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QUDWA 2017

## MEET THE MENTOR—Spotlight Session

# Homegrown Global Success Stories in Education: GEMS Education and SABIS

**Sunday October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

Speaker: **Dino Varkey**, Chief Executive Officer, GEMS Education, UAE

**Victor Saad**, Vice President, SABIS, UAE

Moderated by: **Nivine Afiouni**, Chief Sub Editor, SkyNews Arabia

### Summary Paragraph

*Which are the most valuable lessons learned from growing successful global education providers that can be applied to the theme of “Teaching for Tomorrow”? How do these two MENA-based organizations prepare for the changing role of teachers in the fourth industrial revolution?*

Keywords: Leadership

### Key Points

The moderator opened the session by asking both panelists to share success stories from their companies. Mr. Varkey described how his grandparents emigrated to the UAE in the late 50’s from the South of India and founded a school. Their son saw a commercial opportunity, and grew GEMS from one school to a network of schools educating over 180,000 students in 13 countries. Through the non-profit Varkey Foundation, they have impacted 3.4 million students worldwide. GEMS schools have already achieved PISA targets, and Mr. Varkey said that if they were a nation to themselves, they would be among the top 3 countries in the world.

Mr. Saad said, “SABIS started as a village school in Lebanon in 1886. Today it is active in 20 countries and educates over 70,000 students.” SABIS has developed a book series, academic





support structure, and in-house IT solutions to improve teacher and student performance. The company also recently invested in a professional development institute to train staff.

Speaking to challenges they continue to encounter, both panelists agreed that in general, scarce physical infrastructure, over-regulation that can inhibit innovation, and the ever-growing shortage of local teachers were the biggest challenges.

Mr. Varkey added that banks and investors were often misaligned with education investments. It can take five to seven years to return initial investment in a school, but most investors' horizon is five years at the longest.

He then added the staggering fact that, "you would be able to change the access to primary education deficit by stopping global military spending for seven days."

Asked about the possibilities of public and private partnerships, Mr. Saad stated that he had seen this arrangement work in Kurdistan, the US, UK and UAE. In Kurdistan, SABIS offered short courses to train public school teachers in a pilot project with UNICEF to educate refugees using blended learning, of which Mr. Saad is a keen advocate: "blended learning can boost teacher performance, allow for speedier learning, offer personalized lessons using artificial intelligence, and introduce adaptive learning using individual data to supplement class learning."

Moving from there to the question of what is truly 'disruptive' technology, Mr. Varkey pointed to virtual classrooms, which transform teachers into trainers who perform specific roles in the virtual space.

GEMS continues to invest in disruptive education, he continued, pointing to a new partnership with Silicon Valley's Singularity University, which resulted in a 10-week after school program for 14-18 year olds. Students picked global challenges such as climate change, or hunger, and they aligned all the subjects for those challenges. Accessing the latest technology and design thinking, they worked in groups to provide solutions and traveled to California to present their findings.

Despite the enthusiasm for technology, neither panelist saw a move away from the classroom in the near future. However, there is still the issue of how to address the lack of teachers. Both agreed that technology remains an excellent way to reach underserved, poorer communities at a low cost.

Since both panelists were bullish on online education, Ms. Afioni asked if they felt there was still a prejudice against online education in the workforce, where applicants who attended brick and mortar schools, particularly Ivy League or other prestigious universities, would take precedence.





Mr. Varkey replied, “if we look to Silicon Valley as the forefront of sectors in practice, product and markets, a number of the large employers will still recruit from specialized colleges, but a lot of companies have started ignoring university in its entirety, because the four years in university is no longer seen as a value proposition for these companies.”

“Key national universities and Ivy Leagues will still be around,” he said, “but most colleges will move to micro credentials.” He gave the example of Rolls Royce and Siemens, which co-developed a STEM focus curriculum, where graduates would go directly to work for Rolls Royce and Siemens. “Employers are trying to fill the pipeline themselves, because they are waiting too long for their new workers,” he said.

Asked about the working environment for which students should be prepared, Mr. Varkey replied, “The top skills are critical thinking and problem solving, curiosity, collaboration, and social intelligence. Character qualities are about persistence and grit. It’s going to be incredibly disruptive and they need to be able to change. It’s effectively giving children a mindset of learning for life.”

Both panelists advocated that parents judge the value of a school based on their child’s happiness, as well as changes in their performance and competencies. Mr. Saad added that they should also look at the school’s track record in terms of university and work placements.

However, both panelists agreed that it still does come down to teachers. According to Mr. Varkey, “the teacher is the most important factor there is. If governments and administrators focused more on what allows the teachers to flourish, they would be better off.”

**Main Takeaway: Technology has the power to transform education, even in the poorest communities**

