

## Setting the bar – the Middle East K12 market

A renewed focus on assessment in the Middle East is helping to build a quality framework for the region to provide better schools but some challenges remain, says *Nalini Cook*, Middle East head at ISC Research



Assessment has become the new educational buzzword in the Middle East. This is particularly so among the independent schools in the UAE which includes over 590 English-medium international schools.

The country is leading the region for educational advancement, with a national agenda to suit. Assessment standards for independent schools, which are attended by the vast majority of students aged between 3 and 18 in the UAE, are part of this agenda. Several other countries in the region have indicated the potential for similar moves, notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

### Regulations across the emirates

Within the UAE, five of the seven emirates fall under the inspection regulations of the Ministry of Education (MOE), with Dubai following those set by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), and Abu Dhabi complying with those of the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC). In 2010, the UAE government launched Vision 2021, its national agenda, with the aim for the country to be 'among the best in the world in the Human Development Index'. This includes the intention to drive up standards and educational innovation across the independent school sector, and inform the way in which school inspections are to be conducted.

There is a sense of pride within the MOE for the variety of independent K12 schools available to families throughout the UAE. The English-medium international schools market alone offers over ten different national curriculum options including Indian, Canadian and Australian, as well as British and American education. The international schools sector also offers a wide range of other curricula such as the International Primary and Middle Years Curriculum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and the full range of International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes from Primary Years Programme to the IB Diploma Programme. Needless to say, the government wishes to set some common goals for educational standards.

As a result, the MOE is establishing an inspection framework and process, for international schools throughout all emirates to follow. The national framework, which relates to both the quality of leadership and the quality of education, is drafted but yet to be fully adopted. The reason being; the complexity of standardised appraisals across such a wide range of school types and curricula.

### A British influence

Currently, all three inspection frameworks under the MOE, KHDA and ADEC are based on a British educational structure and, as a result, align to a British approach to teaching and learning.

The British curriculum does predominate across the country's international schools. According to the latest ISC Research data, 46% of all international schools in the UAE follow a British curriculum. However, this also means that 54% of schools face challenges to fit within the British-oriented inspection framework. This includes a significant number of schools offering the IB and those delivering a US style of curriculum, which make up the majority of the other school types. For the international schools market, with its wide range of curricula and teaching levels, criteria and learning options, an inspection framework to suit all school types is difficult, to say the least.

The implications of a common inspection framework, especially one aligned to a particular curriculum, are extensive. A non-British oriented school may struggle to gain an outstanding rating, even though the standards delivered are exceedingly high.

In addition, UAE government requirements for the delivery of Arabic and Islamic studies can restrict curriculum time available for aspects of school life that many international schools consider essential for educating the whole child, such as performing arts, sports or modern foreign languages. Popular as these offerings might be for many parents, schools are downgraded in their inspection if the cultural and native language requirements are not being fully met. Also impacting ratings can be the provision for special educational needs which, when combined with the required achievement of examination targets, can affect an inspection outcome.

### **The impact of inspection rating**

Parents and those making a school choice will naturally aspire to the best school they can afford. Assessment standards are a tool many parents use to identify potential schools, particularly those transient expatriates who are not familiar with a new location and don't have the benefit of word-of-mouth recommendations from trusted peers. Most people not working within the education sector are unaware of such intangibles as inspection idiosyncrasies, so don't understand that a school with a good rating isn't necessarily any worse than a school rated outstanding; it's simply a fact that what the school offers may not fit within the inspection framework. The message to parents has to be, consider the good as well as the outstanding schools, not just those at the very top.

Another consequence for the school of an inspection rating in the UAE are enrolment fees. Schools applying to increase fees are required to meet the standards. This year (the 2016-2017 academic year), Outstanding schools can raise their fees by 6.24%, compared to 3.21% for low performing schools.

### **Redressing the challenge**

The UAE boasts the broadest range of international schools and curricula options in the world. To set quality standards that will recognise all approaches to teaching and learning will certainly be a challenge, but one that the MOE is aspiring to accomplish.

The expectation is that the framework will be refined over the next two or three years until an acceptable solution, considerate of more school types, can be achieved. Needless to say, such challenges are not deterring new school development. ISC Research knows of at least 29 new international school developments underway across the United Arab Emirates, many of which will be following curricula other than the National Curriculum of England.

### **Standards in Qatar and Saudi Arabia**

Elsewhere in the region, similar standards to those in the UAE are expected to be required for independent schools in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

School fees in Qatar are currently very highly regulated. Fee increases are related to results and accreditation, although some schools face unexplained fee restrictions. This has caused many challenges within the international school's market in Qatar, and is one of the reasons for the lack of new school development there. A move to a more transparent, achievable framework will be welcomed by many schools in the country.

In Saudi Arabia, moves are afoot to improve educational standards and increase private sector school provision. The impact of the oil and gas slump has led to recognition by the Saudi government for the need to develop alternative revenue streams. With over 30% of Saudi Arabia's population currently under the age of 15, the government is looking towards improved education options as part of this aim.

This year Saudi's MOE has announced the closure of 3,000 private schools that are not meeting its educational standards. 500 of these schools are being saved and improved by a US\$1.3 billion project, launched this year between a group of real estate, education and investment organisations. It's a project that also plans to create 100 new international schools in the country.

More school development is anticipated. Although foreign direct investment of international schools is currently

restricted in Saudi Arabia, opportunities for international school management by foreign providers is now possible in a bid to support the improvement of educational standards. This move looks likely to expand potential for the Saudi market in the future.

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