

## BUSINESS INSIGHT

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## E-LEARNING

# Ensuring alignment between market needs and graduate skills is a must

Dr. Narimane Hadj-Hamou, CEO of the Center for Learning Innovation and Customized Knowledge Solutions, spoke to *The Edge* about the role that e-learning plays in today's education environment and her assessments of Qatar's education sector.


#### Tell us about your professional career.

I started my career over 15 years ago as a faculty member teaching various subjects in the field of computer science, including teaching programming, management information systems and the use of IT application in business, system analysis and design, among others. After holding a teaching position for a few years, in 2003 I joined the e-TQM College, known today as the Hamdan Bin Mohamed Smart University, in Dubai. Here I assumed different roles, from being their e-learning director, dean of learning and technologies and acting dean of student services to later assuming the role of assistant chancellor for learning and academic development. Being in charge of the academic and research vision of the college, which became the first online university to be recognised by the Commission of Academic Accreditation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2009, I was involved with the design, development and accreditation of several programmes, ranging from bachelor degrees to doctoral degrees. I have been involved in pioneering projects such as launching the first regional association for e-learning and the International Consortium for Teaching and Learning.

I think this was what prompted the shift in my career from a teaching faculty to more of an academic administrative role. In 2012, I was involved with the setting up of the Center for Learning Innovations and Customized Knowledge (CLICKS) as a unique non-profit organisation supporting the advancement of higher education in the region.

#### Given your vast experience in the field of education, what do you think needs to be done in the education sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries?

I think placing more emphasis on building capacity among various higher education stakeholders from members of governing bodies to staff working in student services and in support functions

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should be top of the list. This becomes particularly crucial as more and more emphasis is being placed on improving the quality of universities' offerings and the skills of graduates.

There are many positive things happening in the region such as the establishment of accreditation agencies to support the improvement of quality, the setting up of a national qualification framework, the emphasis on supporting research, and scholarly work by many governments, etcetera.

Perhaps another element will be to continue to ensure alignment between market needs and programme and graduate skills. Opening up the dialogue and establishing strong links between academic and industry particularly in areas related to research would be essential as we move towards being more of a knowledge-based society.

#### With e-learning taking up more importance in the world's education delivery mechanism, how would you quantify its contribution?

There seems to be universal agreement that e-learning worldwide is becoming a significant market - whether this is translated in the world wide e-learning market, growth in the number of e-learning products, the number of online and blended learning programmes or the number of students enrolled in this new type of education.

According to a recent study by Ambient Insight Research,



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the worldwide market for self-paced e-learning is expected to reach USD47.9 billion (QAR174.4 billion) in 2015. The five-year compound annual growth rate is flat at one percent, but revenues are expected to reach USD50.4 billion (QAR183.5 billion) by 2020. The five-year regional forecasts for three types of e-learning products are provided for seven regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and Western Europe.

In our part of the world, developments in e-learning, particularly for higher education, have been growing at a slower pace because of several factors including the lack of recognition of this type of learning by many ministries of higher education, and the cultural readiness where different forms of technology enabled education are not yet widely accepted among employers, parents and even students.

**Qatar and the other GCC nations are all working on developing a sustainable knowledge economy. What do you think can be the role of the education sector?**

Today, a knowledge-based economy is a vital component of modern economies where growth in developed economies is more and more based on knowledge. This of course requires investment in building human capital, widening access to education and supporting research and innovation and its commercialisation.

Universities are increasingly understanding the shift in their role from being pure teaching institutions to becoming more entrepreneurial universities. As part of their responsibilities, they are aligning their priorities with the national strategies in their respective countries, and are encouraging and supporting the creation, spreading, transfer and utilisation of knowledge. Many initiatives are happening in several Arab countries including Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others in this regard.

**Tell us about CLICKS. What does it do and what are its plans for the next three years?**

CLICKS was established mainly to support universities and colleges in areas which need to ensure academic excellence and the ability of institutions to meet international quality standards; as such it supports capacity building through offering a large range of training

programmes addressing various higher education key players (leadership teams, governing bodies and faculty members, etcetera), transfer of 'know-how' and advisory in a number of key areas including, leadership development and governance; innovative learning and teaching including technology integration in higher education; strategy development; research and quality, accreditation and institutional excellence.

**How do you assess the educational initiatives of Qatar?**

I would rather speak about higher education. I believe the government of Qatar understands that while oil and gas are a blessing they will not last forever, and supporting human capital development is the real wealth of the country. As such, it has placed multi-billion investment in education.

The establishment of Qatar Foundation few years ago and the setting up of eight international leading universities is an example of the government emphasis on higher education specifically.

Speaking about the World Innovation Summit for Education Summit which has been running for a number of years, the launch of prizes for education have all been tangible examples of the government's support of innovation. **e**



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