

Education Middle East

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GCC offers great opportunities for investment

Dr. Adil Alzarooni, Founder of Citizens School & CEO of Al Zarooni Emirates Investments discusses investment opportunities in education in the GCC **PG 28**



STREAMLINING SUPPLY CHAIN

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ARE GCC SCHOOL STUDENTS BURNED OUT?

We find out from schools and experts across the region if the problem is real and how they are combatting it **PG 20**



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How schools are tackling supply chain constraints

We are once again at that time of the year when the who's who of the education industry from across the region gather in Dubai for the GESS Education Conference and Exhibition. This year too, the GCC is creating opportunities for additional investments and greater expansion in the K-12 segment for all stakeholders. The UAE continues to position itself as the pivot for the region even as it is being benchmarked for achieving excellence.

In this edition of *Education Middle East*, coinciding with GESS 2023, we discuss the supply chain bottlenecks and best practices that can be adopted; key trends and developments influencing the education sector in the region such as the rapid adoption of AI in higher education both as part of the curriculum and its adoption in research, teacher training and student assessment; and explore the extent to which technology solutions such as robots can be depended on to provide educational institutions with fool-proof security.

Teacher shortages continue to affect the region, and we find out how schools are handling the crisis along with measures they are adopting to manage student burnout and promotion of performing arts within the campuses.

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PROBLEM

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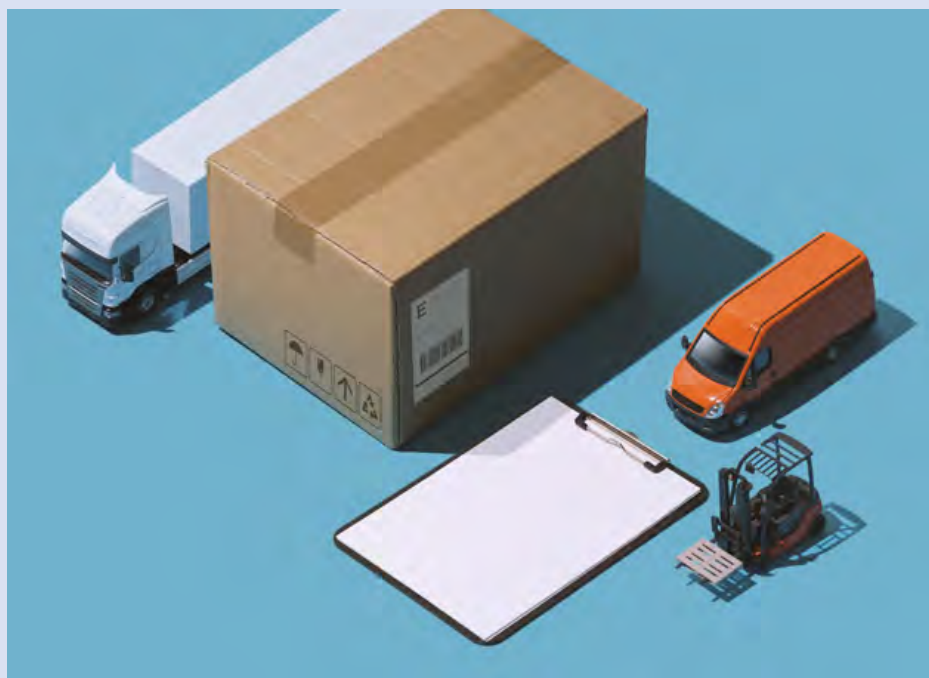
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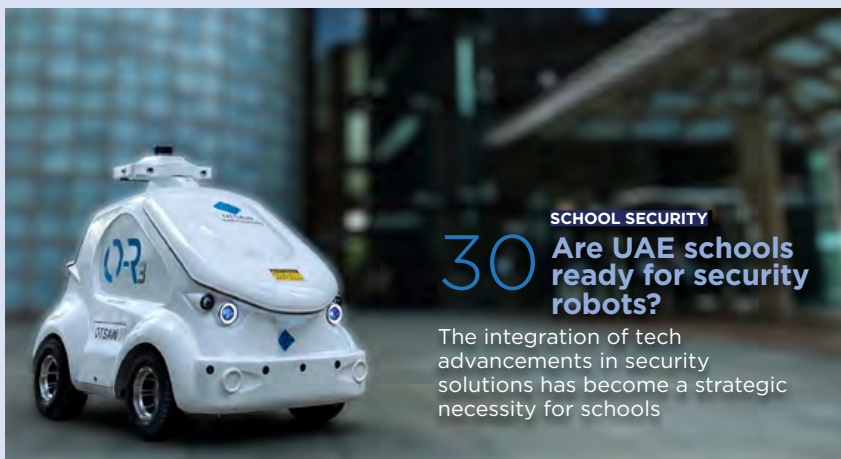
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K-12 teacher shortage

fears rise in GCC amid record demand

New International schools in the region are said to increase sharply even as availability of teachers from native English-speaking countries is expected to drop

By **Joseph George**

The GCC region is facing teacher shortages from native English-speaking countries resulting in HR departments at schools and recruitment agencies altering their

strategies to keep pace with the new requirements, including targeting talent from newer non-traditional markets.

Stating that new teacher recruitment across the GCC from native English-speaking countries could drop,

Diane Jacoutot, Managing Director, Edvectus, a company which specialises in international teacher recruitment says the shortage could be as high as 40%.

“Teachers registering to teach



RECRUITMENT

abroad from the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada are down 40% compared to pre-pandemic levels. This is reflective of severe teacher shortages in those countries, particularly the UK, US and Australia, as well as a general post-COVID risk aversion," says Jacoutot.

While schools have prioritised recruitment from within the country and the region, the shortage of teachers from traditional markets has also opened opportunities for teachers from other countries, including South Africa and Jamaica.

Poonam Bhojani, CEO, Innoventures Education points out that their own recruitment process for the current academic year has seen a massive increase in the diversity of nationalities and ethnicities represented, and an increase in the number of countries from where teachers are applying for roles for the first time. "We have hired teachers from the UK, Ireland and South Africa, as well as for the first time we have hired eight teachers from Russia. This reflects the positive reputation that Dubai is enjoying globally as a desirable destination to live and work," she adds.

Talat Goldie, HR Director, Taaleem points out that a big percentage of their recruits for the current academic year are from outside the UAE, while some are hired from within the UAE and the Gulf region. "As far as geography goes, our new academic staff have been hired from the UK, USA, Canada and South-East Asia," she says.

Lynne Elizabeth Crombie, Head of



There is a concern over the STEM talent gap – it is challenging to find teachers for subjects such as Advanced Math and Physics.

— **Poonam Bhojani**,
CEO, Innoventures Education



With AI now having the ability to generate incredibly picture-perfect resumes, there will be far more focus on digging past the resume and spending more time in the interview process to really bring out the true skills and attitude of the teacher being interviewed.

— **Talat Goldie**,
HR Director, Taaleem

Talent Acquisition, Bloom Education notes that Bloom Education has hired just over 60% of its new joiners in 2023 from overseas. "Our multicultural staff are from 24 countries, including the UK, US, Canada, Ireland, and South Africa," she says, adding that the demand for teachers continues to grow within the UAE, and competition is high between the school groups.

According to John Mayes, Chief People Officer, GEMS Education, which this year recruited about 2,445 new teachers to its network of 44 schools, approximately 90% of new teachers have been recruited from outside the UAE, mainly from the UK, US and India. "We are in a fortunate and strong position to be able to attract a very high calibre of candidates. Having said that, we of course have to operate within the economy we are privileged to be a part of. This means continually refining and improving our approach to hiring to ensure we deliver exceptional educational outcomes across all our schools. A key focus for us is investing in the Emirates and its education sector so that we can provide career pathways in education and support the Emiratisation agenda," he says.

Meanwhile, new regulations making eligibility criteria more stringent



Teachers registering to teach abroad from the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada are down 40% compared to pre-pandemic levels.

— **Diane Jacoutot**,
Managing Director, Edvectus

have also eliminated some older experienced teachers from applying for positions within the region.

According to Jacoutot, the number of GCC countries requiring a bachelor's degree in the teaching subject is increasing. "This is not necessarily a good thing because otherwise qualified teachers are being rejected because of studies they may have completed 10 years ago," she says, adding that the requirement is becoming more widespread across the Gulf, resulting in increased competition for the reduced number of candidates who match the criteria.

"If we had an infinite or even enough teachers, this would not be a problem but we don't. These rules mean the teacher shortage in key subjects such as STEM are exacerbated across the GCC," she adds. The current demand for Secondary English teachers and those teaching Secondary STEM subjects is more than average, especially in the Far East and Southeast Asia.

"There is a concern over the STEM talent gap – it is challenging to find teachers for subjects such as Advanced Math and Physics," says Bhojani.

The current situation has also resulted in schools and HR departments resorting to different strategies. "It's been a very challenging recruitment year due to the teacher shortage in Western countries, and we've noticed more UK and US schools looking beyond straight advertising," says Jacoutot.

Roddy Hammond, CEO & Founder, World Teachers Recruitment Ltd says schools' first option is to advertise their roles and try to do as much as their recruitment in-house. "Word of mouth is proving to be the most popular amongst the highest rated schools. Local and social media advertising brings an additional source of candidates. Agencies are used to help with new school openings, filling last minute roles and forming strategic partnerships to avoid senior management wasting time with high response handling," she says.

As Goldie points out, the focus will remain on fine-tuning and digitising the whole recruitment process, "With AI now having the ability to generate incredibly picture-perfect resumes, there will be far more focus on digging past the resume and spending more time in the interview process to really bring out the true skills and attitude of the teacher being interviewed."

"The K-12 teacher shortages have affected almost all schools, and forward-thinking HR teams now realise that what worked in the past may not work in the future, especially with many advertising outlets raising prices or requiring bundles of unwanted add-ons," adds Jacoutot.

According to Mayes, increasing demand for teachers means ensuring there is enough talent available to satisfy the demand. "This means we have to go beyond traditional hiring channels and look at a wide range of solutions, ranging from grassroots actions with our university partnerships, to the provision of




Approximately 90% of [our] new teachers have been recruited from outside the UAE, mainly from the UK, US and India.

— **John Mayes,**
Chief People Officer, GEMS Education

professional development to those that wish to pursue careers in education," he adds.

The demand for teachers has been on the rise as the number of both public and private schools across the region have seen a steady growth during the past two years.

The UAE is at the forefront of




[Recruitment] agencies are used to help with new school openings, filling last minute roles and forming strategic partnerships to avoid senior management wasting time with high response handling.

— **Roddy Hammond,**
CEO & Founder, World Teachers Recruitment Ltd

this educational wave with 769 international schools or a significant 37% of the total number of schools across the GCC. In Dubai alone 27 new private schools were established during the past four years. ■




The demand for teachers continues to grow within the UAE, and competition is high between the school groups.

— **Lynne Elizabeth Crombie,**
Head of Talent Acquisition, Bloom Education



The demand for teachers has been on the rise in the past two years as the number of public and private schools across GCC has seen a steady growth

Streamlining supply chain

From placing orders almost six months in advance to using tools to streamline operations, procurement teams of GCC schools are resorting to diverse strategies to tackle supply chain constraints resulting from long lead times and customs delays



We have recently faced logistics issues with shipments delays at UK ports mainly.

— **Jasmine Fernandes**,
Senior Vice-President of Procurement,
GEMS Education



By **Joseph George**

With a growing number of schools in the GCC, procurement managers of international schools, especially those offering UK and US curriculums are using diverse strategies to ensure timely and adequate supplies. There are reports of supply chain constraints faced by schools in the recent years.

According to ISC Research, globally the number of international schools has risen by 54.6% in the past decade, and the GCC itself has seen about four dozen new international schools in 2023-24.

The research and consulting firm, which specifically caters to the education sector, notes that sourcing and procurement of resources can be a problem when schools don't

plan in advance and in times of shortage of funds.

Obstacles lie in the protracted lead times required for goods transportation and customs clearance. "As far as we are aware, from our school visits the constraints are simply long lead times and customs delays in various GCC countries," explains Nalini Cook, Head of Global Research, ISC Research.

"Some schools we've spoken to state that they need to order as early as mid-October to ensure that supplies from the UK/US will be with them for the beginning of the following academic year. This is challenging as, not only have areas of focus and new inclusions not necessarily been decided, but many schools - especially new and growing ones - also have no idea what their enrolment and staffing numbers will



be for the next year, and as a result must guess their budgets for the following year," she says.

GEMS Education, which operates about 60 schools across the MENA region, says it sources its products from different vendors worldwide, mainly located in the UK, the US and locally in the UAE, where it is headquartered. "We always plan our orders and procure direct from manufacturers or their main distributors," says Jasmine Fernandes, Senior Vice-President of Procurement, GEMS Education.

According to her, while shortages are unlikely given the wide variety of options they have in the market, of late there has been shipment-related delays. "We have recently faced logistics issues with shipments delays at UK ports mainly; some products have taken longer to reach us due



School resource-based items are ordered at least six months in advance; administrative supplies are procured regularly to maintain stock; and facility maintenance supplies are acquired on an ongoing ad-hoc basis.

— **Zehra Masood**,
Procurement Manager, Taaleem



to these delays," she says adding that they have also faced shortages of certain textbooks' titles that publishers have suddenly informed are out of print.

However, with alternative vendor options the school group manages to obtain the products on time. "This is because we plan more than four to five months ahead and have a ready list of preferred vendors categorised by spend requirement," she adds.

Zehra Masood, Procurement Manager, Taaleem says they primarily source supplies from the UAE and the UK, and they have not faced any constraints so far.

To avoid shortages or delays, she says they follow a comprehensive and proactive approach involving careful planning, effective communication and strategic resource management. "School resource-based items are ordered at least six months in advance; administrative supplies are procured regularly to maintain stock; and facility maintenance supplies are acquired on an ongoing ad-hoc basis. Capital expenditure requirements are budgeted and ordered annually," she says.

Mai Youssef, Procurement Manager, Citizens School says there have been instances where they experienced shortages and delays, especially when orders were placed a little late. "We encountered situations where

the items were out of stock with the supplier, or they were delivered later than expected," she says, adding that to prevent any shortage of supplies for the next academic year she makes sure to place orders well ahead of time.

"I typically initiate orders for learning resources in April since they are imported and require a longer delivery period. Stationery items, on the other hand, can usually be delivered within a week or two, depending on availability," says Youssef. According to her, they haven't encountered any supply chain constraints this time. Our procurement process has been running smoothly.

Fernandes says at GEMS they aim to place their bulk orders during April and beginning May so that deliveries are received in June and July and some few additional ones beginning August. "Some products have reached us late despite placing orders well in advance, and this is due to sudden logistics delays at ports and last-minute notices received from some of our key vendors and textbook publishers about products that have been discontinued," she says, however adding that they always manage to secure alternative options that are fit for purpose when faced with these shortages and delays. "We have strong relationships with our vendors, and this allows us to have a wider source of products available in case of any delays," she adds.

Suppliers as key stakeholders

Meanwhile, with increasing schools, the nature of suppliers' relationships with schools are fast changing. "The increasing number of international schools is encouraging more suppliers to begin supplying to the region. From speaking to international school leaders, many schools and school groups are hopeful that more education suppliers and consolidators will set up in the region with their own stocks, helping to bypass some of the delays," says Cook.

According to her, schools who belong to a group are in an increasingly strong position as they can exert greater spending power and economies of scale. The Middle East is frequently viewed as a region that is innovative and leads the way in pedagogy as well as often having funds to explore new products.

Ronan O'Murchu, Head of International – MENA & Asia Pacific, Findel Education, one of the major educational resource & teaching aid suppliers exporting and delivering to more than 130 countries globally says they have a strong and defined go-to-market strategy, with developed



SUPPLY CHAIN

and established local distributors who understand and operate within their defined territories expertly.

“Within the international school market, we are seeing a continued shift towards a one-stop-shop solution for schools. This puts pressure on smaller, individual brands who do not have established commercial agreements with in-country

distribution networks, from whom the schools buy directly,” says O’Murchu.

As Caroline Wright, Director General, British Educators Suppliers Association (BESA) points out, it can be difficult for individual companies looking to work in the Middle East to navigate the landscape.

“We have recently engaged in conversations with governments and state buyers, particularly focused on improving Special Education Needs provision in the Middle East, Early Years practice and skills and vocational training and development.”

With greater integration of technology, procurement officers at schools are looking beyond traditional suppliers.

Today, technology solution providers are keen to create experiences for both students and teachers and not just sell products.

Anil Iype, Logitech’s Global Head of Business Development & Cloud Alliances Sales says they are trying to create products and solutions that fit into an evolutionary experience. Brands and suppliers, according to him, will have to think about personalising learning. “It’s not just about a transaction. You have to slow the journey down and involve parents, teachers and decision makers in the process,” says Iype.

Referring to supply chain constraints, he says it has got everything to do with planning. The key, he says, is to not behaving like a typical supplier.



Some schools we’ve spoken to state that they need to order as early as mid-October to ensure that supplies from the UK/US will be with them for the beginning of the following academic year.

— **Nalini Cook,**
Head of Global Research, ISC Research



We have recently engaged in conversations with governments and state buyers, particularly focused on improving Special Education Needs provision in the Middle East, Early Years practice and skills and vocational training and development.

— **Caroline Wright,**
Director General, British Educators Suppliers Association

“Which means you’ll randomly sell or become unpredictable, which has a direct and dire impact on the experience of purchasing. Education is niche; it’s not a B2B experience where you just go in and sell products



The UAE is the destination of choice for suppliers to schools because of the large concentration of international schools as well as its ease of doing business



Courtesy: PowerSchool

Technology solution providers focus on creating experiences for students and teachers rather than merely sell products

at regular cycles. Planning means purpose, intention and better outcomes for student performance in the classroom. The average buying cycle is not three months, it's one to one and a half or two years. It's a decision that's made once every 36 or 48 months," he says. So, when you're not in the buying cycle, or when you're not actively selling, what you need to do is to capture the actual experience. We need to understand how the tools that we offer are elevating the learning experience," he says.

The process involves finding the right channel partner, involving companies such as Apple, Google or Microsoft in the journey and finally leading the journey with the end customer or the institution and involving decision makers in the process, he adds.

As Robert Speed, Vice President and General Manager, International Sales, PowerSchool points out, there is a growing demand for comprehensive and scalable tools that can streamline operations, boost parent engagement and provide personalised instruction.

"Moreover, these institutions are seeking robust data and analytics to bolster their security and decision-making capabilities. One area where we're seeing a surge in demand is for tools that make personalised learning easier and more effective. These tools, many of which now incorporate artificial intelligence, are becoming increasingly sought after," says Speed.

Demand for technology hardware solutions such as interactive boards



Within the international school market, we are seeing a continued shift towards a one-stop-shop solution for schools.

— **Ronan O'Murchu,**
Head of International - MENA & Asia Pacific, Fintel Education

and keyboards have also been rising.

"The expansion of schools and the need for digital transformation and upgrading have led to an increase in demand for interactive flat panel (IFP) products and a rise in the number of related school tenders," says Summer Deng, Head of Sales and Marketing, Skyworth, which currently relies on agent partners to provide local inventory and services to school customers. "In the future our company will gradually establish cooperative

relationships with schools in the Middle East and jointly study how to simplify the supply chain process to help school customers," says Deng.

For new entrants and players, finding the right channel partner could itself be a challenge. As Carrie-Ann Gibson, International Education Manager, Texthelp, a software solution provider points out, "Since our products are digital downloads, thankfully we don't experience a lot of the supply chain complexities that are experienced by companies shipping physical goods. However, just finding a partner to represent you in the region (and one that will champion your products and services in the same way that you do) can be a challenge," says Gibson.

UAE leads the edtech race

Meanwhile, UAE continues to remain the destination of choice for school suppliers because of the large concentration of international schools as well as its ease of doing business. "The result of this will be more price-sensitive customers but service & reliability will always be a key factor for returning customers," says O'Murchu.

According to him, with varying VAT, customs and clearance issues in the individual GCC countries and Saudi Arabia being a more difficult country to import to, you naturally see few options for schools to select from.

Contrary to popular perception O'Murchu says there is a slow-down in new school projects in Qatar, Oman, Egypt and Kuwait. "Omanisation and



SUPPLY CHAIN



The increasing number of international schools is encouraging more suppliers to start supplying to the GCC

COVID have hit Oman particularly hard, with expats and foreign investment pulling out of the country, while Qatar is seeing an expected drop in development post World-Cup. Saudi is also showing slower growth from foreign and UK brands within the education sector, and more focus on the public investment fund and American Education division

connection. The UAE is thankfully booming but through the expansion and development of key individual school groups," he says.

Paris Eleftheriades, Sales Director – School & Office, Intermetal LLC, a UAE-based furniture manufacturer for schools and educational institutions, also feels that the UAE market is more mature compared to several other markets in the region, and decision makers are well-versed in available options and accustomed to a range of choices.

"In contrast, the Saudi Arabian market relies heavily on longstanding supplier relationships, and may be hesitant to open to alternative solutions, new options and new suppliers. In both markets, the predominant trend is a focus on pricing as opposed to quality or result-driven," says Eleftheriades.

Iype notes that the UAE is one of the few countries in the world where private school enrolment is set to increase by 2030.

According to him, the investments Saudi Arabia is making are significant. "The UAE is the most mature edtech market in the GCC. The appetite and demand in Saudi and the commitment from the government to figure out edtech in classrooms is highly inspiring," he says.

"We met quite a few decision makers from Oman's schools who have shared that they're looking for pilots for digitalisation of classrooms, and there is demand there. We have also seen interest from Qatar," says Iype,



It's not just about a transaction. You have to slow the journey down and involve parents, teachers and decision makers in the process.

— **Anil Iype**,
Logitech's Global Head of Business Development & Cloud Alliances Sales

adding that the key is to be able to find the right partners, enable them in your value story and enable the governments and ministries of Education to drive it."

"Engaging the ministries of education to understand their vision and behaving in a way that shows alignment with their core values for the country is key. However, that's not how we behave today as an industry," he says, adding that the industry needs to do better. ■



In contrast [to the UAE], the Saudi Arabian market relies heavily on longstanding supplier relationships, and may be hesitant to open to alternative solutions, new options and new suppliers.

— **Paris Eleftheriades**,
Sales Director – School & Office,
Intermetal LLC



How universities in the GCC are navigating the AI wave

While universities are integrating AI into multi-disciplinary courses, many are fostering greater industry partnerships to co-opt programmes and enhance research

By **Joseph George**

Higher education institutions across the GCC are fast adopting Artificial Intelligence (AI) and making it an integral part of their curriculum amidst a surge in demand for courses offering AI.

One of the notable advancements is the incorporation of AI as a core component of the curriculum. Universities are offering AI instruction across disciplines, including computer science, engineering, business, healthcare and humanities.

Another growing trend is a surge in open university and online programmes, with AI as the core subject.

Fehmida Hussain, Head of Computer Engineering and Informatics, Middlesex University Dubai notes that there is a surge in degree programmes specialising in this field, especially those with the term 'Artificial Intelligence' as part of degree titles, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The institutions are encouraging an interdisciplinary approach, allowing students to apply AI techniques to solve real-world problems in diverse fields. Universities have established dedicated AI research centres and labs that collaborate with industry partners, providing students with opportunities to work on practical AI projects to gain hands-on experience on the latest AI



There is a surge in degree programmes specialising in this field [Artificial Intelligence].

— **Faiza Qureshi**,
Discipline Lead - Foundation
Studies & Master of Education,
Murdoch University Dubai



TECH TRENDS

developments. In addition, courses on AI ethics, fairness, transparency and responsible AI have also become an integral part of curriculums.

Dr. Richa Arora, Head of Institution And COO, University of Stirling RAK Campus says AI is no longer an isolated field but an integral part of education across diverse sectors.

“Universities have introduced AI courses and programmes, recognising that AI is no longer confined to computer science departments. AI is now considered a fundamental skill relevant across various disciplines. It’s common to find AI courses as core requirements in computer science and engineering programmes but also as elective options in business, healthcare and the humanities,” she says.

Universities are offering AI courses through online platforms and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), ensuring global accessibility to AI education. According to Dr. Arora, global accessibility ensures that education remains relevant and cutting-edge.

Faiza Qureshi, Discipline Lead - Foundation Studies & Master of Education, Murdoch University Dubai advocates prioritising efforts in fostering AI literacy for both staff and students.

According to her, the emphasis should be on the curriculum and assessment development, particularly in developing authentic assessments.

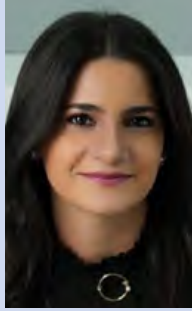
There is a need to ensure equity and access in AI education and necessity to formulate policies, particularly in keeping up with the rapid advancements of Generative AI.



It [developing teacher competency] is a challenging task as considerable attention is to be paid to AI versus traditional skills, training and [latest] developments.

— **Raj Nambiar**,
Director- Administration, University of Bolton Academic Centre Ras Al Khaimah

While AI integration efforts are ongoing, there are concerns about the proficiency of teachers in using and incorporating AI because of limited accessibility to high-quality training programmes due to factors such as cost and geographic limitations. Financial constraints hindering investment in AI infrastructure, technological disparities among educators, resistance to change among teachers, curricular barriers, inadequate institutional support, teacher workload, limited collaboration opportunities with AI experts and difficulty in staying



Many [teachers] have undergone professional development but it’s crucial to provide ongoing support for educators to effectively incorporate AI concepts into their teaching methods.

— **Dr. Khoulood Salameh**,
Computer Science and Engineering Department Chair & Assistant Professor, American University of Ras Al Khaimah

current with AI advancements are among the other major constraints.

As Dr. Khoulood Salameh, Computer Science and Engineering Department Chair & Assistant Professor, American University of Ras Al Khaimah points out that there is a growing demand for more qualified trainers and resources to ensure they stay up-to-date with the ever-evolving field of AI.

“Teachers vary in their AI readiness. Many have undergone professional



Universities are collaborating with industry partners, providing students with opportunities to work on practical AI projects to gain hands-on experience

development but it's crucial to provide ongoing support for educators to effectively incorporate AI concepts into their teaching methods," he says.

Raj Nambiar, Director- Administration, University of Bolton Academic Centre Ras Al Khaimah says teachers' competency to use and incorporate AI into higher education is considered one of the important issues. "It is a challenging task as considerable attention is to be paid to AI versus traditional skills, training and developments," he says.

As Hussain points out, as the technology itself is in its infancy, there are concerns related to the accuracy and timeliness of the content. "However, the improvements are very rapid as AI models are trained through interactions with users, and these constraints will soon become minimal," she says.

With technology advancing at a much faster pace in comparison to the average completion of an academic year, universities are working closely with industry leaders, co-opting programmes such as internships and joint research initiatives with AI-driven companies.

"We recently launched the MDX Innovation Hub, a central community for all entrepreneurship and innovation initiatives on campus, which will form part of our efforts to collaborate with leaders in AI and provide a platform for



We are moving away from assessments such as short essays, which can easily be generated using ChatGPT, and replacing them with assessment components that test students' ability to apply their learning...

— **Fehmida Hussain**,
Head of Computer Engineering and
Informatics, Middlesex University Dubai

■ Assessment in the age of AI

As students increasingly turn to AI for assistance in their assessments, universities are adapting new methods for assessment to ensure that students acquire the knowledge and skills required as part of their curriculum.

Dr. Khoulood Salameh, Computer Science and Engineering Department Chair, Assistant Professor, American University of Ras Al Khaimah says the recent developments in AI have prompted a shift towards performance-based evaluations, including AI-driven projects, automated grading systems and practical, real-world problem-solving assessments.

Raj Nambiar, Director - Administration, University of Bolton Academic Centre Ras Al Khaimah, explains that students are

assessed through various criteria, including different sets of formative assessment points to appraise the development of their ideas, leading to a summative assessment prior to the submission date. Nambiar adds that assessment requirements specify the citation of two or three specific references from very recent sources. Additionally, students are urged to draw upon authentic, recent and local case studies, and refer to new and updated legislations, policies and processes.

"We are moving away from assessments such as short essays, which can easily be generated using ChatGPT, and replacing them with assessment components that test students' ability to apply their learning (which may include research using AI) using higher order cognition," says Hussain.

our students to experiment and test their own practical use cases for this technology and others," adds Hussain.

According to Qureshi, a number of forums have been created for the staff to explore ideas. "We have access to a Generative AI toolkit for academics, which provides access to the latest training, research and news on Gen AI. Our academics have also researched the use of AI tools for supporting academic writing and research for our students, and another research project to gauge the impact of Gen AI on teaching, learning and assessment. "

Other industry collaborations include initiatives such as skill-related certifications, industry visits, research collaborations, hands-on projects, industry forums, keynote speaker events and participation in AI competitions. According to Dr. Arora, these collaborations provide invaluable opportunities for students and faculty to gain practical experience, expand their knowledge and stay at the forefront of AI advancements.

Additionally, universities are also engaging in the UAE Government's AI initiative. According to Nambiar, their students were among the first five universities in the UAE for the self-driving challenge competition (application of AI) conducted by the Roads & Transport Authority. "As part of the smart city programme, our students worked on AI-based traffic light signal processing," adds Nambiar.

Meanwhile, institutions will be required



It's common to find AI courses as core requirements in computer science and engineering programmes but also as elective options in business, healthcare and the humanities.

— **Dr. Richa Arora**,
Head of Institution And COO,
University of Stirling RAK Campus

to navigate ethical, privacy and regulatory challenges to ensure that AI is harnessed responsibly and to its fullest potential. Dr. Arora says, "The future of higher education will be shaped by the dynamic interplay between AI's capabilities and the evolving needs of students, educators and society as a whole." ■

Where the world of education comes together

In an exclusive interview with *Education Middle East*, Sarah Palmer, Brand Director, GESS Education discusses the changes in the GCC's education sector, procurement trends and challenges, and highlights of GESS Dubai 2023

The GESS Education Conference and Exhibition has been growing from strength to strength over the years, with events in Dubai, Turkey, Africa and Asia. Now in its 16th year, GESS Dubai has been the focal point for education in the Middle East.

Whether you are a principal, head teacher, head of department, head of ICT, dean, professor, teacher, or head of procurement, there's something for everyone. For providers of learning solutions looking to establish or expand their presence in the region, the event provides an opportunity to meet with more than 6,000 educational professionals including key buyers and decision-makers. This year GESS Dubai will host 350 plus education brands from more than 40 countries around the globe.

As GESS Dubai gears up for its 16th edition, scheduled to be held from October 30, 2023, to November 1, 2023, at Dubai World Trade Centre, we speak to Sarah Palmer, Brand Director, GESS Education about the latest developments in education in the region and the highlights of the event this year.

Tell us what's happening at GESS Dubai this year?

We have a lot in-store for exhibitors and educators alike at GESS Dubai 2023. There are three main pillars to look forward to: the exhibition space, the rich and comprehensive CPD accredited conference programme and the awards.

At the exhibition space this year GESS Dubai welcomes its biggest ever Chinese pavilion with the largest contingent of Chinese exhibitors with 40 plus providers exhibiting. There will also be a dedicated UK pavilion, supported by the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) with more than 30 UK education providers. The North American representation at GESS Dubai continues to flourish. We also see an increase in exhibitors from Australia and New Zealand, and the return of international pavilions and clusters such as the Finnish pavilion.

For the conference the latest addition



Sarah Palmer, Brand Director, GESS Education

is the GESS Talks (Live Stage), a lineup of speakers and guests from GESS podcasts and webinars. Due to its popularity, we're now taking these conversations live so the audience can interact with the thought leaders in real-time. There are also the Leaders in Education Conference, Wellbeing Space, Skills Development and Education Innovations.

Additionally, the GESS Awards Gala Dinner is set to be held on October 31st. The awards shine a spotlight on and acknowledge the excellence, diversity and quality across a spectrum of educational products, resources, services and individuals, including exceptional educational institutions and the most committed teaching professionals.

Tarsus has been organising GESS Dubai for the past 15 years. What are the major changes you've noticed in GCC's education sector?

One of the major changes we've seen is the rise of international schools

in the region. According to data compiled by ISC Research exclusively for GESS Dubai, the last decade has witnessed a substantial 54.6% increase in the number of international schools worldwide, rising from 8,771 schools in January 2013 to 13,564 schools in January 2023. Among continents, Europe accounts for 14.3% of the global international school market, while Asia takes the lead with around 57.1% of the market share and 64.1% of student enrolment.

Within Asia, Western Asia, which encompasses the Middle East excluding Egypt, stands out as a hub of international education with 2,068 institutions. The UAE, at the forefront of this educational wave, boasts 769 international schools or a significant 37% of the total. As of January 2023, the region is home to 1.9 million students attending international schools, reflecting a 7.9% increase over the past five years.

Several factors have contributed to this remarkable growth in international education within Western Asia.



China and UK will have the biggest pavilions at GESS Dubai this year

These include a surge in expatriate populations from China, Russia and Ukraine, and those from South and Southeast Asian countries; the return of Western expatriate professionals since the pandemic; and rising numbers of Saudi nationals opting for international schools, driven by young parents who have experienced international education themselves. In the UAE's city of Dubai, with a population that is expected to almost double within 20 years, these schools are being located to support distinct community suburbs that are emerging as the city continues to expand.

Key shifts are also seen in EdTech, with AI being a prominent conversation for the past year and with the pandemic completely changing the game in online to hybrid models of delivery; holistic well-being for all education stakeholders particularly our educators; and sustainability with COP28 on the horizon and this year being declared the Year of Sustainability.

There is a dramatic rise in integration of technology in education. Does the exhibition reflect this change too? If so, in what ways?

Definitely. We have seen a rise in exhibitors showcasing products that are in line with the different changes and rise in Edtech implementations. Some of these include Metaverse, AI, Immersive Reality, Interactive Boards, LMS systems, as well as different digital resources.

Globally, the edtech and smart classroom market size is expected to be at \$333.327 billion by 2027 as per data culled from 'EdTech & Smart Classroom Market Intelligence Report - Global Forecast to 2027' published by Think Market Intelligence. In the Middle East & Africa and Europe, it is projected to reach \$120.408 billion by 2027 at a CAGR of 21.78%.

Do you see any major trends in procurement in the K-12 sector in the region? And what are the key challenges faced by GCC schools in procurement?

We've seen an increasing trend of local and regional suppliers becoming more competitive over the years to meet the demand of the modern classroom in this market. Additionally, there's a focus on integrating advanced EdTech solutions such as Artificial Intelligence to reshape the educational landscape.

According to the same ISC Research for GESS Dubai quoted earlier, school leaders in the UAE have indicated that the actual sourcing of necessary resources is not a major hurdle when adequate time and funding are available. However, the real obstacles lie in the protracted lead times required for goods transportation and customs clearance. While inflationary pressures have been felt in the UK, US and Europe, the impact on schools remains relatively subdued, thanks to the resilience of the AED/USD exchange rate and access to more cost-effective products from Asia and local suppliers.

Resource procurement in Saudi Arabia is a time-consuming process. The sweltering summer months often coincide with storage periods, where temperatures can exceed 50°C, causing potential damage to certain goods such as book bindings. Although many items are available domestically, they often come with premium price tags. To optimise costs, some schools resort to consolidating purchases through the UAE, while teachers, when visiting their home countries, personally procure goods from platforms such as Amazon, covering the additional luggage expenses.

Across the education landscape in Qatar, leaders are keenly aware

of the rapid transformation driven by education technology. Schools are actively fostering agile EdTech environments, with many establishing research and development committees or hiring technology professionals. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies are regarded as pivotal tools for data analysis and expanding students' horizons. Consequently, there's a growing emphasis on training students to harness these technologies safely and analytically.

Across the rest of the GCC, educational institutions face shared challenges when it comes to sourcing necessary supplies. These challenges encompass high customs duties, extended delays, a shortage of skilled labour for equipment maintenance and a limited presence of international vendors within the region. For instance, the scarcity of suppliers for products such as Apple results in elevated costs and shipping delays exceeding four months. The absence of local book publishers, regulated due to curriculum control by the Ministry, forces heavy reliance on foreign publishers, impacting education delivery. Consequently, the procurement of educational supplies primarily originates from the UK and the US but also extends to other regions such as Australia and Asia, which are gaining traction in the market.

Which countries rank at the top in providing learning solutions to the GCC?

There's no definite ranking but we know that UK and US companies have been dominant for a long time. It is worth mentioning that growing globalisation means that companies from all over the world now have opportunities that would be on par with UK and US ones. As long as you have a good innovative product that is relevant to the market, it will do well. ■

Are GCC school students burned out?



Students are under tremendous pressure, which is only increasing and having a detrimental impact on mental health and well-being.

— **Mark Samways,**
Director – Wellbeing,
The Free Spirit Collective



Education Middle East speaks to schools and experts across the region to find out if the problem is real and how they are combatting it

By **Ritika**

Efforts are underway among GCC schools to reduce student stress levels resulting from high academic expectations, an archaic test-driven approach, rise in internet usage time, increased workload for specific subjects and a lack of time for relaxation. The schools are using a combination of proactive strategies, tech integration and mental health support to create supportive learning environments.

The increasing phenomenon of student burnout is a significant concern globally. According to data from research.com, the problem is widespread. About 75% of high school students in US have expressed boredom, anger, sadness, fear, or

stress in school while three-quarters (75%) of American high schoolers and half of the middle schoolers describe themselves as “often or always feeling stressed” by schoolwork. Similarly, almost two-thirds (65%) of UK children say they have felt anxious, nervous or stressed because of school, according to a recent study by Oxford Home Schooling.

GCC schools are not isolated in facing this challenge. Mark Samways, Director – Wellbeing, The Free Spirit Collective – a mindfulness training provider, says, “I think the GCC largely falls in line with the rest of the world in terms of student burnout. Students are under tremendous pressure, which is only increasing and having a detrimental impact on mental health and well-being.”



Educators in the GCC have no hesitation in acknowledging that student burnout exists and voice concerns about factors contributing to it.

Dr. Sally Vale, Academic Director, TLC International School Oman says schools are also under pressure to compete and have their students gain high grades.

“One of the ways we try to avoid burnout is by not expecting students to spend too much time after school on homework,” she says adding that the cause for burnout among TLC students is mostly due to lack of sleep, poor eating habits, high expectations from self and family and limited physical exercise.

According to Dr Lene Janse van Rensburg, School Councilor, Brighton College Dubai, burnout in schools is a result of students facing ongoing stress or frustration, with no time to relax and recharge.

When comparing GCC schools with

global counterparts, Dr. Rensburg identifies several factors influencing student burnout that are unique to the region. “The educational systems in GCC countries may differ significantly from those in other parts of the world in terms of curriculum, teaching methods and cultural norms. These differences can impact students’ experiences and potentially their susceptibility to burnout,” she says.

According to her, high academic expectations and a strong emphasis on standardised testing, gender-segregated schools and cultural expectations and norms are some of the factors that may influence stress levels in students.

In addition, there are too many public schools across the MENA region where an archaic test-driven schooling culture still dominates says Mike Seaton, Principal, King’s College Doha. He talks about a recent study that indicated that nearly 30% of



One of the ways we try to avoid burnout is by not expecting students to spend too much time after school on homework.

— **Dr. Sally Vale,**
Academic Director, TLC International
School Oman

Egyptian students suffer from anxiety, tension or depression, where the test-orientated approach to schooling is still all too prevalent.

However, he also notes that in today’s world it is not just academics that is causing stress among students.

“After all, childhood today is more complex than that which we, as adults, once enjoyed. The explosion of all things digital has left many children whiling away hours communicating on the internet with friends whom they may never meet, engaging in increasingly addictive gaming habits and spending far longer, frankly, than is healthy on the upkeep of their social media profiles. All of this has an impact on student burnout – it is unhelpful to ascribe it to academic pressure alone,” says Seaton.

Subjects such as mathematics and science have been identified as potential contributors to burnout. According to Christopher Perry, Assistant Head of Secondary, The Hamilton International School Doha, there is anecdotal evidence from a small sample group that science and math carry the greatest pressure and level of workload for students.

However, there are many learning solution providers who offer tools that can reduce cognitive load and free the mind for critical thinking and problem solving. Cuemath is one such online learning platform that offers a structured supplementary math curriculum to improve proficiency in the subject.

Svetlana Eghterafi, Head of Partnerships, Cuemath says, “Our approach can indirectly support schools in mitigating student burnout. By



WELL-BEING

promoting conceptual understanding and personalised learning, we help students build confidence in math, which can reduce academic stress.”

Meanwhile, there is a noticeable shift in GCC schools in addressing the student burnout issue. Schools are taking proactive measures to mitigate the challenge. According to Linda Bonnar, Co-founder & Director of Content, Upstrive Education - a tool that helps manage student well-being and engagement, there is a growing desire amongst schools to create frameworks that will prevent student burnout. “Many institutions are seeking help in balancing student well-being and academic achievement. They are seeking ways to gain real-time insights into students’ emotional experiences so as to use the data effectively to equip students with the required tools,” says Bonnar.

GCC schools are employing a combination of proactive strategies and technology integration to create supportive learning environments to promote student well-being. Schools are implementing a well-rounded curriculum encompassing academics, physical education and arts to prevent excessive pressure. “Homework loads are carefully monitored by staff and amended as needed,” explains Dr Rensburg.

They are relying on homeroom teachers and pastoral leaders to observe students holistically. In addition, schools are also conducting




Use of wearable tech like pedometers and apps for mindfulness, nutrition and exercise could be leveraged to gauge student activity across key times.

— **Christopher Perry**,
Assistant Head of Secondary, The Hamilton International School

annual well-being surveys to determine which students and cohorts of students are under pressure.

Dr Vale says they holistically monitor students through thrice-yearly report cards, assessing personal, social, emotional, physical, health and academic aspects.

Schools are cultivating healthy relationships amongst students,

teachers and support staff, ensuring students feel safe, cared for and comfortable reaching out with concerns. “Open communication enables us to address concerns and collaborate effectively, reducing student stress,” says Dr Rensburg.

Perry says that they provide clear guidelines to staff in setting homework, which includes specified amount of homework per subject at different grade levels and a strict no to ‘finish classwork at home tonight’ approach, thereby facilitating a flexible approach to completing homework.

Schools are also conducting workshops for students to help them develop effective time management and study skills. “We also like to break up the stresses and strains of exam revision by offering creative and engaging alternative courses for our older students,” says Seaton.

Meanwhile, use of technology, mental health support and physical well-being tracking have gained popularity among educators. Advocating the use of mental health apps for guided meditation, mindfulness exercises and relaxation techniques, Dr Rensburg says, “There are numerous mental health apps and online platforms designed to provide resources and support for students dealing with stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges.”

Perry suggests the use of wearable tech such as pedometers to track student movement and apps for mindfulness,



Subjects such as mathematics and science have been identified as one of the potential contributors to student burnout



Courtesy: TLC International School

Schools in the GCC are taking proactive measures to mitigate the student burnout challenge

nutrition and exercise. “They could be leveraged to gauge student activity across key times,” he says. He also highlights introducing monthly progress reports to enable real-time discussions between parents and teachers about students’ well-being.

Education assessment platforms



High academic expectations and a strong emphasis on standardised testing, gender-segregated schools and cultural expectations and norms are some of the factors that may influence stress levels in students.

— **Dr Lene Janse van Rensburg**,
School Councillor, Brighton College Dubai

are also being used by schools to explore the social and emotional well-being of students, which become “very effective means of identifying students who might be unwilling to come forward with concerns in the well-being survey,” says Seaton.

Meanwhile, educators are also keen to involve parents in addressing student burnout. Dr. Rensburg says, “Involving parents in addressing student burnout is crucial for creating a supportive and holistic approach to student well-being.... Regular parent conferences to discuss a student’s academic performance, social development and any signs of stress or burnout is priority, as these meetings provide opportunities to share concerns and strategies for proactive support.”

Schools are also collaborating with mental health professionals, healthcare organisations, Ministry of Health and other experts to seek help in measuring, monitoring and managing student well-being through data-driven insights, customisable content and training sessions for teachers.

Additionally, collaboration with other schools, teachers, students and parents along with mindfulness courses and well-being clubs are further contributing towards a better understanding of the problem and much effective strategies.

“We monitor all aspects of student behaviour, and where there are areas of concern teachers consult with colleagues, head teachers, academic



The explosion of all things digital has left many children whiling away hours communicating on the internet with friends whom they may never meet, engaging in increasingly addictive gaming habits and spending far longer.

— **Mike Seaton**,
Principal, King's College Doha

directors and parents. These consultations lead to observations by senior team members, the Educational Psychologist and family meetings. Where appropriate an Independent Education Plan is devised and followed through with timed action plans,” says Dr Vale. ■



Championing the arts

Performing arts education has gained recognition as an essential component of a well-rounded educational experience across the GCC, and amidst a lack of qualified staff, more schools are opting for tie-ups with private institutions

By **Ritika**

More and more schools in the GCC are embracing performing arts and incorporating them as part of the curriculum. With students from diverse nationalities, educational institutions have also found arts to be a greater unifying force leading to better understanding of other cultures.

The number one priority for educators is that performing arts education has the ability to nurture social, emotional and cognitive skills, fostering well-rounded development in students.

Jodie Quirke, Wellington Director of Performing Arts, GEMS Education

says, “By understanding and becoming a character, children build a wealth of emotional intelligence and learn how to step into someone else’s shoes. This in turn, improves their empathy and builds valuable social awareness.”

Global partnerships such as ITI/ UNESCO Network for Higher Education in the Performing Arts are working towards creating strong value and importance towards arts education. These efforts aim to ensure that education in performing arts and related disciplines is integrated at every educational level – from universities, academies and higher education institutions to primary and secondary schools.



Finding qualified performing arts teachers can be challenging due to the relatively smaller pool of candidates compared to other subject areas

— **Chelsea Grekoski**,
Head of Performing Arts,
Bloom World Academy

According to Ferne Reynolds Lategan, Founder & Managing Partner, DRAMA SCENE Performing Arts, the trend has grown tremendously across GCC countries, especially in Qatar and the UAE over the past 15 years.

Moreover, schools have incorporated arts education into educational programmes including elective courses, curriculum, pathways and extra-curricular activities. Students are



Courtesy: Dubai Performing Arts Academy



While we follow the guidelines set by the UK examination boards, it is implemented in accordance with the regulations set by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai

— **Sarah Esteban**,
Deputy Head - School Improvement,
Repton School Dubai



Autonomy helps to create a happy working environment - autonomy to run their own curriculum and select performances/ productions that work for them while highlighting the best of students' abilities

— **Benjamin Atkins**,
Head of Secondary, The Aquila School



We aim to find teachers who have worked or trained professionally in the arts, but it is hard to find professionals who are [of] that level or calibre in both areas

— **Jodie Quirke**,
Wellington Director of Performing Arts,
GEMS Education

students, motivating them to become positive contributors to their communities through active engagement in music and dance,” says Afshin, Founder, Melodica Music and Dance Academy.

“Schools are actively dedicating resources to expand this domain, ensuring students have a wide array of chances to delve into their artistic interests and talents,” adds Afshin.

In order to ensure a structured learning environment for students, educational institutions are formulating and implementing policies for performing arts. There is also an emphasis on cross-disciplinary learning, integrating performing arts into subjects such as English literature and history. Rashmi Nandkeolyar, Principal and Director, Delhi Private School Dubai says, “Students may perform dramatic readings or stage productions of plays they study in English class or create and perform musical compositions related to historical events. Example - An act from Shakespeare or Excerpt from Laila Majnu.”

The aim is to ensure cultural sensitivity and overall development of students. While some have implemented internal policies that emphasise respect for the local culture and values, others are adhering to compliance with international and local standards.

Sarah Esteban, Deputy Head - School Improvement, Repton School Dubai

says while they follow the guidelines set by the UK examination boards, it is implemented in accordance with the regulations set by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) in Dubai.

Popular subjects

While performing arts continue to captivate enthusiasts among all age groups of students, drama as the subject has gained notable popularity, especially in the later years of secondary education.

Ruth Sanders, Drama Teacher and Head of Performing Arts, Dubai British School - Jumeirah Park says, “Drama tends to be the most in demand performing arts subject when students opt for their GCSE subjects at the end of Year 9, which now has an uptake of five times more students than it did five years ago.” According to her, though it is still a majority female cohort, there is a gradual increase in boys opting for the subject as well.

Moreover, with technology becoming more accessible, educational institutions are encouraging the incorporation of digital media and technology in the performing arts. According to Esteban, this integration encompasses various areas such as digital music production, multimedia performances and the utilisation of augmented reality in theatre productions.

Assessing impact

Meanwhile, schools are also laying



exposed to music, drama, dance and art from an early age.

James Cuninghame, Founder, Fresco Formation says that schools expect to see benefits from the classes such as cognitive development as well as increased social cohesion and empathy in students of performing arts.

“Schools aspire to nurture personal growth and confidence in their

PERFORMING ARTS

greater emphasis on evaluating students' growth and measuring the success of the programme by employing diverse methods to assess the impact. Specialised performing art teams are established within schools. "During auditions for school productions, if we highlight students as talented in a certain area, we place them in a specialised performing arts team or tutor group, whereby they are taught by trained professionals in their field," says Quirke.

Schools are also ensuring that the success of performing arts education remains student-focused. They are achieving this by monitoring the progress in the quality and

quantity of artistic productions, performances, exhibitions and other showcases, reflecting the students' ongoing success.

Additionally, schools are considering the long-term impact of performing arts on students' lives, including their continued involvement in the arts, career choices and contributions to the arts community.

Chelsea Grekoski, Head of Performing Arts at Bloom World Academy says, "Success in our performing arts education is not solely determined by any one factor but rather a combination of these elements."

Key challenges

However, navigating the world of performing arts education presents its own set of challenges. On one hand, securing licensing rights for performing arts proves to be a complex process. Quirke says, "Gathering the licensing rights for the shows - we have to apply for specific rights with Music Theatre International and follow a lengthy process to get this approved in a timely manner before we announce any shows."

Similarly, another hurdle faced by educational institutions is difficulty in finding qualified and experienced performing arts teachers. "We aim to find teachers who have worked or trained professionally in the arts but it is hard to find professionals who are [of] that level or calibre in both areas," says Quirke.

Highlighting the possible reasons, Grekoski says, "Finding qualified performing arts teachers can be



In several cases, budget [for performing arts] can also be a constraint

— Lisa Scott-Lee,
Principal, Dubai Performing Arts Academy

challenging due to the relatively smaller pool of candidates compared to other subject areas."

In the face of these challenges, schools are adopting diverse strategies to not only attract but also retain qualified performing arts educators. Nandkeolyar emphasises the importance of competitive compensation, professional development opportunities and targeted recruitment strategies to attract qualified candidates.

Schools, meanwhile, are recognising the value of providing autonomy to teachers. Benjamin Atkins, Head of Secondary, The Aquila School says, autonomy helps to create a happy working environment. "Autonomy to



Schools are actively dedicating resources to expand this domain [performing arts]

— Afshin,
Founder, Melodica Music and Dance Academy



Courtesy: Bloom World Academy

Schools are sparing no efforts in ensuring that the success of performing arts education remains student-focused



Courtesy: Sherborne Qatar

Students in GCC schools are exposed to music, drama, dance and art from an early age

run their own curriculum and select performances/productions that work for them while highlighting the best of students' abilities," adds Atkins.

External tie-ups

Schools are also establishing tie-ups with external performing arts organisations and professionals in an effort to introduce a greater degree of professionalism. According to Borby Eybrahim, Director of Performing Arts, Sherborne Qatar, working with external organisations brings more creativity and skills to a school and helps students and staff to grow.

As Nandkeolyar points out, while having external performing arts

organisations results in increased exposure for students, greater awareness and motivation, the challenges will be of a potential monetary commitment, which may strain the budget and the necessity for time management.

Performing arts organisations are helping schools in delivering music and dance lessons as part of the curriculum, while facilitating workshops, extracurricular and peripatetic activities. They also provide access to instruments, maintenance and repair services. They also organise performance opportunities such as concerts and recitals, allowing students to showcase their talent.

However, institutes also face several constraints in offering their services to schools and educational institutions. Lisa Scott-Lee, Principal, Dubai Performing Arts Academy says, "While performing arts still is a very much, up and coming industry here in the GCC, not all schools understand the importance and the positive impact it can have on young student's lives. In several cases, budget can also be a constraint."

In addition, limited academic time, scheduling conflicts, inconsistent levels of parental and community support and the diverse range of extracurricular activities which compete for students' time and attention make it challenging for performing arts organisations to attract and retain participants in music and dance programmes.

Afshin says, "Integrating music and dance into curricular and peripatetic activities presents several formidable challenges. Chief among them is resistance to inclusion in the academic curriculum, driven by a



While having external performing arts organisations results in increased exposure for students, greater awareness and motivation, the challenges will be of a potential monetary commitment, which may strain the budget and the necessity for time management

— **Rashmi Nandkeolyar**,
Principal and Director,
Delhi Private School Dubai

prevailing focus on core subjects and standardised testing."

And as Grekoski says, schools are today better placed to understand that performing arts not only create better students but open doors to a wide range of careers and imparts transferable skills for various professions. ■



Drama tends to be the most in demand performing arts subject when students opt for their GCSE subjects at the end of Year 9...

— **Ruth Sanders**,
Drama Teacher and Head of Performing
Arts, Dubai British School - Jumeirah Park

'40% of nursery-age children will need to be self-employed to have any form of income'

The curriculum of most schools worldwide is designed to create employees and occasionally produce entrepreneurs, says Dr. Adil Alzarooni Founder of Citizens School and CEO of Al Zarooni Emirates Investments, as he discusses the vision for his school and investment opportunities in education in the GCC

By **Joseph George**

Dr. Adil Alzarooni is a man of several talents. From starting a laundry business in his '20s with his own savings to authoring books on entrepreneurship and starting a visionary K-12 inclusive school to holding various leadership positions within UAE government entities, he wears several hats.

He is the Founder of Citizens School and CEO of Al Zarooni Emirates Investments. He has more than two decades of experience in executive management, investments, sales, logistics, IT security and economic zone development. Committed to lifelong learning, Dr. Alzarooni has served in various leadership positions within UAE government entities as well as family-owned businesses.

He has bolstered his portfolio with directorship positions in diverse sectors including healthcare, education, financial services, logistics, media, technology, food and beverage, fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) and real estate. Currently he operates two family offices.

In September 2022, he launched a K-12, inclusive and non-selective school named Citizens, in Dubai. The school focuses on reimagining education and individualised learning that is structured around each child's unique strengths.

Dr. Alzarooni holds a bachelor's degree in engineering from the Etisalat College of Engineering, a master's in business administration from American University of Sharjah and a PhD in family businesses and business systems from the British University in Dubai. He is a passionate educator and an inspiring public speaker in the fields of economic zone development and sustainability of family businesses.

spoke to Dr. Alzarooni to find out about his entrepreneurial journey,

his vision for the new school and opportunities for investors in education in the GCC.

You started your entrepreneurial journey while you were still a student. Tell us about it.

I belong to an entrepreneurial family but as a recent graduate from the Etisalat College of Engineering in the '90s, I knew that having business in my DNA and being ambitious was not enough to be successful. I wanted to learn more about operating a business by venturing out on my own. So, with Dh100,000 from my earnings and savings, I bought a laundry and started running it on my own.

This practical, real-world experience as a sole proprietor of a small business was immensely valuable. I learnt to use all my resources optimally. I also gained skills and expertise in all aspects of building a business such as operational and financial management, sales and marketing, customer services and so on.

You wear several hats as an entrepreneur, education being one of them. What made you enter the education space in 2022?

The journey began eight years prior to the school's launch. I observed how the curriculum of most schools worldwide is designed to create employees and occasionally produce entrepreneurs. With Citizens, I wanted the opposite to happen as 40% of nursery-age children in schools today will need to be self-employed in the future to have any form of income as per The Future of Jobs Report 2020, World Economic Forum.

I wanted to set up a school which was designed to meet the new market dynamics and complex social realities, while being all-inclusive and non-selective.

What is your dream for Citizens

School, and how successful have you been in achieving it?

Citizens is on a mission to reimagine a future relevant education experience. We have a bespoke experience-based, inclusive curriculum that caters to each child's individual strengths and approach to learning.

Our learning philosophy centres on the holistic development of our future generations, enabling them not only to have successful careers but also to build a higher quality of life, which includes physical, mental, emotional and financial well-being.

We've had a great first year, not only in terms of enrolment but also because, in line with our mission, we've successfully launched several new initiatives during the year such as entrepreneurial workshops for kids as young as age four, trainings for teachers (who we call mentors) on design thinking, a sustainability revolution across our campus and daily activities and an onsite community fitness and well-being centre for parents and staff.

We will also be launching a venture studio soon where our students will be able to develop entrepreneurial skills by building new start-ups and receiving funds to grow them.

You run a school yourself and also head Al Zarooni Emirates Investment, which invests in education. How easy or difficult you think it is to build a high growth educational business in the GCC vs other parts of the world?

The GCC region offers excellent opportunities for investment in the education sector, with its rising population of expatriates, educational reforms and member states' financial commitments to the sector. According to a recent report by an investment advisory firm in the UAE, most of the GCC countries have allocated a large proportion of their budget



Dr. Adil Alzarooni, Founder of Citizens School and CEO of Al Zarooni Emirates Investments

to education. While Saudi Arabia is leading the way with approximately \$50 billion allocated to education between 2022 and 2027, the UAE and Kuwait are expected to grow at the fastest rate when it comes to student enrolments. Overall, enrolment in the GCC is expected to increase by 1.1 million to 14.2 million by 2027.

What opportunities exist for investors in education in the GCC?

Investors can choose to invest in one or more subsectors of education, which includes education delivery (K-12 to higher education), education

services (professional development and consulting), support services and infrastructure.

Which category of schools in your view have higher chances of success in the GCC region?

According to a Boston Consulting Group report, parents are more willing to pay for private schools that 'provide differentiated offerings and better outcomes'.

There is rising demand for schools offering international curricula such as British, American, International

Baccalaureate, etc. In addition, those schools that quickly embrace new tools and technology such as AI and gamification in learning have much better chances of success.

What are the trends taking shape in investment in education in the GCC region?

There is an increasing focus on education driven by technology and adoption of blended learning platforms. So apart from private school operators, edtech service providers have numerous opportunities to expand in the region. ■



Picture Courtesy: Otsaw Digital

Are UAE schools ready for security robots?

As schools the world over deal with increasingly complex security challenges, the integration of technological advancements in security solutions has become a strategic necessity

By **Ritika**

Automation in surveillance infrastructure has already changed the way humans think and perceive security. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning capabilities have transformed the capabilities of CCTV cameras and access control systems being deployed at public places.

Advancements in robotic technology have further enhanced the industry's

enthusiasm in deploying them towards strengthening the security infrastructure. The ability of robots to be mobile and operate 24/7 combined with robust computing power to analyse and assess threat scenarios have made them work almost on par or better than humans when it comes to surveillance.

As schools deal with increasingly complex security challenges, the integration of these technological advancements has become a strategic necessity.

Robots as security guards

Several schools across the US, faced with recent security breaches and gun violence, are testing the effectiveness of robots as security guards. Santa Fe High School in New Mexico was one of the first schools to trial a robot as security guard. The robots developed by SMP Robotics was deployed in association with its partner in the US, Team 1st Technologies.

Explaining the capabilities of the robots, Tal Turner, Vice-President, SMP

Robotics says these robots provide 360-degree panoramic views and can actively engage with potential threats.

"They can issue warnings to potential threats, alerting them that they are under surveillance. Simultaneously, robots can swiftly notify local law enforcement about the situation. It safeguards schools from potential security breaches and enhances their safety measures," he says.

Higher education institutes in Singapore have also deployed security robots. According to Wen Dee Kee, the Commercial Director at Otsaw Digital, a developer of robotics technologies, these robots are utilised for outdoor patrolling and outdoor-indoor security coverage. The implementation enables educational institutions' existing security personnel to concentrate on indoor security coverage.

According to Kee, there is a pressing need to enhance security, especially on larger campuses, while the rising cost of wages and a shortage of manpower have further propelled the demand for these robotic solutions.

Kee underscores that modern security robots are able to utilise advanced sensors, AI algorithms and autonomous navigation to enhance surveillance and threat detection, empowering them to actively monitor surroundings, identify potential threats and respond swiftly.

The industry is already working towards the development of machine commands, which enables robots to communicate with security robotics video management systems.

According to Turner, this integration allows robots to seamlessly interact with Visitor Management Systems (VMS). Turner also highlights a groundbreaking development where robots gaining the ability to converse autonomously and even interact with



Schools [in the GCC] are indeed showing a growing interest in deploying security robots as part of their safety measures

— Wen Dee Kee,
Commercial Director, Otsaw Digital



platforms such as ChatGPT. It means that future robots can engage with individuals independently and enhance their efficacy in diverse scenarios.

There is substantial progress in security robots' operational efficiency. Turner says "Today, robots are capable of running 12 hours on one battery charge, and by 2024 they are expected to operate for 24 hours."

SWARM robots, a noteworthy innovation in the arena, operate collaboratively and communicate effectively with each other. This approach, as highlighted by Turner, enhances their efficiency and effectiveness in securing schools.

However, while the integration of robotics into security measures promises a safer learning environment, investments, technical malfunctions and privacy issues remain a concern.

The UAE has already witnessed several initiatives towards adoption of technology in security and surveillance. Dubai Police announced at the GITEX Global 2023 exhibition the introduction of a self-driving robotic patrol vehicle, which combined with advanced facial recognition and detachable drones, could be effectively used for the city's surveillance. However, while public initiatives are robust, schools in the region are yet to make any serious investments into robotic security solutions.

Turner says schools in the UAE and other GCC countries are much more well protected and safe compared to the US and several other parts of the world.

"Despite technology advancements robots will not be able to fully replace humans. They can only be force multipliers," says Turner.

According to Kee, the market for security robots in schools within the GCC is evolving rapidly. "Schools are indeed showing a growing interest in deploying security robots as part of their safety measures," he says.

Access control and security cameras

Most schools in the region are deploying advanced CCTV camera and access control systems equipped with smart AI analytics. These analytics include preemptive threat detection such as recognising left objects, crowd density control, face recognition and tracking.

According to Prateek Verma, Sales Director at Vantage Security, there has been a surge in demand for CCTV cameras in educational institutions globally. The rise is attributed to increasing threats such as external attacks, theft and suspicious activities around school premises. In regions such as the Middle East, compliance with laws and regulations, monitored by governing bodies, has also intensified the need for robust security measures.

Verma says some concerns such as managing access control in schools with a large number of students can be managed with the use of turnstiles, swing gates and entrance barriers integrated with access control solutions.

Maria Araceli Mapanao, Lead Presales Engineer, Stebilex Systems notes that some schools are implementing solutions such as speed gates integrated with face recognition readers. According to her, using smartphones to unlock doors and manage access to school's premises is the future of access control. She says that video access control (a fully integrated CCTV+ ACS) is another promising innovation that would help enhance school security.

Cloud-based access control is another new feature that will be effective in schools with multiple branches. It will allow the security department to seamlessly manage all the branches online and integrate to multiple existing systems without the need for physical interface or integration licenses.

Verma says the coming years will witness standardisation of features such as behavior detection in CCTV systems, thereby enhancing their ability to detect suspicious behaviours. ■



Despite technology advancements robots will not be able to fully replace humans. They can only be force multipliers

— Tal Turner,
Vice-President, SMP Robotics

Is the four-day school week effective?

Sharjah schools switched to a four-day working week in 2022. *Education Middle East* finds out from UAE school principals the potential benefits and challenges of adopting a similar model across the UAE

By **Amitha R**

Hundreds of schools around the US have adopted a four-day week in recent years. Back home Sharjah announced in 2022 that all its schools would switch to a four-day working week following a similar move by the UAE federal government for its employees.

Following the implementation of the four-day working week, the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA) conducted a study to assess the productivity and standard of living in Sharjah's educational community.

The study was conducted on the basis of a survey, which was filled out by more than 7,000 educational and administrative staff and about 31,000 families from 70 nationalities. Children from these families attend 127 private schools in Sharjah, which have a capacity of more than 184,000 female and male students.

Interestingly, the study found that having a three-day weekend enhances productivity, time management and quality learning outcomes. The key findings of the study reveal a 90% improvement in work-life balance and a 78% enhancement in students' social

skills and relationships. Furthermore, administrators and teachers showed an 88% increase in motivation, and student academic achievements surged by 77%. Additionally, the productivity of both administrators and teachers experienced an 86% increase.

Meanwhile, there have been discussions on whether the model should be replicated across the UAE. *Education Middle East* speaks to principals from Sharjah schools and other emirates to find out their views on adopting a similar model and the benefits and challenges of a three-day weekend.



Jan Stipek

Principal, Regent International School

I can certainly imagine a four-day school week but believe that a potential decision on such a switch should come after a discussion with school leaders on the reasons for the change; available research findings about a four-day week impact on student progress and attainment; and how to operationalise this change if approved.



Firstly, the four-day school day is not a unique idea, and schools from the UAE to the US have implemented this. However, the reasons for the change vary from cost saving and attracting or retaining more teachers to well-being and creating time which can be spent by students on pursuing their extra-curricular passions. Therefore, starting questions we should be asking are: What are we hoping to achieve in our context? Do we all understand the reasons and share the same vision?

Secondly, existing research from

Sharjah shows positive outcomes of a move to the four-day week. There is now available research regarding the impact of a four-day week on student progress and attainment from outside of the UAE. I believe it is important for schools to review and critically evaluate existing research findings in both areas (well-being and academic performance) so that school leaders can confidently speak about the change to parents and universities.

Finally, school days and academic years are driven by timetables and calendars so schools should ask themselves how they can operationalise this move in their school-specific context so that the decision does not lead to a loss of quality instruction time or a forced decision to limit 'non-core' subjects or 'optional activities'. Do we need to extend our school day or the school year? What are our school's 'promises' (e.g., swimming pool time for all students) and how would this change affect these?



James McDonald
CEO & Principal, Wesgreen
International School Sharjah

Without question, our school community is enjoying the benefits of

a more relaxed and productive team.

The four school days are busy and purposeful. Little time is wasted with shorter breaks and fast-paced learning experiences.

Students are fully engaged and pushed harder than they could have been with sufficient downtime to allow the knowledge to stick. The quality and depth of student learning can further be seen through our year-on-year academic examination success stories. With extra-curricular activities flourishing, a broad range of enrichment competitions thriving and a range of new and exciting developments taking place, it is plain to see the impact of a four-day week upon our learners and educators. Our staff cover the same time as a five-day week. Yet, by allowing for the extra day off we have significantly increased their productivity.

The GEMS Wesgreen teaching community itself has been able to push harder and faster as a result of this innovative work-life balance approach.

We are enjoying improved staff





retention and attract the best possible quality of candidates to come and educate our young people.



Craig Halsall
Principal, Reach British School

The recent education impact study by the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA) about a four-day working week makes for interesting reading. Any education authority considering a similar move should carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages not only from a well-being perspective but also the impact on the quality of learning as well as parents before doing so.



There are proven advantages not only from SPEA case study but others too. The impact on the quality of teaching and learning must however be a key consideration when looking at a four-day work week. As teaching is widely accepted as the most important factor affecting student learning, the likely impact of a reduced week on attracting the best quality teachers to the UAE, especially during a time of growing teacher shortages, must be taken seriously. Providing a better work-life balance for teachers may be appealing but can also provide an environment that fosters improved and more innovative curriculum planning and lesson delivery.

A reduced week would increase pressure for schools to cover the curricula, almost certainly resulting in longer school days. Thought should also be given to the impact on the early years, as a longer day is unlikely to be productive given their young ages.

A longer day, however, would provide more opportunities for parents to visit school and meet with teachers at times that best-fit working families. Consideration does need to be given to parents working five days and for whom childcare arrangements would become a challenge.

Schools would need to consider restructuring the school day to enable a successful transition to a four-day week. One thing is for certain, a shorter week, embedded within a culture focused on improved well-being, does provide advantages that are worth embracing.



Nargish Khambatta
Senior Vice President - Education
and Principal & CEO, GEMS Modern Academy

News of the four-day week has been creeping into conversations for a while now and if it is implemented, there is bound to be initial euphoria and excitement. However, administrators will have to spend



many hours working out the minutiae for successful execution, and I'm sure the authorities will consult and be willing to adjust and amend compliance norms based on what will be impacted.

Children will be able to relax more and pursue their interests over the extended weekend, and senior students will get more time to complete assignments, prepare for competitive exams and carry out university application-related activities. Some might even take up internships over the three-day weekend, which will enhance their portfolios.

Teachers might welcome the time to get organised on the home front, to exercise and enjoy some 'me time', which is normally scarce, and they will be able to schedule medical and personal appointments over the weekend, perhaps leading to fewer requests for leave.

For working parents, having young children at home for three days will mean additional planning and perhaps payment for childcare services if they don't have a responsible elder at home.

For timetable, curriculum and assessment coordinators, the considerations will be interesting as they will be required to squeeze the same amount into a work week that has shrunk by 20%! A power curriculum will be needed to meet compliance standards in the stipulated time and teachers will flip content to accelerate learning. Should the authorities decide to implement it, educators will make the four-day week work. It's what we've always done and been applauded for. ■

How teachers can help students deal with stress

By understanding stressors, recognising signs and teaching coping strategies, educators can empower students to navigate life's challenges with resilience and confidence, says Mahira Zakiuddin, Wellington Director of Counselling, GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis

According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), adolescent mental health is a pressing concern, with an estimated 10-20% of adolescents worldwide experiencing mental health issues. Stress is a significant contributor to these difficulties, and in recent times, there has been a growing understanding in the role that educators can play in supporting their students through this. There are several ways that teachers can help students deal with stress, from recognising key stressors to fostering a resilient mindset.

Identifying triggers

Teachers should be vigilant in identifying key stressors that may affect their students. These stressors can vary widely, from academic pressures and peer relationships to family problems and societal expectations. One way of doing this is making time to connect with students and building relationships with them. The American Psychological Association has identified that creating positive connections with educators has important, positive and long-lasting implications for students.

Reporting signs of stress

Understanding what stress looks like in students is essential. Stress can manifest differently in every individual but common signs include changes in behaviour, mood swings, withdrawal from social activities, decreased academic performance and physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches. Stress affects not just students' emotions but also their physical well-being. Common physiological indicators of stress include increased heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension and disrupted sleep patterns.

It is important to note that any noticeable change in behaviour should be considered a potential sign of stress, including behaviours considered 'out of character'. In line with UAE safeguarding laws, each school has a Designated Safeguarding



OPINION

Mahira Zakiuddin
Wellington Director of Counselling,
GEMS Wellington Academy

Lead (DSL), and teachers should inform the DSL of any significant changes in a student's behaviour.

Support strategies

Addressing dysfunctional thinking styles: Negative thinking patterns often contribute to stress. Therapists and psychologists address these patterns by using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). While teachers need not have a comprehensive training of CBT, a basic understanding of dysfunctional thinking styles can help support students. Some examples of these include catastrophising, overgeneralisation and perfectionism. Teachers can guide students in recognising and challenging these thoughts, promoting more balanced and positive thinking patterns.

Building the attentional muscle of the mind: Mindfulness practices have gained prominence in recent years for the ability to help individuals maintain present-moment awareness in a non-judgmental manner. Teaching the skill to focus attention on the present moment can significantly reduce stress. There are 11 research-backed ways that mindfulness reduces stress, which vary from improvement in

immune function to heart health and overall well-being.

Teachers can incorporate short mindfulness exercises into their classroom routines, encouraging students to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings without judgement.

Creating distress tolerance: A person's ability to manage an emotional incident without feeling overwhelmed is called distress tolerance. This can quickly support a person to return to a state of equilibrium when new stressors arise. Teachers can help students develop distress tolerance by encouraging them to face difficult situations rather than avoiding them. This may involve problem-solving strategies, emotional regulation techniques and seeking support from trusted adults or peers. Teaching relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation can also help.

A supportive environment

Creating a supportive classroom environment that promotes well-being, fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging open dialogue about stress and mental health, and providing resources for additional support when needed, such as school counsellors or mental health professionals can help manage student stress. Teachers and counsellors now have access to a plethora of well-being frameworks and free evidence-based practices to help them create a nurturing environment at school.

Self-care for teachers

It's crucial for teachers to prioritise their well-being too. Stress can be contagious, and teachers who model healthy coping strategies and self-care techniques can positively influence their students.

Teachers should engage in self-care activities, seek support when necessary, and maintain a positive work-life balance. ■



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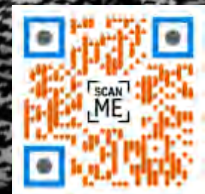
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