



Supporting Online Learning in Tertiary Education





Online learning is gaining in popularity and is expected to continue transforming traditional methods of education. It provides a great opportunity for the youth to access high-quality education within and beyond their local community, develop competitive skills, and reach the international job market. As of 2022, the size of the global education market was USD 217 billion and is predicted to grow to around USD 475 billion by 2030 (Facts & Factors, 2023).¹ The benefits of online learning, such as convenience, flexibility, lower costs, and improved access to a wider range of resources, are driving many institutions to adopt online learning into formal tertiary education systems.²

Under its strategic pillar Education 360, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation encourages greater multi-sector collaboration between stakeholders, who are dedicated to supporting the youth in their education to employment journeys with the aim to accelerate realization of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda by 2030. In 2020, the Foundation launched [University Consortium for Quality Online Learning](#) (UCQOL), a UAE-based initiative, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and nine leading UAE universities to develop high-quality, market-driven, and accredited online programs.

As part of its continuous endeavors to share best practices and create and maintain knowledge channels among different stakeholders, the Foundation convened a group of experts and leaders to discuss:

- The importance of and process towards accreditation of online programs in the UAE;
- Emerging opportunities from strengthening partnerships among universities; and
- Innovative approaches to improve the online learning experience for students.



1 Facts & Factors. (2023). Online Education Market Size, Share Global Analysis Report, 2023 – 2030.

2 sciencedirect. Understanding the role of digital technologies in education: A review



Shifting Perceptions of Online Learning

For years, online learning was perceived as less robust than traditional education that requires physical presence. Despite being easily accessible and providing learners with the opportunity to develop soft skills, many still viewed online learning as less favorable than in-person learning. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, required fundamental shifts in teaching and learning, causing many institutions to leverage digital platforms as primary mediums of instruction. The role of online education in reducing learning losses throughout the pandemic helped alter perceptions of remote learning and education. In a recently released report by McKinsey & Company, 7000 higher education students, who had moved to online classes during the pandemic, were surveyed from 17 countries in America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Findings indicated that 65% of students want aspects of their learning experience to remain virtual. Students say they appreciate the flexibility and convenience.³



³ McKinsey & Company. (2023). "What Do Higher Education Students Want from Online Learning?"

Shifting Perceptions of Online Learning

Today, institutions recognize that there are numerous benefits to online learning; some of those include:

- Equipping students with transferable soft skills that they could leverage as they navigate the online learning space independently. Additionally, it serves as an important tool in closing the widening global skills gap (World Economic Forum, 2022).⁴
- Removing physical barriers, allowing institutions across countries and regions to collaborate with one another while saving time and resources; and
- Allowing institutions to evaluate their programs against international standards by examining existing processes, comparing them with the global market, and collaborating to address national and regional needs.

In a survey of scholars, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation found that more than 50% of respondents were open to studying online in the future.⁵ Although perceptions of online learning have evolved, more progress is needed to create an enabling environment for the growth and use of online learning tools. Shifting perceptions, among employers and communities to become more positive requires maintaining high standards and a common commitment to delivering high-quality education that equips students with the knowledge and skills they need.

⁴ [World Economic Forum. \(2022\)](#)

⁵ [Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation. \(2020\). Emergency Remote Teaching or Online Learning? Arab Students' Experiences During Covid-19.](#)



”

“The Ministry of Education and Al Ghurair Foundation share a vision of a consortium that promotes university collaboration, and constantly raises overall education and online learning quality via constructive cooperation. Therefore, we envisage and encourage the consortium’s reach to expand its impact beyond the UAE. Our objective is for UAE universities to become a global shining example of online learning, setting the standards and leading excellence regionally and globally.”

His Excellency Dr. Hassan Obaid Al Mheiri

Assistant Undersecretary for Licensing and Quality Sector
Ministry of Education, UAE



Challenges to Adopting Online Modalities

Although online learning has gained more acceptance and there have been increased investments in digital infrastructure, higher education institutions still face several challenges when adopting online modalities into formal tertiary education. Some of these challenges that require prompt attention are listed below:

1. Rigidity and resistance to change among education providers hinder the shift to online learning: Although shifting away from traditional modes of teaching and towards alternative methods can be difficult for education providers to embrace, adaptive learning modalities developed throughout the pandemic have proven that online learning can be as effective as in-person learning. In fact, the pandemic showed that in-person only modes of delivery in education can be fragile, therefore, it became essential for education providers to show willingness and flexibility to adapt to this change.

2. More focus is placed on the mode of delivery rather than on the quality of education: It has now become crucial to consider the quality of available courses and programs and to tailor the method of delivery according to programs' needs to maximize effectiveness. As education becomes more accessible to a wider audience, it is important to focus on the quality and rigor of education in addition to providing an exceptional experience, regardless of its mode of delivery.

3. Higher education institutions' capacities still require support in the transition to online learning: Coordinating efforts, allocating resources, investing in infrastructure and technology, and dedicating training to faculty and staff are important factors in supporting higher education providers reach their transition goals. Faculty and staff may also need significant support in preparing and designing courses, and in developing metrics of success that differ from in-person courses.

4. The digital divide and unequal access to education pose additional concerns while implementing technology-enabled learning: Disadvantaged groups may face disproportionate challenges in accessing online learning, exacerbating existing inequalities and deepening the digital divide among students. Institutions need to enhance equal access to information and communication technologies among all students to ensure engagement and inclusivity.



”

”To shift the perception about online learning, we should ensure that online education is robust, that the admission criteria have the required credibility, and that faculty qualifications are up to standards. Most importantly, we need to make sure that the skills and knowledge needed for the labor market and the jobs are fulfilled in online education.”

His Excellency Dr. Mohamed Baniyas

Higher Education Advisor and Director
Commission for Academic Accreditation, UAE



Collaboration for Enhancing Online Education

To address the aforementioned challenges, it is important to increase multi stakeholder collaboration across education institutions, faculty, regulators, and of course, students. With this in mind, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation established the University Consortium for Quality Online Learning (UCQOL) in 2020 with the UAE Ministry of Education and nine leading universities in the UAE to strengthen online education and offer comprehensive opportunities for learners.





”

“The consortium is a unique initiative, an initiative where the UAE showed once again that barriers can be broken when a community of professionals and experts decide to join forces. As the consortium was launched under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and the Foundation, I am confident that we are making a change that will have an impact for years to come. This consortium is about how to have a stronger educational system; one that is progressive and reaches beyond barriers of geography, buildings, and time zones.”

Mr. Sultan Al Ghurair

Board Member
The Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation

Collaboration for Enhancing Online Education

Collaboration among universities would robustly help strengthen the overall rigor of online learning. Strategic and meaningful partnerships contribute to strengthening the wider ecosystem and reaching further milestones. Some of the key benefits of collaboration include:

- 1. Besides healthy competition, collaboration allows institutions to share lessons learned and identify scalable courses and programs.** This can help universities adopt online learning more efficiently. Believing in the impact of sharing best practices and encouraging know-how exchange, the Foundation has fostered collaboration between the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Arizona State University (ASU), which accelerated the launch of several programs sooner than originally planned. Similarly, knowledge sharing among universities like AUB, the American University of Sharjah (AUS) and University of Sharjah (UoS) will certainly help avoid some of the challenges universities face in their earlier design phases and their scaling process.
- 2. Collaboration in online learning also removes physical constraints to enable students and faculty across institutions to work with one another.** It allows students to register in multiple courses and connect with faculty from different institutions to receive greater exposure. This could help institutions specialize in specific disciplines while allowing students to tap into different expertise and access a variety of specializations.
- 3. Education providers have a better opportunity to evaluate their programs against international standards when they enter into active collaborations with reliable partners.** Higher education institutions can examine existing processes globally and benchmark internationally in terms of developing and delivering online programs of high quality. Additionally, faculty and administrators need to work together on addressing the needs of the UAE and the Arab region as a whole. Productive competition and meeting international standards can ultimately allow institutions to achieve sustainable growth and attract students from different parts of the world.

Partnerships among higher education institutions are central to the success of online education. Universities can also collaborate with industries and government entities to maximize the benefits of online learning.



”

”I believe that collaboration should be expanded to industry, higher education, and government bodies. We need to work collaboratively to ensure that the perception of quality is addressed so that we can accelerate availing high quality online learning.”

Dr. Issam Srour

Professor, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and
Director, Abdulla Al Ghurair Hub for Digital Teaching and Learning
The American University of Beirut (AUB)



Bridging the Gap between Industry and Education

Market-driven education can create bridges and ties to employability that help learners transfer their knowledge to the workforce and the broader society. To adequately bridge the gap between education and industry, all stakeholders should integrate insights from the job market into online programs.

Similarly, learners can explore career paths for different programs before joining, whether these programs are online or in-person. Students who completed their degrees online refer to the impact of learning valuable additional skills in comparison to their peers, who may have completed qualifications without an online element. Such skills include time management, independence, and creativity.

In developing online learning, program designers must specifically consider the topics and courses that could be delivered online, rather than committing to putting a program entirely online. Numerous successful programs combine online and in-person elements. Program designers should therefore consider when online delivery can be efficient and maximize benefiting from faculty, carefully identifying topics and courses that could be delivered online. This could help university leadership and faculty build online courses that respond to the market needs and assess their success and relevance.

For instance, it is possible for students to receive theoretical lectures as well as modeling videos online then apply these lessons in labs and courses. Finding this balance could help higher education institutions benefit from technology-enabled learning while maintaining the “human element” of learning processes.

To bridge the gap effectively between education and industry, it is essential to incorporate real-time input from industry leaders into the development of online content. For example, the integration of emerging disruptive technologies and artificial intelligence tools can be swiftly implemented, modeled, and incorporated into online education. Hence, students graduate with readiness and preparedness for the rapidly evolving demands of the real-world workforce.



”

“The online element made it easier for me and my colleagues to adapt to new technology way faster and to be able to tackle problems in different ways. We managed our time and learned to be independent.”

Wafaa Al Habach

Alumna, Open Learning Scholars Program (OLSP, AGF Program) and
Arizona State University (ASU)



Key Recommendations for Universities

Launching rigorous and high-quality online programs requires planning and investment in technology, curriculum development, and faculty training. For online learning to be effective, institutions should ensure that their programs provide engaging and holistic learning experiences, including access to high-quality digital resources and learning materials.

Some key recommendations for implementing effective online programs include:

1. Conducting market research before launching programs

Higher education institutions should invest in extensive market research to align program designs with market needs. This was put at the center of Abdulla Al Ghurair Hub for Digital Teaching and Learning strategy after its establishment in 2021 as a partnership between AGF and the AUB. The Hub started with understanding the target audience, and their needs and objectives, before designing the programs.

2. Being flexible to review and modify program design according to needs

The AUB experience also highlights the importance of flexibility to adapt programs to respond to learnings developed throughout implementation. Universities should be open to rethinking and revising processes related to marketing, recruitment, registration, retention, and student journeys to ensure they are agile and responsive to learners' demands and needs.

3. Establishing clear processes and communications tools

It is evident that highlighted clear study plans and deliverables, interactive platforms, accessible resources, and high-quality learning materials are key components of a successful online program. These components, together with clear communication and a well-thought study plan, are critical in allowing students to manage their time effectively and get the most out of the program.

Key Recommendations for Universities

4. Ensuring that faculty are accessible throughout programs

Developing interactive platforms that provide opportunities for students to collaborate and interact with their peers and professors is also very important. Access to faculty helps students seek support when needed to meet expectations. Accessibility to peers and faculty members added to the dynamics of the learning experience and allowed for a deeper and more agile learning curve from students' perspective.

5. Placing students at the center when customizing programs

Universities should foster student-centered learning environments by placing learners and their learning objectives at the center of course design and delivery. Being on the receiving side, students have a better sense of what works for them, therefore, it is key to engage them in the development of classes and programs. This can also ensure that courses and programs equip students with the knowledge and skills that they need to succeed within and beyond the program.

6. Complementing online programs with real-life modeling

It is essential for universities to leverage technological advancements to address the needs of specific fields whenever possible. Incorporating practical skills into online learning is vital for its sustainability. For example, because nursing is a relatively "hands on" profession, it is important to develop simulations and real-life modeling tools for training and procedural practices. To ensure that online programs attract diverse learners, universities should design programs that help learners build a variety of skills that can be applicable in different fields and sectors.

7. Developing adaptive assessments to measure success

Universities should establish innovative assessments to evaluate online learners' knowledge and experiences. Traditional modes of education use linear measurement systems, such as conventional exams methods to test knowledge. While testing knowledge is important, it is not enough to test other skills required in today's modern world. As learning methods change, it is crucial for assessments to change in parallel, and universities should move towards assessing how learners apply their knowledge and skills in real life.



Moving Forward:

A Focus on Alignment and Trust

Bringing the entire ecosystem of students, universities, employers, policymakers, and wider society together, requires aligning approaches to online learning and meeting international standards:

Establishing a shared understanding and an organized way of collaboration can help higher education institutions, industries, and governments put learners at the center and facilitate better opportunities to serve students and the overall economy. Matching local qualities of online learning with international standards enhances opportunities and enables students to transfer the skills they acquire in university to real life as they transition into the workforce. One of UCQOL's core goals is to build a rich experience for students that aligns with international standards and increases students' competitiveness on a global scale.

Building trust in online modalities of learning is essential to maximizing its benefit:

Establishing high-quality processes for online learning can help ensure programs are effective and sustainable. There is an urgent need to build the trust of the industry, peers, and the global community. This will crystalize through leveraging the power of transnational education, remote work, and access to different services that would be very difficult to maintain without clear measures and the trust of different parties. Therefore, it is crucial to build on the various steps taken towards designing and delivering high quality online programs to reach the desired degree of trust and credibility.



”

”Students are working in a time when even if they are in the UAE, they can be collaborating with colleagues around the world, so they need to be competitive at both regional and international standards. Thinking about how we build that authentic measure that allows our students to excel in a global space is key.”

Cindy Bonfini-Hotlosz

Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Centreity



The Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation's efforts in the UAE and the MENA region aim to create pathways to opportunities by leveraging innovative solutions, building trust and alignment, and cultivating strategic partnerships with relevant stakeholders. Developing innovative programs that create positive, long-term impact is at the forefront of the Foundation's mission in the UAE and the region. In line with this commitment, the Foundation will continue to collaborate with partners across different sectors to advance online learning and enhance the ecosystem to empower youth and support them to thrive and reach their full potential within and beyond the UAE.



Annex:

This Thought Leadership Series was co-hosted by the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation and the UAE Ministry of Education featuring the following speakers:

- His Excellency **Dr. Mohamed Baniyas**; Higher Education Advisor and Director, Commission for Academic Accreditation, UAE.
- **Cindy Bonfini-Hotlosz**, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Centreity
- **Dr. Issam Srour**, Professor, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and Director, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Hub for Digital Teaching and Learning, The American University of Beirut (AUB)
- **Wafaa Al Habach**; Alumna, Open Learning Scholars Program (OLSP, AGFProgram) and Arizona State University (ASU)



مؤسسة عبد الله الخريـر
Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation

