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# DIGITAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING: TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

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## Abstract

As educators we appreciate that education underpins all social progress. If this reality is taken a step further, we realise the major contribution that online learning makes by offering opportunities for a customized educational experience. Successful education needs personal interaction and accountability, this study explores how one initiative has delivered this effectively. This study explores a social online learning initiative; Cloud Campus, which embodies the Smart Learning approach. The Cloud Campus initiative, the first of its kind in the Arab region, offers learners from different nationalities and age groups a convenient learning environment and an innovative and interactive e-Learning experience while also providing support and guidance. The platform has proven to be an economical way to reach out to a large segment of learners worldwide through the use of social media such as Facebook, Google+ accounts giving direct access to online content.

This study provides insight into how contemporary social learning frees learners to better process content and better retain what they have learned. When allowed to let go of the rules that accompany formal learning, the outcomes are significant. Learners were more expressive, they were able to interact with course content in ways that were more meaningful to them than a traditional format. This study demonstrates how social online education can build communities, both globally and locally, and highlights the ways in which these communities can interact. The online learning experience not only introduces a convenient and affordable way to learning but importantly it contributes to transforming education in the Arab world.

**Keywords:** e-learning, social media, Higher Education, online learning platforms, Arab region, online content, lifelong learning.

## Introduction

Social media is coming of age. Since the emergence of the first social media networks some two decades ago, social media has continued to evolve and offer people around the world new and meaningful ways to engage (Nielsen, 2012). In 2014 social media is still continuing to grow rapidly, becoming an integral part of our daily lives. Social networking is not only a global phenomenon but a platform for teaching and learning. Below is an indication of the penetration of social media users in the Arab world, notably the United Arab Emirates has the highest number of Facebook and LinkedIn users. How far this substantial growth is being utilised for teaching and learning is yet to be researched. At Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU) we have taken advantage of this growth and created Cloud Campus to do exactly just this.

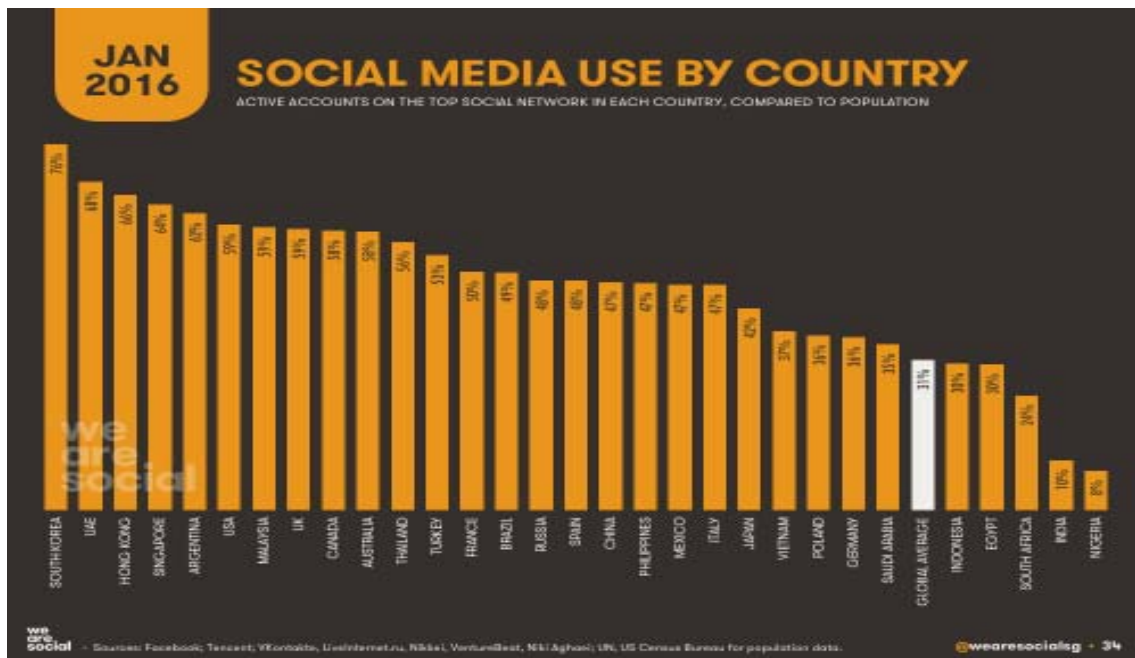


Figure 1. Social Media use by Country

When we ask about what makes e-learning a successful experience for learners we are taken to the debate of quality in e-learning. *Online education* has a long tradition and is a broad umbrella term that captures a multitude of approaches to learning – from step-by-step tutorials designed to impart specific skills to autonomous exploration of online resources and communities of interest. Online learning promises significant advantages over the traditional face-to-face setting: Self-paced learning; access to infinitely vast resources on the Internet; engaging and immediately responsive instruction; and a diverse and effective community of learners and faculty available for prompt feedback and connection. We believe the power of online education is changing how we learn. At Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, a blend of virtual and face-to-face environments, personal and institutional technologies, undergraduate and postgraduate learners have developed new working practices around the technologies available to them. Increasingly, learners are experiencing flexibility and openness in the institutional approach and provision that support their learning. Portable technologies and 24/7 access to learning resources on the network/VLE has enabled learning to take place in multiple locations. Our learners have access to their own choice of software and communication tools from enrolment and are assisted in adapting and personalising these. Learners also have access to multiple online communities for networked learning. Our institution provides highly resourced physical spaces, managed by staff and learners, for collaborative, networked learning. Learners are given the opportunity to explore their own identities and develop skills through use of social software, virtual worlds and simulations. Most of our learners do understand the risks and advantages of learning in a technology-rich environment and we actively promote skills of effective, safe and appropriate digital learning (Alzouebi & Isakovic, 2014).

Exploring how learners describe and reflect upon their online learning experiences helped to generate dialogue around educational innovations in general which particularly, lack learner voice (Alzouebi & Isakovic, 2014). This study enables learner use of social learning tools to be brought to light, thus contributing to our understanding of online learning. Parrish (2005) explains that learner experiences arise from the ways learners interact with and respond to content, activities, instructional methods, instructors, and the context within which learning and instruction happen. Nowadays, authors are required to think in new ways: no longer is the instructional material built in a series of straight consecutive units where each presentation is based on the preceding one, but learning modules that are decontextualized

and therefore easier to reuse are to be created. On the learner's side, the question arises which characteristics are most important for good e-learning-environments and which providers offer the best performance at a reasonable price in a market that is continuously differentiating further. Learning Management System (LMS) providers, for their part, find themselves confronted with the continually progressing didactization of the technological *delivery structure* of e-learning and are thus faced with an increasing learner orientation (cf. Ehlers, 2004). On the other hand, Software developers, institutional designers have to move also beyond the borders of their own disciplines when designing and implementing learning software; they are in need to seek interdisciplinary exchange with faculty, authors and learners.

### **Social learning: A border crossing in education**

Technology has proven to be a key for better education particularly with the growth of social media usage in the Arab region (Alzouebi & Isakovic, 2014). With the advancement of technology more opportunities are being provided for learning, interaction and collaboration ultimately leading to a transformation in the way we learn. The introduction of social networking technologies in the classroom is growing at a fast pace which is dictating when and how we learn. This case study presents one example of how social media utilization at a higher education level has taken place and explores how social learning has taken advantage of the various social networking platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Google+.

The significant penetration rates and the important adoption of social media in the United Arab Emirates at various levels have opened new horizons for innovations by individuals, developmental uses by government entities and created new social trends by different forces in Arab societies (Mourtada, Salem, & Alshaer, 2013). Social media technologies today are increasingly being acknowledged by UAE government organizations as key for a better service delivery at an institutional level. Hence the emergence of *social learning*, intelligent decision making networks' and *massive open online courses*, educators, students and educational institutions are increasingly relying on social media tools to create innovative approaches to education, capacity building and knowledge transfer. Social media technologies are already playing a growing role in formal and informal education, on-demand training and capacity building. Social media's capacity in promoting engagement and inclusive learning, the wide range benefits of social media use in the classroom; and given the challenges faced by the current education system whether at K-12 or higher education, the integration of social media in educational reform becomes a logical next step.

However how far the Arab region has taken advantage of social media use in education is still yet to be explored. Social media has vast capabilities for mass knowledge transfer, community learning, and importantly its capacity to empower not only students but educational facilitators. As a higher education institution we have used social media as a channel for transfer of innovations, as a facilitator for research networks, a remote learning tool, and a facilitator for communities of expertise and practice (CoP) with abilities to break down information in a much easier way. As an online university we appreciate that social media is playing a critical role in enabling new employment opportunities, entrepreneurship potential and more importantly, aligning education with skills needed in the UAE market.

### **Significance of study**

The growth of technology alongside social media in the UAE – from Facebook to Twitter, from Flickr to YouTube – has provided a host of new opportunities for collaborative learning and as educators we need to recognize the opportunities provided by the use of such social media. Changes to the nature of learning and how education can join forces with social media to support learners is at the heart of Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University's quest for creating impact on education through e-learning. Social media makes it easy to motivate people, to connect, to share information, and develop relationships. However when using

these sites in the classroom, specific goals, directions, and guidelines on how to reach them (such as input from an instructor or lesson plan) can be used to facilitate formal social learning. Such technologies have fundamentally changed the way we interact with knowledge. The figure below gives an indication of the internet penetration in the Middle East in comparison to the rest of the world.

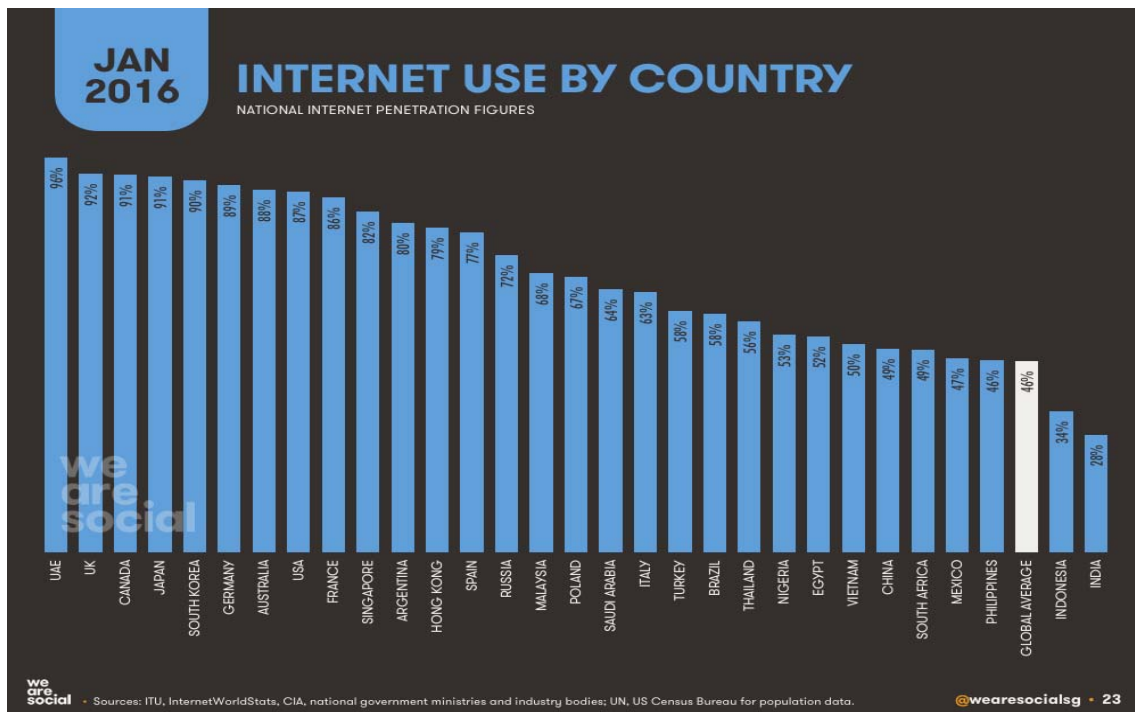


Figure 2. Internet Use by Country

The interactive, collaborative, and open nature of social networking technologies offers a vast array of opportunities for learning (Mourtada, Salem, & Alshaer, 2013). We have seen better learning be facilitated through collaboration and sharing. Social learning has helped to break down barrier of time, space and social class to enable a more equal real-time learning. Social media has become a valuable teaching and learning tools that can help to overcome some of the challenges facing educational institutions in the Arab region.

However, we must not forget that the introduction of new technologies brings about new transformational challenges and the introduction of social media platforms in education environments is one (Mourtada, Salem, & Alshaer, 2013). With any new change in education we are faced with emerging challenges for educators, students, parents and educational institutions. These challenges can be overcome when educators, policy makers and governments appreciate that social networking technologies are creating opportunities for peer learning, discussion, debate, large-scale feedback, information sharing and innovation in educational environments.

At Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University we have looked carefully at the need to provide a balance between providing information and supporting learners in creating knowledge. We understand that learners are best engaged when they are learning about things or with things that they can relate to or that are relevant to them. Social media is culturally relevant for learners at a Smart University. Therefore harnessing these tools for education can develop powerful contexts for learning. Social media is also highly relevant across society: for example, in the UK in 2011 eight of the ten most popular search terms were directly linked to a social website; Facebook was the most popular search term in the UK. It is also interesting to note that the e-learning market in the e-Learning revenues for the Middle East reached \$378 million in 2011, while the region's growth rate in eLearning is an impressive 8.2%.

Revenues are estimated to reach \$560 million by 2016, according to a new Ambient Insight report. The report showcases the growing popularity of e-Learning as the preferred avenue for education by both learners and instructors alike. Therefore e-Learning has been witnessing an unprecedented expansion as an opportunity for higher education and at Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University we have taken this growth a step further to create *Cloud Campus*; a social learning environment.

This study explores the implementation of Cloud Campus and looks at the impact it has on facilitating learning. Data has been collated on specific components of the Cloud Campus that explore patterns of use and effectiveness for K12 learning Business skills and Languages. The study ultimately focuses on e-learning while making important links to the Smart learning initiative and aligning Cloud Campus with e-learning at the higher education level. The study is organised as follows; we start with an exploration of some of the good practices in relation to e-learning at HBMSU and we highlight the strategies designed and implemented by HBMSU to enable e-learning to influence the drive to smart learning. We then move on to provide an overview of the SMART Learning initiative in Dubai, taking us a step closer to the Cloud Campus project. We then look at the patterns of use of the various components of Cloud Campus while also considering the impact of Cloud Campus as a Smart learning initiative in higher education. The final section of the study provides concluding observations and explores possible implications for future practice and research.

Access to higher education in the UAE had drastically improved with the increasing number of students attending universities across the emirates had also grown. In addition to a segregated section of new universities giving an opportunity for women to also attend universities while still conforming to traditional family values. It is recognised that a long-term solution to growth, development and sustainable society is an improved education system at all levels (Davidson, 2010). Students must acquire the qualifications demanded by employers which meet the needs of a new and growing economy. The education system must equip student with the necessary skills.

More recently, the UAE has begun to thrive on a high technology and knowledge-based economy where new campuses are well equipped with the latest technological equipment, outstanding resources to ensure learners experience a pleasant educational environment surrounded by good resources for learning. The UAE is now home to several branch campuses of leading international universities, while existing universities have invariably sought partner institutions (Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014). These have included New York University and Le Sorbonne (in Abu Dhabi), and The British University in Dubai (BUID). As a result of the rapidly escalating population the UAE is increasingly confronted with the importance of developing additional higher education institutions that will contribute to a powerful educational sector providing premium degree programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate level (Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014). At times, there was a belief that the recognition and achievements these institutions attained over decades in their native land would be easily transferable in the implementation of an international branch campus in the United Arab Emirates (Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014).

There are explicit indications that the UAE government is seriously committed to reforming the education sector. Education is recognised as providing the door to opportunities, progression and stability in society. New initiatives are in place which have already had a significant impact particularly on the higher education sector to improve standards and expectations. Education is recognised as the key to competitiveness in the current global knowledge economy. Such serious commitments to improving education led to establishment of the first e-learning university in the UAE in 2002; Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University.

## **Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University: A pioneer of e-learning in the Arab World**

Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University was officially launched in 2002 by His Highness Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Crown Prince of Dubai. HBMSU is a fully-fledged e-learning university with a pioneering vision that has paved the way for the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR), UAE to design Standards for accreditation of e-learning institutions. It has been able to successfully integrate all its innovations related particularly to curriculum design and delivery mechanisms into all its academic and professional programs. Moreover, it has moved with the time and kept at pace with advances in e-learning pedagogies and technologies. It has also been successful in creating global networks anchored in e-learning arenas, quality and excellence to gain credibility and international recognition. The university has responded to the needs of the market in terms of programs and courses offered and their delivery mode; while also bringing research to the centre stage of its core activities focusing on e-learning and excellence; and above all, one of the building blocks of HBMSU's strategy is its lifelong learning model. The lifelong learning model is designed to cater for four categories of learners: the casual learners, committed learners, concentrated learners and continuing learners; and most importantly, it has brought a paradigm shift in higher education by designing smart learner-centric solutions in its strategy. It provides opportunities for learners, academics and practicing executives to gain useful knowledge and meet the challenges of the knowledge-based and smart economy. It is also embedded within the schools of the university, reflecting an innovative smart learner-centric approach to serve all segments of society in the UAE and indeed elsewhere in the Arab world. HBMSU follows in its delivery of learning a blended approach. Blended learning is usually used to define a situation where different delivery methods are combined to deliver a particular course. These methods include a mixture of face-to-face classrooms, online classrooms, and self-paced learning.

HBMSU lifelong learning (LLL) model is designed to provide many forms and opportunities of education and learning experiences that combine academic and non-academic programs and courses. Academic programs represent the portfolio of highly structured and research-oriented degree programs including Bachelor's, Master's, and doctorate degrees. The non-academic programs or professional development programs represent the portfolio of professional skill-based certificates and short courses including seminars, conferences, workshops and professional certificates.

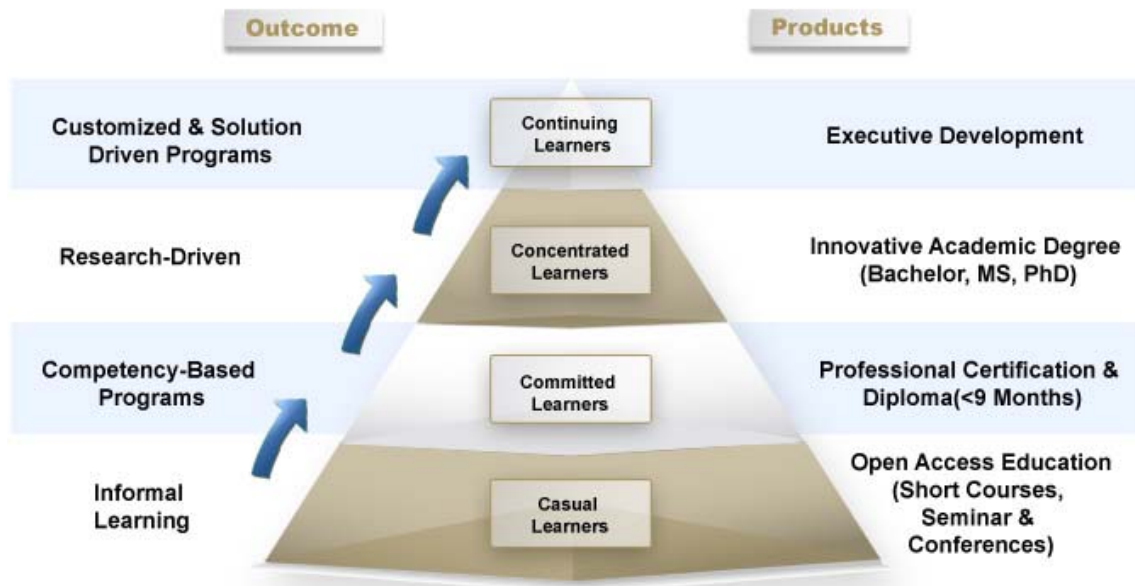


Figure 3. HBMSU Life Learning Model

Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University adopts a blended learning approach in the delivery of all undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The blend is a combination of face-to-face learning, online collaboration and self-paced learning. The online collaboration would normally take place in both a synchronous and asynchronous mode through the use of advanced technologies. The self-paced learning component of the blend is the part through which learners take responsibility for their learning and make use of various support material prepared by the university and facilitated by the instructor such as: online interactive course material, study books, recorded master classes, text books, etc. The face to face learning component is integrated whenever seen necessary. The percentages of each portion of the blend varies from one program to another and from one level of study to another, taking into consideration various aspects such as the nature of skills and competencies the learners are expected to be acquainted with at the end of the program/course, the learners' characteristics (i.e. Learning styles, locations, prior learning, available technologies, etc.) and other institutional constraints (i.e. technologies, finances, etc.).

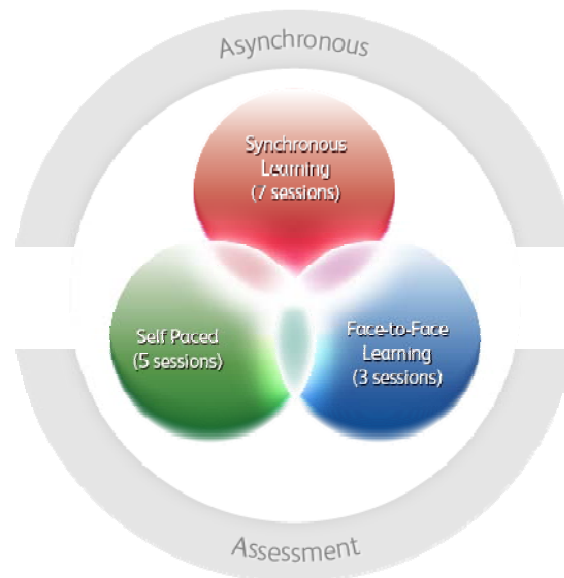


Figure 4. HBMSU's Blended Learning Model

### Smart learning in Dubai: A leader's Vision for Education

Under the presidency of H.H. Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Crown Prince of Dubai and President of Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University has expressed great commitment to instigating a culture of quality, excellence and research through e-learning in the Arab world. The smart learning approach taken at HBMSU mirrors the directives of HH Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum to transform the education system into a smart education system keeping at pace with the rapid developments taking place in the field of social learning.

The initiative for Smart Learning which was launched in 2013, aims to create a solid and integrated e-learning platform that not only involves teachers and pupils but also parents to help enhance the learning experience. The project is to be piloted over a period of five years in public schools. The concept is to establish a unique learning environment in schools through the introduction of *Smart Classes*, where pupils will utilise tablet PC's and high-speed 4G networks as means of acquiring knowledge (Gulf News, 2012). The initiative also includes specialised training programmes for teachers and the introduction of new curricula to serve its purpose. H.H Sheikh Mohammed emphasised that 'investment in education is an essential component of UAE Vision 2021. We want to provide the new generations with the skills needed for the future. This is our national duty. We believe that the future of the UAE begins from schools. The project will prepare future generations to face the new challenges of the new world more confidently (Gulf News, April 11<sup>th</sup> 2012).

The new Smart learning initiative will also see pupils, teachers and parents interacting on many aspects of learning. The integration will help involve families in the development of education and enable them to be part of the decision making process and be active stakeholders in the education system. It will also provide parents with first-hand experience of how the system works (Emirates news 24/7, 2012). The initiative is endorsed by the UAE Ministry of Education but managed by Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) which owns the fund and manages the program's delivery for at least the initial five years. The initiative aims to create a unique and new educational environment which entails the distribution of tablets for all pupils and the provision of all state schools with 4G high-speed networks. The initiative is also part of the UAE Vision 2021 and will be introduced at four stages over the coming five years.

The Smart learning programme aims to develop a learning environment in public schools through the launch of smart classrooms, which will provide pupils with interactive learning



tools, computers and high-speed Internet a strategy for helping to reform the educational system in the UAE in addition to keeping pace with the latest global developments in education. The idea is to create a generation conversant with technology and actionable innovation, in addition to providing access to smart digital apps world and cloud computing. The main objectives of the initiative are to encourage the integration of teachers, pupils, parents and administrators within a unified electronic platform, to change traditional methods of teaching to more interactive approaches, and to create a pupil-oriented educational system that identifies pupils' particular learning styles, talents, skills and weakness and looks at enhancing their skills according to their abilities.

School teachers will be provided with training and new qualifications to help deliver a new type of teaching. Assistance and training for school leaders will also be provided with a focus on customised applications for teachers and pupils that aid the learning process. Some workshops have already been delivered for teachers to be trained on the latest innovations in education through the use of technology. As part of a *Pioneer Programme*, teachers will also receive specialised training in smart learning to ensure effective use of information and communication technology in the classroom. This is a new initiative; hence there is a paucity of research that looks at the impact of the Smart Learning in the UAE.

With smart learning comes Smart City. Smart City Dubai is an initiative also launched by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid in October 2013, which would mean wireless internet access being available throughout Dubai. Remote sensor devices would be placed throughout the city; allowing educational facilities, health and general security to be managed through smart systems. The smart city initiative will allow the public to communicate with government departments. His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum stated that "Our goal is to improve the quality of life as we aim to harness technology for the establishment of a new reality in the city of Dubai, a different life, and a different development model. We want our services to reach every child, mother, youth, businessman, and tourist to make a new quality of life for all" (Gulf News, October 19, 2013). An integrated high-tech approach aims to use the latest advances in technology to create a model for providing government services that are easily accessible, quick and efficient using smart devices. Smart City's main aim is to provide better connections and increase cooperation between the emirate of Dubai and its residents. It also promotes the use of governmental facilities using the largest possible number of smart applications. This project is quite unique in its nature because it includes the largest partnership of its kind between Dubai's public and private sector.

### **Cloud Campus: A Smart learning arm of Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University**

HBMSU has worked rigorously on taking learning to the next level through an innovative online social learning initiative called *Cloud Campus* which was launched in January 2013. The aim of Cloud Campus is to create a social learning environment that allows learners of all ages to take advantage of the power of technology giving access to knowledge to a wider population and the key is affordability. Cloud Campus falls within the lifelong learning model of the university (see Life Long Learning model Figure 1), under the category of *casual learners*. With the continuous change in educational technology that has no doubt had an impact on the way we learn. Cloud Campus is a learning platform, integrated with social media, accessible via multiple screens, providing a unique learning experience, through interactive content and academic support anywhere in the world. Cloud Campus is conceptualized and designed to allow individuals to acquire knowledge and develop skills formally and informally on social media platform.

Opportunities for self-development and social interaction with family, community, business teams, the business community, and the learner community at large are available through Cloud Campus. This initiative has managed to reach various dimensions, and results in effective smart social development, which in return will positively affect the economic development and stability of society.

Cloud Campus is run by Hamdan bin Mohammed Smart University, the first accredited online university in the GCC, and Global Learning International, a leading education innovator, both based in Dubai. Cloud Campus is supported by a number of forward-thinking strategic partners. Technology partners include Global Learning SARL-Lebanon, Eruditus-Lithuania, among others. Content partners include Learnetic-Poland, Cross Knowledge-EU, International Quality Advisors-Lebanon, Notre Dame University Louaize-Lebanon, among others. Distribution partners include Zain Group-Kuwait, Emirates NBD Bank, Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank, Sharjah Islamic Bank, UAE Academy (the training arm of Abu Dhabi Chamber), in UAE, and Aramex – worldwide, and Du. This list is growing in terms of countries and organizations. Cloud Campus is hosted on Amazon Cloud (AWS) – Ireland.

Global Learning in close collaboration with Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, have developed Cloud Campus. Through the power of social media, this platform opens up the possibility for large scale development, reaching out to a potentially massive online learning community. The resultant cost implications are destined to make quality education affordable for millions of people across the globe.

Many education and training systems do not provide young people with the basic skills needed to escape unemployment, even though they continue to receive formal education. Cloud Campus was developed to fill this gap by providing learning and skills development opportunities that are relevant to the context in which young people live and seek their livelihood. HBMSU launched Cloud Campus to entail flexibility, quality and diversity, in order to strengthen self-leadership among learners and prepare them socially and academically for a future career through integration into the job market. Originally Cloud Campus began with K-12 content and soon evolved to focus primarily on developing important ICT skills in people as young as 14 and all the way to adulthood to enable them to succeed in the digital age. Cloud Campus is an online learning platform that trains individuals in professional and digital skills through 60- to 90-second videos. It offers a flexible training platform and 5,000+ video lessons covering more than 170 subjects using a proprietary micro learning method. The videos combine voiceover, screencasts, and animation, and are accompanied by quiz questions, glossary terms, and downloadable PDF takeaway notes. Education is central to development and to the improvement of the lives of young people globally.

Education is important for promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development. Increased efforts towards education accessibility, quality and affordability are central to HBMSU's mission and strategy. The current educational curriculum lacks the soft skills training that is needed for career success and for closing the skills gap. In order to measure results, Cloud Campus users are trained, assessed and then awarded a certificate of completion. Cloud Campus is online and uses the self-paced approach. The Cloud Campus delivery format compared to traditional learning approaches provides a new approach that is learner-centric and creates self-paced opportunity for learning.

The new online teaching method has innovative implications for the faculty, learners and indeed the institution at large. It requires the faculty to understand the promising ideas behind active learning so that they can incorporate them into their curricula and delivery systems. The learners, on the other hand, must shoulder the responsibility of active learning on their own. For HBMSU, it is about creating an opportunity for ALL to learn.

There has been a rising tide of interest in E-learning in recent years mainly due to the availability of useful E-learning technologies and changes in society's needs for flexible education. In fact, the use of the Internet in the program delivery system has been increasing considerably all over the world. It is believed that institutions of higher learning have to adopt distance-learning formats in order to grow and stay profitable in the following years.

Evidence from various countries of the Arab World suggests that online programs and courses have been proliferating with considerable speed. Contemporary environment is

characterized by the invention and proliferation of ICTs in the education sector. The UAE Government has given pride of place to smart education in its policy relating to education in schools, colleges and universities. The Cloud Campus has responded positively to these promising trends in the environment to serve the cause of education in the UAE and indeed elsewhere in the region.

Some of the topics covered in CC: Attention Management, Building Consensus and Commitment, Communicating and Interacting with Others, Communication, Developing Networks and Partners, Developing Self and Others, Email Efficiency, Fostering Innovation and Creativity, Leadership, Leading and Managing Change, Leading the Global and Diverse Landscape, Leveraging and Optimizing Performance, Negotiation, Productivity, Online Presentation, Project Collaboration and Management, Stress Management. The pedagogical methodologies utilized are innovative and learner-centric.

The Cloud Campus programs are unique as they are based on innovations in e-learning technology and advances in the disciplines. The Cloud Campus has certainly opened up new directions for education in the UAE and indeed elsewhere in the Arab World. It is based on the notion that smart education is a need of the hour and a case of active restructuring on the part of the learner. Restructuring occurs through engagement in problem posing as well as problem solving, inference making and investigation, resolving of contradictions, and reflecting. These processes all mandate for more active learners as well as a different pedagogical approach. The building blocks of a new pedagogical approach adopted by the Cloud Campus are logically based on scientific research about how learning takes place and require a shift in focus from the traditional instructor-centred approach

### **Framework for Smart Learning through Cloud Campus**

Cloud Campus delivers e-learning via personal accounts on Google+, LinkedIn and Facebook. Learners have access to over 1,600 interactive online lessons in the areas of mathematics, sciences and IT for school pupils from first to twelfth grade, in addition to business skill development for adults through 180 certified programs in Leadership, Communication, Marketing and Islamic Banking, among many others. There are more than 600 online lessons in the English language for a variety of age groups. The uniqueness of Cloud Campus lies within the academic support it provides to its users; browsing any course and communicating with e-tutors (appropriate professional or teacher related to the browsed course) in real-time, to have live chat and co-browsing one-to-one communication; an important feature for live coaching or tutoring as it enhances self-development and learning sustainability and effectiveness of learning. Cloud Campus uses latest technology to provide online interactive training. It also allows for live interaction with teachers and fellow class mates. To provide a succinct description of Cloud Campus; it is a:

- Full-fledged educational platform that utilizes social media channels;
- Extends knowledge reach out to the Arab world and hopefully beyond;
- Enhances the creation of learning communities;
- Offers rich interactive library.

Cloud campus is currently harnessing and building on the power of Facebook and other social media platforms. This contributes to the flexibility and convenience of integrating and replicating it with any existing system or other activities or division across the institution or other institutions Cloud Campus initially targeted more than 2 million casual learners, while HBMSU aims to eventually expand the scope of the service by signing more strategic agreements and partnerships with major enterprises, including mobile service operators and banking institutions in the Middle East, Africa and South and West Asia to increase the number to 13 million casual learners.

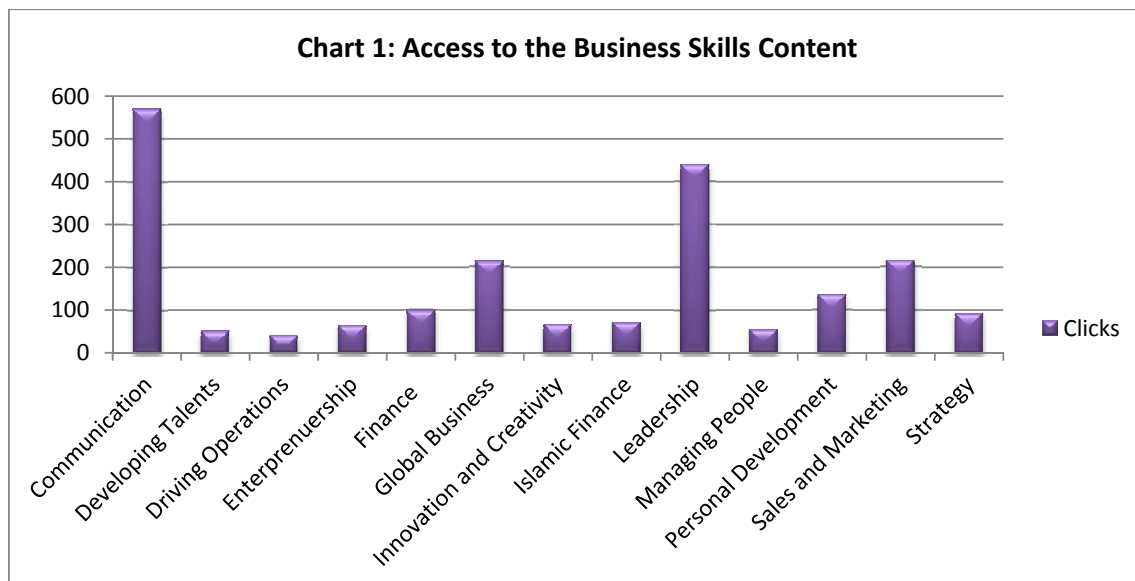
Table 1: List of current partners

PARTNERS CATEGORY	CURRENT PARTNERS	POTENTIAL NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS
Mobile Operators	Zain Group	2.2 Million
	- Kuwait	13 Million
	- Sudan	12 Million
	- Iraq	2.7 Million
	- Jordan	1.8 Million
	- Lebanon	0.5 Million
	- Bahrain	5 Million
Banks	Emirates NBD	1.4 Million
	ADIB	1 Million
	Sharjah Islamic Bank	0.2 Million
Others	Aramex	0.25 Million
	UAE Academy	0.5 Million

Currently there are three tracks on Cloud Campus:

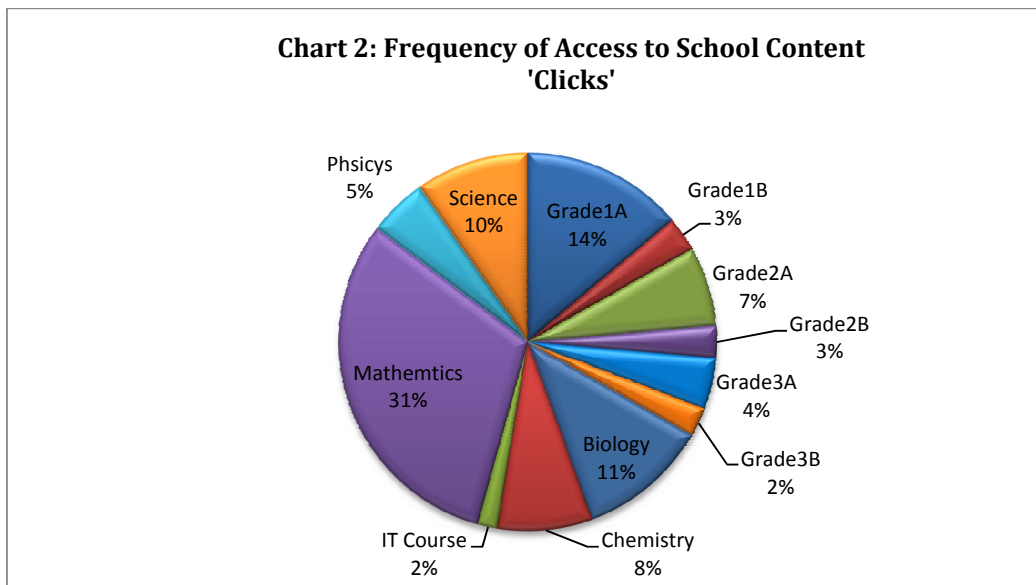
1. *Business skills courses track*: which offers more than 180 online sessions covering Soft Skills topics in Leadership, Communication, Developing Talents, Driving Operations, Entrepreneurship, Finance, Global Business, Managing People, Personal Development, Sales and Marketing, and other related topics are offered.

The Business skills courses are developed by Cross Knowledge which has been recognized as one of the best performing and most innovative e-learning companies on the international stage by Brandon Hall, a prominent American research and analyst organization specialized in corporate organizational performance. The courses are certified by ILM (Institute for management and leadership) in Communication, Finance, and Marketing, Management, Personal development, Sales and Management control.



2. *The school content track* offers intensive universal curriculum of more than 1,600 lessons in Math and Sciences and IT covering topics for Grades 1-12, offered in a multimedia-enhanced interactive online format. The School content is mapped to the curriculum of more than 27 counties around the world and works for all age groups.

**Chart 2: Frequency of Access to School Content 'Clicks'**



3. *The English language track* offers More than 600 interactive lessons based on international curricula and publishers series, preparing learners for international exams. The language courses are Cambridge level, and prepare learners to sit for international language exams. Cloud Campus provides a totally engaging experience through the variety of on-line sessions, exercises, assessment and interactions with tutors via a collaborative platform.

Each of these categories contains a *Library*, *Forum*, and *News Feed*. The *Library* contains online interactive and self-explanatory content. Learners can choose a sub category, which will list the various sessions and lessons available, showing the learner's progress in each of them. When the learner chooses a session or a lesson, a short summary is shown, with the list of previous learners' comments and questions, as well as tutors answers. It also provides a list of related resources. One or more tutors are assigned to each session/lesson, where learners can either pose a specific public question related to the session/lesson, or send a private message to one of the tutors. All public and private messages are responded to by the relevant tutors. The *Forum* is a discussion place of general topics related to a specific sub-category or subject, providing learners and tutors with a free learning space to exchange their views, experiences and knowledge. The *News Feed* is an update dashboard for learners and tutors, which shows all discussions that have taken place lately, both in the Library and forum, for subcategories and subjects that are considered within the learning space of a specific learner. Every learner develops, over time, a unique learning space, based on their pre-defined profile, as well as their content bookmarks and interests. Learners and tutors can reply to any question or comment, directly from the News Feed, or they can choose to go to the specific session or Forum topic, and read further comments before he/she decides to continue.

Specialized tutors are assigned to every session in Cloud Campus. When you enter a session, the list of assigned tutors is shown. Learners can ask questions or write comments publicly, related to a specific session, and the assigned tutors replies in real time. In addition, learners are able to send private short messages to specific tutors. Tutors also engage in general discussions about a specific subject in the Forum of every learning category. There are currently two exit points for certification:

1. *Completion Certificate*: Learners, who complete all the courses of a specific subject, are granted an automatic completion certificate by Cloud Campus, which can be downloaded online in PDF format.
2. *Professional Certificate*: Learners who complete all the courses of a specific subject, are entitled to take an assessment-based professional certificate, issued by Hamdan

Bin Mohamed Smart University in Dubai. Learners have to pay a separate fee for these assessments. Assessments are scheduled in authorized centres in various countries.

A collaborative effort between Microsoft and Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University initiative called *Microsoft Zone on Cloud Campus*, will also help to integrate the Smart University's Cloud Campus with Microsoft's Cloud Office. It will benefit both learners and professors who will have free access to all learning materials as well as teaching tools. It is hoped that the initiative will provide employment opportunities for young people and promote entrepreneurship in the Arab region. Cloud Campus learners will also be eligible for certification with Microsoft.

## Discussion

Cloud Campus embodies the crucial role of HBMSU in shaping the future of education and learning through creativity and innovation, while significantly contributing to the sustainable social and human development in the region and around the world. Cloud Campus is a full-fledged educational platform that utilizes the impact, accessibility and power of using social media to extend knowledge reach out to the biggest number of population across the Arab world. Social media has become a comfortable environment of communication among large communities. Once integrated in learning processes, it enhances the creation of learning communities in which an individual can be a learner sometimes and an instructor at other times. HBMSU provides the learning application on Facebook, with a rich interactive library. Social learning interactions are guided and supervised by HBMSU Academic support.

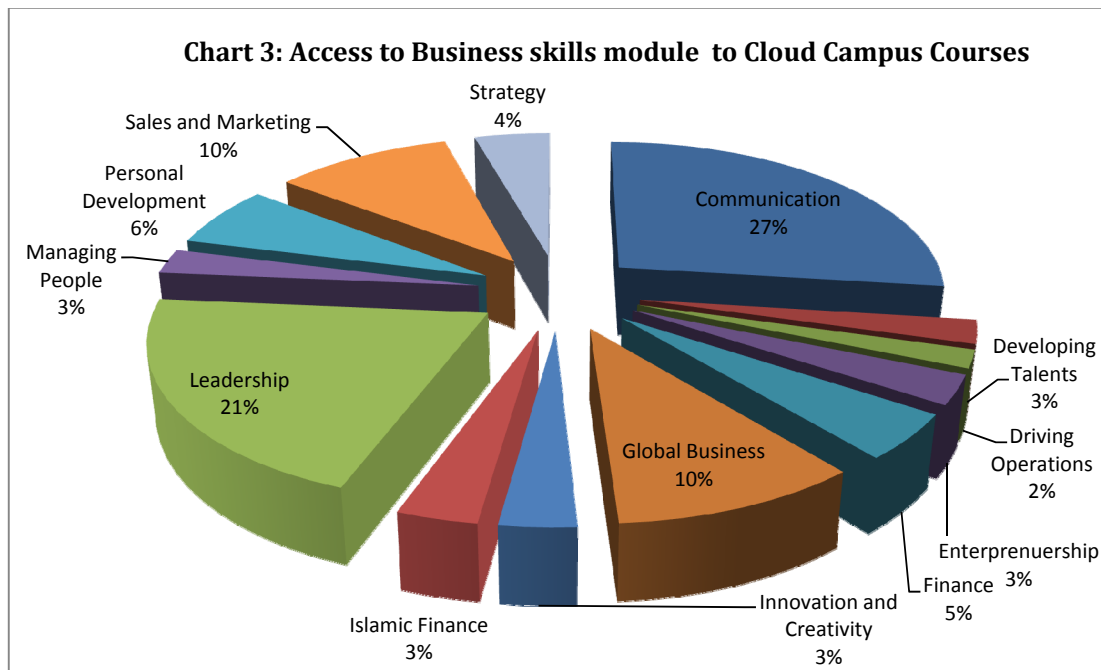


Chart 3.

Through Cloud Campus HBMSU is changing the way learning is delivered and facilitated. Knowledge is being shared by the click of a button, learners are not required to leave their workplace hence the organisations' productivity is not affected. It is also cost saving and revenue growth will ultimately lead to better opportunities in addition to contributing to the economic development of the UAE. Users are also allowed to score, comment on, publish and share training content. This facilitates the utilisation of content by the community, while it encourages more people to use the content, personalising the learning needs of each individual learner.

Cloud Campus, as a social learning platform has helped students at different levels to learn crucial communication and critical thinking skills. Cloud campus learning is structured in an informal context, hence learning is more spontaneous, self-directed than formal learning. The online tutors are using social networking technologies to assist them in their teaching where they are able to engage students through the technologies that they are most familiar with thus bridging the gap between students' home, social and learning environments. Cloud Campus through social media has helped to facilitate distance and extra-curricular learning and enabled students to learn outside of the classroom in an engaged way. The K-12 curriculum content is provided in a standardized format, allowing students who do not have access to adequate schooling to supplement their studies with high quality tools. Furthermore, students whose education is interrupted regularly will also be able to access information that can bridge the gap and make transition back to school easier.

## **Conclusion**

The interactive, collaborative, and open nature of Cloud Campus has helped to offer a vast array of opportunities for learning. We have seen better learning be facilitated through collaboration and sharing. Social learning has helped to break down barriers of time, space and social class to enable a more equal and real-time learning. Social media has become a valuable teaching and learning tools that can help to overcome some of the challenges facing educational institutions in the Arab region.

However, we must not forget that the introduction of new technologies brings about new transformational challenges and the introduction of social media platforms in education environments is one (Mourtada, Salem & Alshaer, 2013). With any new change in education we are faced with emerging challenges for educators, students, parents and educational institutions. These challenges can be overcome when educators, policy makers and governments appreciate that social networking technologies are creating opportunities for peer learning, discussion, debate, large-scale feedback, information sharing and innovation in educational environments.

This study was designed to identify and examine a social online learning initiative at higher education; namely Cloud Campus. At Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University we are focused on equipping learners with the knowledge and the enthusiasm to become themselves, inspirational to others in their adoption of e-learning. Teachers and schools are central to ensuring that our young people are given real opportunities to engage with the web in their learning and with social media in particular. There is a growing recognition that the skills needed to succeed in the knowledge society today and into the future are different in kind from those that were required in the industrial age. It is therefore incumbent upon teachers to familiarise themselves with the online landscape today, because without that insight, they will simply not be equipped to serve the learning needs of their students (SMILE, 2012). Teachers exploring this exciting, sometimes daunting, landscape will also be able to discover the real potential of e-learning to transform radically the pedagogical basis of their classroom practice, giving them tools that they can exploit in order to create truly personalised and flexible learning experiences for students. At Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University we have not only embraced e-learning, but have become the pace setters of e-learning in the Arab world by leading the way and establishing the first e-learning university in the UAE.

This study further demonstrate that if the concept of e-learning is imparted with a better approach and perspective, the reach will be phenomenal. This study reiterates the relevance of imparting quality education through e-learning.

## **Implications for future research**

So far, this case study has helped to shed light on the practices of a social online learning platform in higher education. However further research is needed to explore how social

media has contributed to the knowledge creation, and the new and innovative ways in which social media is being used to drive economic and social change in the Arab region. A further look at how the topic of social learning and education, particularly exploring the impact that social media has had and its potential on education systems, life-long learning and up-skilling in the Arab region is desperately needed. A growing generation of young social media users continue to drive social media growth in the region constituting the large majority of users of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn- how do we use such social media to create social learning is yet to be researched. Having “tested the waters” through this case study we feel that a great deal of research needs to be done that looks at the impact of social media phenomena on citizen engagement and social inclusion and the role social media plays in the societal transformations taking place in the Arab world.

A closer examination of the e-learning experiences of learners in the Arab world is needed; we need to have a holistic understanding of learner experiences by exploring patterns of behaviours and in-depth qualitative descriptions of what learning in an e environment is like. More learning analytics research that explores the ways learners engage in e-learning environment is needed. Even though the application of e-learning at universities in the Arab region has increased, little is known about learners’ expectations and experiences. Until recently, research has tended to focus on learners’ experiences with specific aspects of e-learning courses, e.g. the interaction with an instructor, learning with a specific learning management system, or certain characteristics of a course. Greater research is needed in order to enrich and enhance the e-learning experience of learners in the Arab world.

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