We wanted students to understand that attending these colleges was a privilege. We expected them to conform to the highest standards of excellence. We were not prepared to accept anything less.

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I arrived in the United Arab Emirates on July 3, 1988. The date has stuck in my mind because on that morning a United States warship had shot down an Iranian airliner as it flew towards Dubai. I landed shortly afterwards.

Two months earlier when I announced to my family and friends that I was going to live and work in the UAE they had reacted with disbelief and concern. “Where is it? Is it safe? Do they speak English? Isn’t it just sand and oil?” But somehow the prospect of helping to launch a new system of technology colleges in a dauntingly different country appealed to me. Just one more adventure before I finally retired to the scenic splendor of Canada’s west coast.

At that time the UAE had a population of about 2.5 million people of whom about 400,000 were nationals. The discovery of vast oil reserves had led to a dramatic transformation in the country. Abu Dhabi, the nation’s capital, had changed from a sandy settlement on the Gulf coast to a city of imposing high rises, wide boulevards and an elegant corniche reminiscent of the French Riviera. In less than 20 years the country had acquired a significant infrastructure of highways, hospitals, schools, shopping malls and a university. However, it still had to create a system of technological education capable of preparing young nationals to assume key roles in the running of their own country. That’s where the Higher Colleges of Technology came in.

I was the first employee of the system. However, a team of consultants had already been at work preparing the ground by
finding temporary buildings, arranging renovations, developing curricula and ordering books and equipment. The federal cabinet had approved the plan and Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, the chancellor of the UAE University, had assumed the chancellorship of the new college system.

The first four colleges opened with 230 students in September 1988. They consisted of men’s colleges and women’s colleges in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, an oasis city deep in the desert some 120 kilometres from the coast. The colleges occupied temporary buildings, mostly residential villas, renovated and furnished at astonishing speed. In Abu Dhabi, the men’s college used two floors in a new office tower with the Central Services department, including my office, perched on the floor above.

It was a time of frenzied activity. Staff were still arriving right up to the first day of classes, some even after the start of classes. There was no time for culture shock. They were quickly placed in hotels and then found apartments or villas. Lunchtime conversations usually revolved around where to get the best deals on furniture, pots and pans.

Class hours were long for students and faculty — about 30 hours a week, well beyond anything we had experienced in our own countries. On top of that there was marking, lesson preparation, curriculum revision and for the students there was homework. It was an exhausting and frustrating experience, yet somehow stimulating as order emerged from chaos and the students began to learn. I remember asking a faculty member how she was finding the experience. “In Canada,” she said, “these conditions would have provoked a strike. But here it all feels worthwhile. We know we are creating a new system of education, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Where else do the students thank you at the end of each class meeting?”

By the beginning of November we were into warm sunny days, the perfect winter climate of the Gulf coast. However, new challenges
were starting to emerge in the college system. The plan assumed that students would develop their English skills along with their vocational skills. But effective learning in courses like electronics and economics requires well developed skills in reading and writing, and our students were not at this level. The eventual solution was to create a “Foundation Year” followed by two years of vocational subjects. Students would not be permitted to progress beyond the Foundation Year unless they met the required standards in English, Arabic, mathematics and computer skills. This meant another task for our hard pressed faculty — redesign the curriculum mid way through the first semester. We agreed, as a special concession, that the current students could still graduate in two years.

Besides curriculum changes we also had to adapt to new standards of academic conduct. Regular attendance, handing in assignments on time, no cheating — these were standards we were all accustomed to. But in the Higher Colleges they were enforced with a rigor that at first seemed excessive to Western academics. Cheating, for example, was dealt with by instant dismissal — no warning or second chance. As Sheikh Nahayan observed, “We have to get the message across — attending these colleges is a privilege. Students who don’t accept the basic rules have no place here.”

In spite of these problems, the end of the first year arrived with a real sense of achievement for all of us, students and faculty alike. We had breathed life into a new educational concept, and it was alive and well.

We all gathered in the banquet hall of one of Abu Dhabi’s sumptuous hotels to receive our certificates of recognition as founding members of the new system. The faculty members departed for their summer leave; those of us who stayed behind turned our minds to the next challenge — opening two new colleges in Dubai. We had two months to do it.

At the start of the new academic year in September 1989, one of our students confided in me: “You know the word is out among my
friends. The Higher Colleges are the place to be. You’re taught by experts, you learn English, computers and technology. I think you will get a lot of applicants.”

I said, “What about the long hours and the heavy workload?”

“That’s what we need. We’re being prepared for work.”

This was reassuring news. And yes, we did get a lot of applications. But we were in for another major adjustment.

Nine months had passed and the end of the second academic year was in sight. The first intake of students would soon be graduating with their Higher Diplomas in Business and Technology. The course grades had been assigned by faculty members as students progressed through each semester, and the Higher Diplomas would be awarded to those who had at least a passing grade in each course. Those with excellent grades would receive Higher Diplomas with Distinction. It was the system commonly used in colleges and universities throughout the world.

“How do we know,” asked the Chancellor at a gathering of the College Directors, “that the grades given by one faculty member are the same as the grades given by another in the same subject? How do we know the standards at one college are the same as the standards at the other colleges?”

We explained that we had an elaborate system of curriculum committees where faculty members consulted on these matters. But he was not impressed.

“We must have a final examination that draws together all the elements in each program. Without that we have no means of establishing the value of the Higher Diploma,” he said.

As he spoke I reflected briefly on my Cambridge days. That was the system he was describing. The colleges prepare the students, but final examinations are administered by the University. If we wanted an assurance of consistent quality, that was the way to go.

But for the students it meant yet another hurdle to leap, one they had never been told about until now. At many universities
or colleges this would have provoked a riot. What would happen here?

Teams of faculty members and department heads went furiously to work preparing final examinations that synthesized all the elements from four semesters in each program. The students complained to the college directors, their parents complained to Sheikh Nahayan. However, he stood firm and the examinations were conducted. Interestingly enough, the new requirement was strongly supported by the businesses to which our graduates would be looking for employment. Possession of a Higher Diploma had suddenly acquired a new value.

The examination results revealed that about 70 percent of the students had passed and, as suspected, there was no consistency in the grades awarded by different colleges. The students who passed were given their Higher Diplomas at a grand ceremony and those who didn’t were offered intensive tutoring for a further semester. About 70 percent of them were successful and appeared at the next graduation ceremony.

Interestingly, about this time I was reading through the Journal of Higher Education and noticed an article on the same topic. Some state legislatures in the US were actually proposing to mandate the use of comprehensive examinations as a condition of state funding. Predictably, there were loud negative reactions from the colleges and universities. Meanwhile, we were moving on to fresh challenges.

The introduction of a comprehensive assessment drew attention to our need to hire experts in student evaluation. A new department eventually emerged and as the years went by we steadily refined our methods. Exit standards were defined for students leaving the Foundation Program, which meant we could now assess the suitability of students who didn’t need to take the Foundation year. The Graduation Assessment was made somewhat less brutal by staggering the timing of some components and extensive use was made of international tests in subjects like English.
In fact, this passion for self-scrutiny and assessment spread into other areas. Institutional assessments were applied to each college; there were regular staff performance evaluations; professional development programs were launched; the whole system was analysed in excruciating detail in the pages of an annual report which yielded gems of information such as the cost per student by college and program and the number of nationalities represented on our staff. (We had 26 different nationalities.)

New colleges opened one by one across the country, all encouraged to explore new program fields but subject to the same system-wide standards of academic achievement. Our programs already involved a mandatory period of field experience. Now, some programs were converted to co-operative programs involving alternating periods in college and in employment, sometimes abroad.

The program structure, which had started life in 1988 as a simple but short-lived two-year program had finally settled down to four levels: a one-year certificate, a two-year Diploma, a three-year Higher Diploma and a five-year (or longer) undergraduate degree program. This in turn led to accreditation by universities and professional associations.

One by one the temporary buildings were replaced by splendid new facilities with lavishly equipped laboratories and workshops. The aviation program acquired a fleet of aircraft and new hangers. Our enrolment was now into several thousand.

For the first six years we were all very inwardly focused. The pace of change and refinement allowed little time for relaxation or self-congratulation. But now and again faculty members would remark to me: “It won’t be easy going back home. Nothing compares with this.” Or, “I have never worked so hard in my life — and never enjoyed it so much.” Or, “You can really do things here.”

In 1994, UNESCO announced that the Comenius Award for outstanding achievement in education had been awarded to the Higher Colleges. It appeared the world had noticed that something
remarkable was happening in education in the United Arab Emirates.

The following year my wife and I left to return to Canada. It was not easy. Abu Dhabi had become our second home. And as for the Higher Colleges — I felt I was abandoning a favorite child.

Since that time the UAE has become an international success story. In the post 9/11 world it is a symbol of moderation and prosperity — a liberal, cosmopolitan Arab country with the fastest growing economy in the world. Recent reports estimate the annual rate of increase in GDP at 35 percent. It has diversified into a complex post-industrial economy with Dubai emerging as the key financial center of the Middle East. The population now exceeds four million.

The Higher Colleges currently have 16,000 students. There are 15 campuses and 80 programs. Graduates of the system are to be found throughout industry, business and the public services. They are invariably knowledgeable and helpful — and they all have excellent English.

In today’s world, success stories from the Middle East are all too few. This is one that deserves to be more widely known.

As for me, back home on the Pacific Coast, this was the adventure of a lifetime. Something to always treasure.