**Knowledge hub
-
Collection of best practices**

Summary of the best practice

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) *

The Hands-on Learning Program: Re-engaging At-Risk Youth Beyond Vocational Education

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented *

United Arab Emirates

3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to *

☑ Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools

☐ Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development

☐ Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession

☐ Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation

☐ Action Track 5. Financing of education

4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) *

   The Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research

5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. *

   At-risk youth, Community engagement, Life skills development, Practical scalability, Grass roots intervention, Vocational education, Boys education

6. What makes it a best practice? *

   The Hands-On Learning program (HOL UAE) provides a practical approach to re-engage at-risk boys by equipping them with critical life skills, so they grow confidence, engage, and achieve in school. By removing participants from traditional classrooms for one day each week and introducing them to an alternative, hands-on learning style, the program equips them with the behaviors, skills, and attitudes necessary to succeed and pursue meaningful careers. HOL UAE embodies best practices, as it tackles the root causes of Emirati boys' disengagement in school. It engages local stakeholders to come together to address these challenges in a meaningful and cost-effective way. Participants are self-directed and encouraged to be inventive, conceiving of their own ways to construct significant projects that can benefit them, their schools, and their communities. Engaging in these projects outside of their usual classrooms enables participants to learn how much they are capable of doing and to acquire essential life skills such as cooperation, leadership, problem solving, resiliency, communication, and empathy.

Description of the best practice

7. Introduction (350-400 words)
   This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:
   i) Which population was affected?
   ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
   iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? *

There is overwhelming evidence that boys in the UAE (and across the Gulf region) are becoming increasingly disengaged with and falling behind in school (UNESCO, 2022). Despite the efforts taken to create an equitable education system where both boys and girls can thrive, the UAE is facing one of the largest gender gaps at boys' expense in the world (Ridge et al., 2017). This achievement gap is readily observed in multiple indicators, such as in international assessments (i.e., PISA), where Emirati boys, on average, are an entire school year behind girls in reading (OECD, 2019). This trend can also be visible in public university enrollment, where there is a 60-40% gender gap in favor of girls (UAE Ministry of Education, 2019). This divide not only impacts the education systems but has repercussions for the country's economic and societal development.

To slow this alarming trajectory of a widening gender gap at the national level, the Hands-on Learning program (HOL UAE) tackles this challenge at the local level by supporting male students who are performing badly academically, displaying behavioral issues, and at risk of dropping out of school. Emirati boys' poor education attainment and their decision to drop out of school has been found to be largely linked to demotivating school experiences (Ridge et al., 2013) as well as individual factors of low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence (Ridge, 2014). Based on these findings, HOL UAE aims to re-engage at-risk boys in school by providing an alternative to regular classroom activities one day per week, to transforms boys' image of education, and build their individual self-worth. To this end, the program features vocational training and life skills activities, such as building a brick barbecue, designing and planting a community garden, and constructing a traditional Emirati house. Although vocational in nature, the objective of HOL UAE is not to emphasize vocational education, but rather to equip participants with the conduct, skills, and attitude necessary to re-engage them in school and follow their career goals back in the conventional school stream. These program objectives are achieved by increased attendance rates, developing character, increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and strengthening communication skills.

8. Implementation (350-450 words)
Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:
i) What are the main activities carried out?
ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?
*

The Al Qasimi Foundation began HOL UAE in 2014, and the program has continued on an annual basis. Adapted in collaboration with the original program from Australia, HOL has four main elements: a place to belong, people to connect with, life skills and practical applications, and the opportunity to give back (Australia HOL, 2013). HOL UAE builds on this by incorporating UAE heritage, English language, and nutrition into its program. Overall, HOL UAE outlines five key components of its theory of change: behavior modification through focus planning and self-attendance, English language development, Life Skills development through home economics and work experience, community engagement and improved school outcomes.

The participants meet once a week during school hours in a separate space within the school grounds. The program day begins with a review of the participants' focus plans, which are topics identified by themselves as areas in which they need improvement, such as time management, or participation in class discussions. The program day continues with an English lesson designed to familiarize participants with communicative English before moving on to the project at hand.

A central component of HOL UAE is having 'a real thing to do'. This consists of projects with real life application. In the course of completing projects, such as soft art crafts, construction and building, and landscaping, participants engage in cooperative activities that allow them to acquire and apply new skills. The location and length of activity varies depending on the nature of the project. Some examples are building a community garden and landscaping, creating solar printing, and attending a car mechanic workshop.

HOL UAE makes use of a classroom on school grounds with seating for participants and a set of basic tools and equipment for construction projects and cooking. Ideally, the HOL classroom is a dedicated space, which provides participants with a consistent, secure atmosphere. Participants also engage with the community through projects and field trips. Some examples of community involvement are volunteering at the Obaid Allah Geriatric Hospital, the Ras Al Khaimah Correctional Facility, and the Ras Al Khaimah Animal Welfare Centre.

Because of the community-based nature of the program, HOL UAE actively seeks to improve efficiency in order to increase scalability across contexts. Initially, the yearly cost of the program was roughly 82,000 USD, and the annual cost per participant was approximately 6,400 USD. Through collaboration and sponsorship with local businesses and government entities such as Danube Building Supplies and the Ras Al Khaimah Public Services Department, HOL UAE has been able to cut its direct costs. Additionally, sponsors agreed to supply skilled manpower as instructors, while other companies donated raw materials in bulk, thereby reducing the expenses per participant by 67% (Al Qasimi Foundation, 2019).

9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)

   To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:

   i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);

   ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?

   iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? *

From its inception, HOL UAE has sought to be evidence-driven with a strong emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of objectives and impact. To this end, a variety of quantitative and qualitative instruments has been used to collect student data, such as surveys, interviews and available school data, throughout the school year and across cohorts.

To evaluate changes in participants' behavior and attitude, participants were asked to complete a number of survey questions to capture changes in their self-efficacy and self-regulation. Participants reported significant improvements in their ability to concentrate in class, take notes, and organize and plan their school work. They also showed marked improvement in their attitude toward their education, with 83% of participants indicating that education is important for their success, a 50%-point increase (Al Qasimi Foundation, 2019).

HOL instructors, school teachers and principal also indicated a marked positive improvement in participants' behavior. They reported participants' improvement in their interpersonal and self-control skills, as well as improved self-discipline and motivation in school. Class teachers also reported that 70% of participants were 'good' or 'excellent' at communicating their thoughts and emotions with others, a 26%-point increase (Al Qasimi Foundation, 2019).

Participants reported very high satisfaction with the program (93%). Specifically, 100% of the participants reported they enjoyed the program and found it beneficial, 79 % of the participants reported that they felt happier as a result of the program, 86% of the participants responded that they had a better attitude towards school since attending the program, and 93% of the participants felt a sense of belonging and care from the people in the program (Al Qasimi Foundation, 2018). In interviews, the participants said that the learning environment was a significant reason why they believed the program was beneficial at enhancing their behavior. Participants also valued the skills they learned, particularly during hands-on projects, where they developed a greater respect for themselves and others.

10. Lessons learnt (300 words)
    To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:
    i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
    ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
    iii) What did not work – why did it not work? *

The key triggers for transformation have been a synergy of the five key components: behavior modification, English, life skills, community engagement and school outcomes. Overall, the most recent evaluation of HOL UAE supports the findings of previous years' evaluations, which have consistently demonstrated the positive impact of HOL UAE on participants' behavior and attitude, their skill set, and their emotional and social development, including numerous long-term benefits that will not be fully apparent until the participants are much older, enter the workforce, or continue their education. Specifically, the program has instilled a stronger sense of impulse control and self-regulation, the internalization of personal ownership and responsibility, independent and leadership skills as well as teamwork and cooperative interpersonal skills and a strong sense of self-efficacy.

One of the key areas that worked well was the grass-roots element of the program. Local companies and governments entities came together to create strong local engagement as well as reduce overhead costs. Additionally, the combination of dynamic HOL instructors and school teachers and administrators created an environment of acceptance and a sense of belonging for the participants as well as an improvement in student-teacher relationships.

While there is some data on the programs' effectiveness, there are some limitations to show program's overall impact and to compare the growth of participants to their peers. Existing institutional structures surrounding the public-school system in the United Arab Emirates make it impossible to obtain the requisite student records to evaluate the program's impact on the boys' grades and attendance. Institutional obstacles such as curriculum density and teacher-centered teaching approaches, which are prevalent in public schools in the UAE, may also impede the program's effectiveness and the achievement of students in general.

11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a "best practice". What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented "best practice" or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? *

The Hands-On Learning program (HOL UAE) provides an innovative approach to re-engage at-risk boys by equipping them with critical life skills, so they grow confidence, engage, and achieve in school. This is done through behavior modification, English lessons, life skills, and community engagement to improve school outcomes. HOL UAE embodies best practices as it tackles the reason for disengagement at the root causes of Emirati boys' disengagement in school: their attitudes, behavior and skills. It also utilizes local stakeholders to come together to address these challenges in a meaningful and relevant way. Participants are self-directed and encouraged to be inventive, conceiving of their own ways to construct significant projects that can benefit them, their schools, and their communities. Engaging in these projects outside of their usual classrooms enables participants to discover how much they are capable of doing and to acquire essential life skills such as cooperation, leadership, problem solving, resiliency, communication, and empathy.

To increase scalability and make the Hands-on Learning model available to more schools across the UAE (and other relevant contexts), the Al Qasimi Foundation designed materials for Hands-on Learning in a Box (HOLIAB). This toolkit is comprised of a variety of lessons plans and guidelines that define the many components of HOL UAE and allow school administrators and teachers to implement HOL UAE seamlessly in their schools. The resources for HOLIAB are designed to provide sufficient instructions for implementing HOL UAE while enabling schools the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to their needs.

12. Further reading
    Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional
    information on the "best practice" for those who may be interested in knowing
    how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. *

An HOL UAE in a Box toolkit has recently been produced for roll-out in a larger number of
schools.
https://youtu.be/9l_7bnQt7co?list=PLk-E79Ju6YNIfBXRLvKuyrAGi3SrZoHEy

https://publications.alqasimifoundation.com/blog/helping-at-risk-youth-why-schools-should-
take-the-hands-on-learning-approach?hsLang=en

https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/hands-on-learning-scheme-helping-potential-school-
dropouts-make-the-grade-1.884455

https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-supportive-community-empowered-ahmad-through-
his-education-united-arab-emirates

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381149.locale=en

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Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research.

Australia, HOL (2013). The power of the Hands-on Learning Experience. Bridging the
Policy/Research Divide in Education in the GCC.

Conn, B. E. (2014). Interventions for at-risk adolescents: Self-esteem and empowerment as
predictors of increased work effort. Alliant International University.

Ridge, N. (2014). Education and the reverse gender divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the
global, ignoring the local. Teachers College Press.

Ridge, N., Farah, S., & Shami, S. (2013). Patterns and perceptions in male secondary school
dropouts in the United Arab Emirates (Working Paper No. 3).

Ridge, N. Jeon, S. and El Asad, S. (2017). The challenges and implications of a global decline in
the educational attainment and retention of boys. World Innovation Summit for Education
(WISE).

UAE Ministry of Education (UAE MOE). (2019). Gross tertiary enrollment. Abu Dhabi: UAE MOE.
(Accessed May 2022).

UNESCO (2022). Leave No Child Behind: Boys disengagement from education; United Arab
Emirates case study. UNESCO.