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'Expanding the talent pool through educational innovation'

by **Dr Ayesha Abdullah**

Executive Dean, Business, Higher College of Technology, Dubai

'Celebrating professionalism in the Middle East' is a pioneering series of case studies, published by the Chartered Insurance Institute, to showcase professional practice and innovation in insurance

EXPANDING THE TALENT POOL THROUGH EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION



by **Dr Ayesha Abdullah**

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Higher education is at a crossroads. If it was possible to fast forward to 2030, I would expect to see a hugely changed sector.

Technology had already been driving disruption in how knowledge is curated, shared and assessed, and these forces have accelerated as individuals and organisations have adapted to pressures resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. For many years, established educationalists were somewhat dismissive about 'online learning', regarding it as an inferior experience. Such complacency is no longer possible. Almost every tutor now embraces digital channels, not least because otherwise they would be unable to communicate with their students during lockdown. The practices that have been adopted during this extraordinary period are here to stay.

WIDENING ACCESS

To my mind, this is incontrovertibly good news. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates, has always championed the role of education in building a vibrant and successful modern economy, and has backed this commitment with sustained investment. In fact, the transformative power of education is fully reflected in the mission statement of the Higher College of Technology (HCT): "To provide applied higher education to equip generations with knowledge, skills and competencies that meet international standards and the future needs of the UAE industry and society." Since the HCT was established in 1988, it has provided post-secondary education to tens of thousands of UAE nationals - with more than 24,000 students currently enrolled across our six colleges.





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Despite this progress, the delivery of high-quality graduate-level education can be an extremely expensive undertaking, whether it is paid for by the government or by the individual. Advances in digital learning provide a powerful opportunity to expand access to large numbers of people who can be excluded from its benefits due to financial constraints. It also enables resources to be focused upon the development and delivery of first-rate knowledge, rather than being tied up in bricks and mortar.

Of course, face-to-face learning will always be a vital element of a rounded educational experience — it provides opportunities for student interaction and engagement with tutors that's hard to replicate in the digital space. But the emergence of *blended learning*, combining the best of both in-person and digital education, provides the greatest benefit to society, to students and to prospective employers, and brings closer the vision of a country whose future is rooted in the best possible educational success for the vast majority of its population.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF INSURANCE PROFESSIONALS

Any developed economy relies upon a strong and professional insurance sector; for this reason, insurance is already hardwired into the HCT curriculum. The College of Business runs nine programmes, and insurance features prominently in the finance options. The insurance content has been designed to reinforce two priorities for qualified professionals: they must possess outstanding technical knowledge and they must embrace the highest ethical and behavioural standards. When I consider the wonderful young people graduating every year from HCT, I am proud at their achievements in both these areas.

However, we are hearing from leading insurance companies in the Middle East that we need to go further. Insurance touches on so many areas of modern

economies that the demand for talented professionals is almost insatiable. There are the different demands of short-term insurance (such as property and motor) and longer-term insurance (such as health). There are the differences between the commercial requirements and those of individuals and families. There are roles that appeal to statisticians and roles more suited to commercial leaders. And, of course, in the Middle East we also need to ensure plentiful and high-quality takaful products are available. Many of the companies that I regularly speak with believe the expected growth of the profession during the next decade justifies a standalone insurance programme at the HCT, and this is a theme to which we must give very careful consideration.

DELIVERING THE OPPORTUNITY

None of these benefits will be delivered if young people are unaware of the opportunities. Educationists cannot remain hidden away, waiting for students to knock on our doors. For this reason, the HCT invests heavily in student outreach — our experts are encouraged to speak regularly at high schools and fairs, we run open days for potential applicants, we pay close attention to our website content ensuring it's always up-to-date and informative, and we engage actively with social media. The results speak for themselves — more young people now look upon insurance as a worthwhile career that deserves consideration.

There are seven pillars to the HCT's strategy, and one of the most important is *Creativity and innovation*¹. In this short article, I hope I've communicated my passion for educational innovation, and the role it can play in the foundations for a trusted insurance profession in the Middle East that we can all celebrate. ▲

1. The full list is: creativity and innovation; accountability; integrity; excellence; respect: community sport; service to society.

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