

INSPECTION REPORT

Universal American School

Report published in April 2014

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

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GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT Universal American School

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Location | Al Rashidiya |
| Type of school | Private |
| Website | www.uasdubai.ae |
| Telephone | 04-2325222 |
| Address | Dubai Festival City, P.O Box 79133 |
| Principal | Dr. Daryle Russell |
| Curriculum | US/IB |
| Gender of students | Boys and Girls |
| Age / Grades or Year Groups | 3-18 / KG 1 to Grade 12 |
| Attendance | Outstanding |
| Number of students on roll | 1419 |
| Largest nationality group of Students | US |
| Number of Emirati students | 116 (8 %) |
| Date of the inspection | 10th February to 13th February 2014 |

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The context of the school

Universal American School, located in Festival City, provides education for girls and boys aged 3 to 18 years. 1419 students, from 861 families. The school follows a US curriculum with close links to the IB principles for the Elementary and Diploma grades. 149 students had been identified with special educational needs. 116 Emiratis, approximately 8%, attended the school, with 70 nationalities enrolled in total.

External assessments such as MAP, ACER and IBDP, along with PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, were administered in the school.

All of the 139 teaching staff were appropriately qualified. 25 new teachers had been recruited during the academic year. There were 19 teaching assistants. An Interim Director had been in post for six months and was preparing a handover to a permanent Director before the start of the 2014 -2015 academic year. The senior leadership team consisted of the Interim Director, Elementary and Secondary principals and the Building and Facilities Manager. The school was owned and managed by Educational Services Overseas Limited [ESOL] whose directors made up the Board of Governors.

Overall school performance 2013-2014

Good

Key strengths

- The school had set up comprehensive systems to inform teaching strategies to meet students' needs and learning styles more effectively in response to the recommendations of the previous report;
- Students' attitudes, behaviours and understanding of Islamic values and global cultures were exemplary and there were excellent teacher- student relationships;
- Leaders were increasingly focused on the quality of instruction in all phases and subject areas;
- The elementary curriculum was being modified to reflect the US model;
- Arrangements for the protection and support of students were outstanding across all phases of the school.

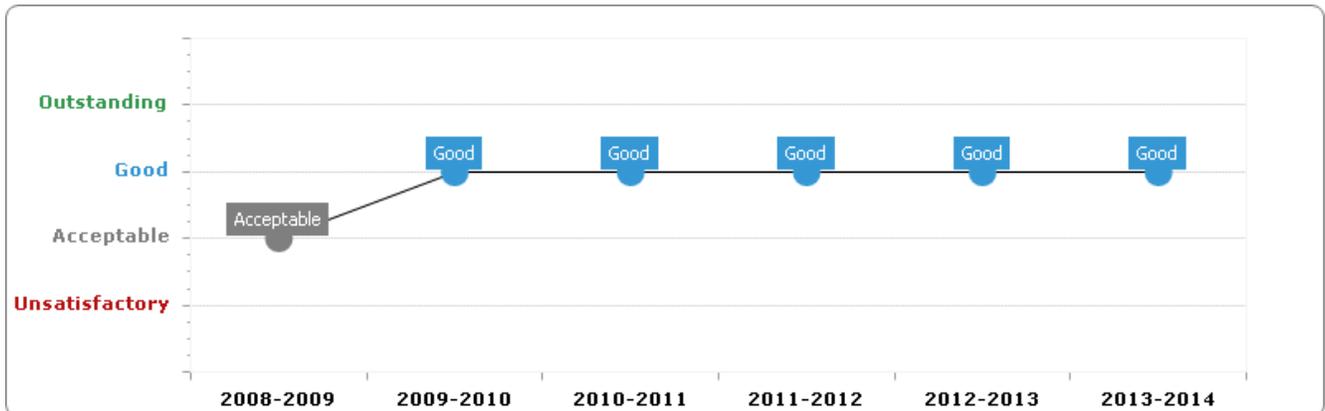
Recommendations

- Use assessment information more effectively to meet the individual needs of students who have different developmental stages and learning styles;
- Use externally validated assessments to moderate the school's own assessments and to give staff, the students and their parents, a realistic view of students' attainment in an international context;
- Systematically improve teaching quality by identifying and sharing best teaching practice and by regularly monitoring to ensure outstanding pedagogical practice occurs;
- Ensure attainment and progress in Islamic Education and Arabic improve by challenging students and developing their higher order skills;
- Embed appropriate instructional strategies in lessons and a range of activities to ensure students with special educational needs, including those with gifts and talents, make the best possible progress;
- Ensure that each teacher accepts responsibility for the teaching of literacy and teaches each student to apply, reason and analyse, their thoughts, ideas and hypotheses.

Progress since the last inspection

- A more coherent curriculum structure and rationale, particularly for kindergarten children and elementary students, articulated through an excellent range of experiences, was now in place;
- The school had established the necessary infrastructure to ensure assessment data was available to inform teaching and learning strategies;
- Self-evaluation and improvement planning, especially teacher appraisal and associated professional development, remained an aspect where senior leaders could raise their expectations and accountabilities;
- Teaching and student progress in Arabic had improved in elementary; however attainment and progress in Islamic Education and Arabic required improving in all phases.

Trend of overall performance



How good are the students' attainment progress and learning skills?

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|---|----------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Islamic Education | | | | |
| Attainment | Not Applicable | Acceptable | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| Progress | Not Applicable | Acceptable | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| Arabic as a first language | | | | |
| Attainment | Not Applicable | Acceptable | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| Progress | Not Applicable | Good | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| Arabic as an additional language | | | | |
| Attainment | Not Applicable | Acceptable | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| Progress | Not Applicable | Good | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| English | | | | |
| Attainment | Outstanding | Good | Good | Good |
| Progress | Outstanding | Good | Good | Outstanding |
| Mathematics | | | | |
| Attainment | Good | Good | Good | Good |
| Progress | Good | Good | Good | Good |
| Science | | | | |
| Attainment | Good | Good | Good | Good |
| Progress | Good | Good | Good | Good |

[Read paragraph](#)

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|------------|--------|------|
| Quality of students' learning skills | Outstanding | Good | Good | Good |

[Read paragraph](#)

How good is the students' personal and social development?

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Personal responsibility | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding |
| Students' understanding of Islamic values and their local, cultural and global awareness | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding |
| Community and environmental responsibility | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding |

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are teaching and assessment?

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|---------------------------------|-------------|------------|--------|------|
| Teaching for effective learning | Outstanding | Good | Good | Good |
| Assessment | Good | Good | Good | Good |

[Read paragraph](#)

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|--|-------------|-------------|--------|------|
| Curriculum quality | Outstanding | Outstanding | Good | Good |
| Curriculum design to meet the individual needs of students | Good | Good | Good | Good |

[Read paragraph](#)

How well does the school protect and support students?

| | KG | Elementary | Middle | High |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Health and Safety | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding |
| Quality of Support | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding | Outstanding |

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

| | Whole school |
|--|--------------|
| Quality of leadership | Outstanding |
| Self-evaluation and improvement planning | Good |
| Parents and the community | Outstanding |
| Governance | Good |
| Management, including staffing, facilities and resources | Outstanding |

[Read paragraph](#)

How good are the students' attainment and progress?

In Islamic Education and Arabic attainment was acceptable overall. It was at least good in the other three key subjects across all phases and outstanding in English in the Kindergarten. Elementary students showed an appropriate knowledge of key Islamic beliefs and practices and had adequate recitation skills. Older students demonstrated a proper understanding of the meanings of the Quran's verses and Hadeeths they studied, and the consequences for lawful and unlawful acts. In Arabic as a first language, most students had secure listening and speaking skills and acceptable reading comprehension; however, a significant minority had gaps in their basic writing skills including spelling and basic sentence structures. In Arabic as an additional language, most students across the school had acceptable listening and speaking skills but struggled to decode, understand and form Arabic script independently. A majority could use a few familiar sentences to talk about themselves using very simple Arabic. Children built a sound foundation of English literacy skills in Kindergarten, but, for too many students, this expressive capacity was not developed as fully as possible in Elementary. Middle and high school students acquired the skills to study complex aspects of literature and to lead communications in English. The application of mathematical skills in a range of challenging settings was a developing feature across the school. Children understood that numbers have patterns. These were used to solve challenging problems in elementary phase and older students could design and solve real-life issues using a range of detailed skills. In science, a majority of students had sufficient skills in a range of disciplines to exceed expectations. Their independent work skills and use of appropriate technical vocabulary required development.

Progress across all key subjects and phases was similar to attainment although in Arabic as a first and as an additional language progress was better than attainment in Elementary. In Islamic Education elementary students made expected progress in reciting the Surahs and in identifying different Islamic behaviors and consequences. Similarly, older students were developing an understanding of the Islamic teachings on modesty and spiritual purification. In Arabic as a first language, elementary students made significant progress in developing their listening, speaking and reading comprehension skills. Progress in middle and high was in line with expectations. Progress in writing was the weakest across all phases. Students of Arabic as an additional language made steady progress in learning new vocabulary and improving their listening. A significant proportion of students, particularly older students, were struggling to develop basic decoding and writing skills. In English, Kindergarten children quickly developed strong reading and writing skills and progress was outstanding. They also spoke and listened confidently. These skills had developed into analysis and critical thinking capacities across the high school curriculum. In many mathematics lessons students effectively applied mathematical skills and thinking in new learning

contexts. A majority of students across all phases increased their knowledge and understanding of scientific concepts in relation to their previous learning.

[View judgements](#)

Quality of students' learning skills

The quality of learning skills was outstanding in Kindergarten, and good across other phases. Kindergarten children were active, engaged learners. They demonstrated emerging levels of independence and responsibility when provided with opportunities to participate in collaborative group work and stimulating activities. Open-ended questions and multiple resources supported their sense of wonder and curiosity. They communicated the results of their learning clearly. Elementary students solved problems and confidently took risks to find solutions. They explained and demonstrated their understandings in a variety of ways including through the use of digital tools. Students developed their creativity and independence and flourished but this was not a consistent feature in all lessons. Older students enthusiastically met the challenge and rigor of lessons. When given the opportunity to explain the process of learning, most articulated their thinking with a clear rationale. The best learning occurred when students were provided with opportunities to collaborate and discover for themselves. Students excelled when thinking, creative problem-solving and effective communication were key elements in lessons.

[View judgements](#)

How good is the students' personal and social development?

Students across all phases had outstanding personal responsibility and social development. They demonstrated excellent attitudes towards classwork and critical feedback. They were self-disciplined and resolved any conflict among themselves by seeking guidance from teachers and administrators. Relationships with other students and with staff were very respectful. A very active school council made decisions democratically and used students' feedback to improve activities. Students demonstrated an excellent understanding of healthy living and made good choices about food. They demonstrated high levels of work ethic; they were articulate when collaborating and sharing ideas among themselves. Attendance and punctuality to lessons were outstanding. Students highly appreciated Islam's value of tolerance, and they were knowledgeable of Muslims' practices. Students had an outstanding knowledge of other cultures, within school and globally. Children in Kindergarten enjoyed living in Dubai, and older students understood the Dubai context in a practical and community-based sense. Students' knowledge of Emirati culture and traditions was less strong. Students across the school had an excellent understanding

of environmental issues. Children in Kindergarten vividly described the harm caused by plastic wrappers and bottles and the importance of recycling; older students described a personalized commitment to reducing their carbon footprint. They participated well in various school-led activities raising money for charity, however they were not always proactive in initiating and leading such events.

[View judgements](#)

How good are teaching and assessment?

Teaching for effective learning was outstanding in Kindergarten and good in other phases. A positive, supportive climate based on mutual understanding and respect pervaded the learning environments. School-wide, teachers were committed and collaborative showing respect and support for colleagues and students. The best teachers had a sound knowledge of their subjects. Teachers sought, accessed and integrated a range of creative and appropriate resources in lessons, however the incorporation of teaching and learning strategies that addressed the needs of students who reached different stages in their development or those with different learning styles was not a consistent feature beyond Kindergarten. Multiple examples of outstanding teaching were evident; however, the common elements of this practice were too inconsistently implemented across a number of subjects and phases. Outstanding teachers facilitated investigative and creativity-focused learning, questioned with purpose to provoke personal inquiries and critical thinking. These strategies led students to analyse, collate and hypothesise very effectively. While technology use was a common feature in many lessons, teachers were not routinely exploiting the available resources in the most interactive and engaging manner.

Assessment was good across all phases. A comprehensive range of internal and externally benchmarked diagnostic assessments was recorded on a flexible Information Technology platform. Data interpretation was developing as a result of training, but was not reflected in all curriculum development or lesson planning. There was capacity to identify special needs and particular talents. Planning for different learning styles was not informed by data, nor appropriate strategies recorded. Self-review, peer reflection and critical analysis were features of the best lessons in the middle and high schools and occasionally in the elementary grades. Kindergarten lessons lacked ongoing anecdotal assessments to record progress. Where teaching was less than good, including in Islamic Education and Arabic, assessment did not impact on learning. Some teachers did not yet understand or use the methodology of assessment for learning.

[View judgements](#)

How well does the curriculum meet the educational needs of all students?

The curriculum quality was outstanding in Kindergarten and elementary and good in middle and high. The school's Islamic Education and Arabic curriculum met the Ministry of Education standards. The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (IB PYP) provided a curriculum framework for kindergarten and elementary levels, and the IB Diploma Program (DP) a framework for the high school curriculum. The school designed a middle school framework to act as a bridge between the PYP and DP programmes. Standards in English and math were aligned with the US Common Core Standards at all levels. The school's science curriculum incorporated US New York State standards. The school had developed a social sciences curriculum and a personal, social, and health curriculum. Curriculum for coursework in business drew upon UK and Australian standards. The kindergarten and elementary curriculum reflected excellent planning for progression in all subjects. Cross-curricular links were well planned in enquiry-based units of study. Transition between kindergarten and first grade was well managed. It was reviewed and modified on a frequent basis to meet students' academic needs. A strength was the range of extra-curricular options. Good provision was made for personal development at all levels. The school had not completed refining the curriculum in middle and high schools to provide needed improvements in articulation across grade levels. The school was currently refining curriculum elements to develop a more cohesive alignment of the IB framework, values, targeted skills and knowledge, within a US context.

The curriculum design to meet the individual needs of students was good across all phases. It was appropriately planned to provide opportunities for all groups of students to learn through real-world experiences. Accommodations and modifications were supported by the Learning Support Centre and additional resources were used to help curriculum modifications in reading, writing, and spelling, which allowed a broad range of learners to be engaged. There was an appropriate variety of provision outside of classrooms such as "Week without Walls" and service to the community to enhance experiential learning. The curriculum provided a significant selection of subjects in middle and high phases, including foreign languages and IB choices to fulfill the aspirations of most students. The school's next steps included expansion of the number and type of student groups under scrutiny and the provision of a wider range of activities informed by interest, talents and aspirations.

[View judgements](#)

How well does the school protect and support students?

The protection and support of students was outstanding in all phases. Health and safety were prioritized. The entire site was reviewed weekly. Close supervision ensured students felt safe; they reported that they had never experienced bullying and were well supported by staff. The child protection procedures were secure, but staff felt they would benefit from additional appropriate training. Internet safety formed part of a cohesive health education program that included parents. The premises and safety equipment were well maintained and monitored. Evacuation drills were recorded, but more detailed analysis of these events was needed to inform risk assessment. The security team supervised all vulnerable areas, including parents' car parks. There was a pervasive environment of mutual respect and trust. Interactions between students and teachers were respectful and polite and students generally appreciated the perspectives of their peers. Attendance and punctuality were monitored rigorously at the commencement of the day and, in the secondary school, for individual lessons. All students were screened prior to admission which included observations by the staff, MAP and school-based testing, interviews and consultation with parents. This process though, did not include detailed analysis and identification of students with specific educational needs which hampered the development of the early provision of support strategies in lessons for some students. There was no formal identification or support for gifted and talented students. A team of counsellors provided guidance and support across the school and a designated career counsellor supported students effectively from Grade 10 with subject choices and university and college placements.

[View judgements](#)

How good are the leadership and management of the school?

The quality of leadership was outstanding. Leaders had led positive, focused change in student outcomes in some sections of the school. The schools vision was evident in practical improvements such as the development of new assessment systems and curriculum articulation. Leaders at all levels had coordinated purposeful communication to identify and, increasingly support, better teaching and learning outcomes. There was a sufficient capacity to distribute and empower leadership roles, create shared lines of accountability and link current responsibilities with the upcoming changes to the school's senior leadership team. The work on ensuring that vision and mission had practical classroom application had begun in earnest.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning was good. Effective action planning had led to comprehensive data gathering and next step profiling. There were effective success indicators for the practical actions to support improvements in academic outcomes. Recommendations from a range of external and internal

sources had been used. Staff appraisal was thorough in establishing baseline qualitative understanding. It did not, however, as part of an overall improvement strategy, identify the proportions of teachers who were consistently developing better differentiation, assessment and curriculum modification capacities. All recommendations from the previous report had been addressed to some extent, however there was limited data to help determine their overall success. Extensive professional development had taken place but did not always impact on improved support and challenge of student.

Outstanding ongoing partnerships with students' families were evident. Robust and varied communication channels regularly informed parents of progress rates, school developments and upcoming priorities and events. Parents led in-school activities, were involved in lesson-based programmes in the elementary school and had recently organized career development experiences for older students. Parents had easy and regular access to leaders and other personnel. Home-school relationships were positive and highly effective. Extensive community projects exemplified through CAS and "Week Without Walls" were in place. Students experienced local, regional and global opportunities to understand different elements of community life such as charity, business, social development and leading positive change in daily lives.

Governance was good. Governors remained firmly committed to continuous improvement. They sought broad stakeholder insights and opinion using multiple data gathering tools. This led to a realistic understanding of the school's standing in each aspect of its operation. They planned effectively thereafter. Governors had not yet held senior leaders sufficiently to account for the overall quality of developing high-order teaching and learning skills. The representation of the whole school community at governor level was limited. Despite the positive channels for the school community to access and inform governors, the number and profile of the governing personnel was too narrow. A stakeholder role had not been defined and this matter was not consistently at the core of governor discussion and action. Statutory requirements were now fully met. Governors had supported the development of the school's infrastructure to a high level, ensuring no shortage of personnel resources to fulfil their responsibilities.

Management, including staffing, facilities and resources was outstanding. School management was effective and efficient. All staff were well qualified and appropriately placed. The facilities were exceptional, particularly with the addition of a new multi-purpose hall. Resources for teaching and learning were wide-ranging and of a high quality. However, no specific leader for students with special educational needs was in place for the provision of support.

[View judgements](#)

How well does the school provide for Emirati students?

The attainment of Emirati students in Islamic Education and Arabic was in line with expected levels. Teachers and the Learning Support Center provided Emiratis with appropriate English-medium subject support. In English, their attainment was similar with students from other countries where English was not the first language. In IBDP English and mathematics, the majority of Emirati students attained levels that were in line with international standards. In science, no Emiratis fell below expectations and a majority exceeded expectations. The progress of Emiratis at lower phases in Arabic and Islamic Education was in line with curriculum standards. In English, the majority made progress at or above grade level expectations, and their overall progress was at a similar level to their peers in math and science.

How well does the school provide for students with special educational needs?

The school was generally inclusive. Students in need of additional learning support were identified through a collaborative process that engaged the counsellors, learning support teachers, and where possible, parents. In Kindergarten, observations were the prime form of identification but from Grade 1 upwards, MAP testing was used alongside some school-based testing. External agencies were recommended for identification, but some parents were reluctant to access this resource. Individual Educational Plans (IEP's) were developed by the learning support team in collaboration with the students and parents; however, teachers were not engaged in this process, consequently, goals from the IEPs were not consistently transferred to lesson plans. In many classes teachers did not plan for differentiated learning activities that provided opportunities for students to develop or be extended to their potential. There was no designated SEN leader to guide teachers. Consequently classroom teachers did not consistently support and thus implement the strategies and goals outlined in the IEPs. There was also a need for leadership in professional development in this area. The school governors responded to resourcing needs, with the development of a diverse support team to include counselors, qualified special education needs teachers, and designated work and spaces for all groups.

How well does the school teach Arabic as a first language?

Arabic teaching was improving overall across the school. Noticeable improvement in elementary phase led to improved students' progress. Most teachers had the required knowledge to teach Arabic as a first language, and had appropriate knowledge of their students' strengths and weaknesses. In elementary, lesson planning included sufficient activities that led to enhancement of language skills; however, this feature was not always consistent across all lessons. In middle and high, interesting discussions and activities were facilitated by teachers; however a linguistic purpose was not always evident. Teaching in middle and high, occasionally had only modest expectations and the individual linguistic needs of some groups of students were not always well managed. A majority of teachers used technology effectively to enhance their lessons. Teachers had detailed assessment information; however this was rarely used effectively to inform lesson planning.

The quality of the Arabic curriculum was appropriate. It was reviewed and planned for annually, and all teachers were planning effectively. ICT and other texts were often used to enrich students' learning. The curriculum lacked sufficient modifications to address the specific language needs of all groups of students. Deeper reading skills and extended writing were the weakest aspect of the curriculum and needed to develop particularly for older students.

What are the views of parents, teachers and students?

Before the inspection, the views of parents, teachers and senior secondary students were surveyed. Key messages from each group were considered during the inspection and these helped to form judgements. A summary of the survey statistics and comments from those who responded to the survey follows:

| Responses to the surveys | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----|------------|
| Responses received | Number | | Percentage |
| Parents | This year | 220 | 25% |
| | Last year | 238 | 29% |
| Teachers | 103 | | 74% |
| Students | 274 | | 94% |

*The percentage of responses from parents is based on the number of families.

A minority of parents, a very similar percentage to last year, completed their surveys. Most parents were generally very supportive of the school. There was a consistently high proportion of survey respondents outlining satisfaction with students outcomes in the key subjects, the quality of teaching, how technology was being used, the accessibility of leaders, safety arrangements and the range of learning experiences set out for students. Some concern was voiced over high fees, evidence of parents' opinions being heeded rather than just listened to and the quality of the canteen operations. Furthermore, a few parents raised concerns about the quality of teaching in Arabic, the feedback given to students on their next educational steps and high teacher turnover. Most teachers responded to their survey. A minority were unhappy with salary levels and expressed concern over the understanding provided to them about international assessments, their purpose and outcomes. They were positive about students' behavior, the management of SEN provision and the leadership of the school. Almost all eligible students responded to their survey. Many issues were raised. They raised concerns about their own voice being heard, the quality of food available, Arabic and science teaching and how the school modified the curriculum to suit their needs. They were equally concerned about the quality of teachers' feedback and the amount of private tutoring they needed.

What happens next?

The school has been asked to prepare and submit an updated action plan to DSIB within two months of receiving the most recent report. This plan should address:

- Recommendations from DSIB;
- Areas identified by the school as requiring improvement;
- Other external reports or sources of information that comment on the work of the school;
- Priorities arising from the school's unique characteristics.

The next inspection will report on the progress made by the school.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

How to contact us

If you have a concern or wish to comment on any aspect of this report you should contact:
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