate detriment of their students.

Dubai prides itself on its business-friendly environment and the education market is an important element of this environment. People willing to make the investment to establish schools are encouraged to do so. Advice is provided to support the supply of additional capacity to cater to enrolment growth in a way that matches the demand for particular types of schools in certain areas. While direct financial support to private schools by way of subsidies, grants or student vouchers is not provided by the Government of Dubai, other incentives to investors are employed. These include the allocation of suitable land at affordable leasing rates as well as the commencement of programmes to facilitate working with the processes of other government departments and utility providers.

The effectiveness of a good regulatory environment should not be underestimated. While many western countries are moving towards deregulation and loosening controls over schools, emerging systems such as Dubai's focus on positive regulation to ensure the interests of parents and students are safeguarded. Regulation of bylaws, teacher qualifications and other education-related areas, when coupled with compliance checks, ensures standards in schools are maintained. In addition, fee regulation maintains the balance between the intent of permitting school owners to make a satisfactory return on their business investments whilst limiting fee increases to prevent profiteering.

Next Steps

The vision of a first-rate school environment for its children is common to governments around the world. It is doubly important in a place like Dubai, which requires quality schools to educate its local citizenry, to lead the country into the future as well as assure expatriate families that the education of their children will not be disadvantaged by attending a school in Dubai. Quality schools are one of the essential building blocks to stimulate the current and future growth prospects of the local economy. Only by developing the soft infrastructure necessary to attract and retain high-quality talent can Dubai drive growth and develop its future human capital resources.