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QUDWA 2017

Equity in Education: Delivering on Sustainable Development Goal No. 4

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Speaker

H.E. Jameela bint Salem Al Muhairi, Cabinet member and Minister of State for Public Education, UAE

H.E. Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuami, Chairman, Department of Education and Knowledge, Abu Dhabi Executive Council member, UAE

Hon. Julia Gillard, chair, Global Partnership for Education and 27th Prime Minister of Australia

Moderated/Facilitated by

Vikas Pota, Chief Executive, Varkey Foundation

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) no. 4 is "to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning." Education is the golden thread that goes through all 17 SDGs, which are part of the worldwide organization's larger vision to build a better, more sustainable world by the year 2030. "Without education, how can we have a peaceful society," Mr. Pota said. "War, poverty, climate change: the only answer is education, education, education."

The United Arab Emirate's Ministry of Education (MoE) established a committee in September to look at the national agenda for education and align it with SDG no. 4. The three pillars of education are the teacher, the curriculum and the student; the Ministry has developed initiatives for all three. Qudwa brings the best educators from around the world to interact and enable and empower teachers. "All sectors are working on this topic," H.E. Al Muhairy said. "But teachers are the critical element."





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In September, the MoE unveiled its National Strategy for Higher Education to equip a new generation of Emiratis to face the future. Also in September, the government launched a Moral Education Program (MEP) across the country to supplement the current curriculum with civics and ethical education. “Fortunately, we have leadership in His Highness Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nayhan, who puts education first,” H.E. Al Nuami said. “Education has always been a critical element that provides the cheapest solutions.”

The key to achieving SDG no. 4 in the rest of the world will be the performance of the poorer countries in the world. If they have to go through the same development process as more privileged countries took it is unlikely they will reach the 2030 targets. Technology, however, could change the equation. “What increases in technology can we use to get us there faster?” Ms. Gillard said. “Instead of spending years building our systems, they can leapfrog.”

Advances in robotics and artificial intelligence will drive the so-called “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” but they must be used in positive ways to overcome challenges. In the UAE, the strategy for developing tomorrow’s leaders is not focused on inventing new technologies, but on improving the oldest technology: the human mind. “We launched our higher education strategy with the main focus on the human being,” H.E. Al Muhairy said. “What do we want to see in our citizens? This was an issue we heard from Sheikh Abdullah [Bin Zayed Al Nayhan]. We want children to have skills and values. These will be the basis of the future.”

The commitment of the UAE government to education needs to be an example to other countries that have not invested in their knowledge economies to the same extent. Financing is a few trillion dollars short and 69 million new teachers will need to be hired to achieve SDG no. 4. “There is a crisis engulfing the education sector,” Mr. Pota said. “Politicians rarely call it what it is, but it is a crisis.”

Despite the scope of the problem, Ms. Gillard remains an optimist. The Global Partnership, of which she is the chair, is tackling the funding challenges, and she believes it can be broken down into manageable amounts.

“It’s a good moment in the history of education to have a discussion about reimagining,” she said. “We learned from [the UN’s] Millennium Goals. We are more sophisticated at the kind of learning we need. We have much better research and powerful new technologies. It’s just a matter of do we want to do it, or do we just shrug our shoulders?”





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Another strategy for garnering public support for increases in education funding is to increase the status of teachers in society. The Global Partnership has looked at their partners in healthcare and realized that the teaching profession could benefit from professionalization. A 2013 Varkey Foundation study found that only in China were teachers looked at as equal to doctors in status. “When you’re talking about a birth attendant and an obstetrician you’d know the difference,” Ms. Gillard said. “But ‘teacher’ means both a PhD in Finland and a person in front of a class with no education. What is it to be a professor? A parateacher? A literacy expert? If we could think more about this, we could find solutions because it helps characterize as truly professional one who is assisted by others. Teachers need work taken off of them, or what is known as ‘unbundling.’ ”

The professionalization of teaching is also needed in the UAE, Dr. Al Nuami said, but more important is an increase in social status and the leeway to develop innovative ways of reaching young minds. Dr. Al Nuami was a teacher before he moved into government, yet he was threatened with termination by administrators who didn’t like his outside-the-box methods. “Do not wait for the community to accept you: impose!” he said. “Don’t look at financial status or even social status. You are shaping future human beings, kids who can achieve great success. Your reward is the priceless feeling you get when you see the massive impact you had on their lives.”

Mr. Pota took the conversation back to the title of the session: Equity in Education. SDG no. 4 aims to make education a right much like food or water. But equal access does not necessarily mean equal opportunity. All students, regardless of their backgrounds or aptitudes, deserve an equal amount of time to be dedicated to their learning.

“Some schools only focus on excellent students and neglect lesser students, but part of equality is offering education to both” Dr. Al Nuami said. “Real excellence is supporting weaker students so that they gain knowledge and experience.”

Takeaway: There is a crisis engulfing the education sector, but with better research and powerful new technologies it can be solved.

