

A Human Touch

Fahad Al-Othman, Founder of HumanSoft, is cultivating success from the green pastures of a university campus.

BY HELEN MORROGH

Fahad Al-Othman looks out of his floor-to-ceiling office window with pride. Below him is the campus shared by Kuwait's American University of the Middle East (AUM) and the American College of the Middle East (ACM). Against a hue of green, students mill around palm trees and picnic tables, and chat as they saunter past a football pitch and basketball court. It is a place, he hopes, where young people don't just feel compelled to learn, but where they enjoy it, too. "We wanted to create a place that feels like a resort," says the Founder of HumanSoft, the company through which he established the institutions. And in that, Al-Othman reveals the vision of a lifetime: to boost the potential of a region dear to his heart.

The six-year-old campus is a shining string in the bow of a company that has allowed AUM's Chairman of the Board of Trustees to share his passion for education with a nation. "My life is dedicated to this," he says of the business that invests in technology-driven ventures related to education, human resources and health. The Kuwaiti founded his diverse group in 2002 before taking it public, listing on the Kuwait Stock Exchange in 2005. A decade on from the IPO and with profits of more than KWD 5 million (\$17 million) in 2013, according to the company website, the businessman's passion appears to be a lucrative one.

The role of his company underpins Al-Othman's deeply held belief that once equipped with the right tools, the potential of

his home country and the rest of the Middle East is limitless. Speaking of the relative youth of many Arab nations compared to other world countries, the entrepreneur says: "We have to be extremely proud of what we have achieved in such a short period of time." Nursing a cup of coffee, he adds: "If you realize that, one can only imagine what we can do in the future."

The subject of his homeland stirs immense enthusiasm in the chairman; one need only Google his name to see the proof. Newspaper articles dating back to 2010 reveal an invitation he delivered to one of the world's once-most powerful leaders. That year, it was announced that former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had been paid \$1.5 million to advise the Kuwaiti Royal Family. In response, Al-Othman took out a number of ads in regional newspapers, appealing to the controversial former statesman to discuss with him—from a 'positive and constructive perspective'—

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Kuwait's development strategy during a live TV debate. He was not taken up on the request.

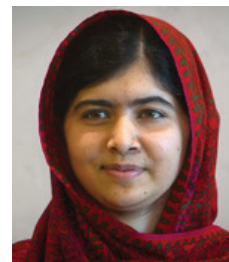
This did little to dampen Al-Othman's plans for regional development—a campaign of educational and technological advancement that began back in the early 90s. First delving into the tech world in 1991 by setting up PC distribution business, Al-Othman and Al-Sarraf Computer Services Company, his digital journey truly started when he invested in US-based New Horizons Computer Learning Centers. Bringing the IT training franchise to the Middle East, the founder soon realized the wealth technology could provide to the region. Now present in 11 countries region-wide,

Facts

The Indira Gandhi National Open University in New Delhi, India, has the most students in the world, with approximately 3.5 million.

"I truly believe the only way we can create global peace is through not only educating our minds, but our hearts and our souls."

Malala Yousafzai



CARLO ALLEGRI / REUTERS



Fahad Al-Othman,
Founder of Human-
Soft and Chairman
of the Board of
Trustees, AUM.

the investment continues to contribute to the region's IT literacy, while up-skilling aspiring IT professionals.

Seeing the demand and success of New Horizons, the entrepreneur established HumanSoft as a holding company to incorporate his first investment and further contribute to the region's growing IT and education needs. Now, New Horizons is just one of the successful subsidiaries under the HumanSoft belt, with other companies including TRACK Learning Solutions, an eLearning platform, and Tawteen, which focuses on career development and job placement of GCC nationals.

Inspired by the group's achievements, Al-Othman and his colleagues, following "an internal debate for probably a year-and-a-half," arrived at the decision to establish AUM and ACM to help young people discover the "joy of learning." Concentrating on business

administration, engineering and IT—through degrees in the university and vocational programs in ACM—just like the chairman, their focus is the individual. Between them, the two institutions accommodate 7,000-plus students and provide a setting where they can thrive.

The need for higher education bodies to offer something different is clear. According to global rankings, Arab universities are simply not performing to international standards. The region first appears on the *QS World University Ranking* at number 225, with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd University. The top 10 places, meanwhile, are occupied solely by the US and UK.

Francisco Marmolejo, World Bank Tertiary Education Coordinator, comments: "This is the area where most work needs to be done. Different studies conducted by the World Bank show that in order to unleash the employment potential in MENA, it is imperative to consider reforms in

the tertiary education system [that are] aimed at making it more responsive to the changing needs of economy and society.”

For Al-Othman, responding to those needs requires a holistic approach. Now standing to admire the view below, dressed in a grey check wool suit—the sun may be shining, but Kuwait winters are cold—he asserts: “At the end of the day, it’s about what kind of environment you are creating.”

That environment, in the case of AUM and ACM, comes in the form of the 130,000-square-meter campus, combined with an attitude conducive to success. The Kuwaiti is unyielding in his view that higher education must be more than a manufacturer of degrees. “We start to think beyond education, beyond the degree,” he says, adding that education “should not stop and cannot stop at just obtaining a degree.”

Education that looks beyond education? The 2008 birth of the sister institutions has enabled just that, says the founding father. Through emphasis on collaborative learning and personal development, AUM and ACM, says Al-Othman, don’t just produce graduates, but well-rounded, educated individuals. This must be done while all the time keeping their key focus in mind: knowledge.

It seems an obvious motivation for any educational body, but knowledge, says the founder, is crucially different to information. “It is your ability to take information, apply it and put it to some meaningful use,” says the group leader, his accent revealing his years spent in the United States as a student of Drake University, Iowa. “In today’s world, people can just Google anything,” he continues. “The challenge is: how do you apply it? That’s knowledge.”

In response to that very question, students at AUM and ACM are regularly required to work on team projects and participate in the ‘flipped classroom’ format, which sees students handed a topic to research, before discussing what they have learned in the following class. All but born with an iPhone in hand and Google at their fingertips, today’s students are in no shortage of information. But for the HumanSoft CEO, it’s incorporating that technology into the learning process that will be vital to the region’s development.

In Al-Othman’s view, MENA universities still aren’t doing enough to exploit technology and adapt to change. “If your curriculum does not respond to that, you have a very serious problem,” says the entrepreneur.

To facilitate that collaborative learning process, students are encouraged to take part in activities, not just inside

the classroom—flipped or otherwise—but outside, too. “Hobbies tend to promote passion,” says the CEO, adding that each year, approximately 20 or 30 new clubs and societies are created to further encourage an appreciation for learning.

Applying that passion to the workforce, however, is an altogether more challenging task. Faced with the stress of finding a job and paying their way, many students crumble under the pressure. “We see a lot of bright students get crushed in this stage,” says Al-Othman. “It’s a pity. There is no connectivity. Three months ago you were a student, three months later you are a graduate from university and the world, your parents and society expect you to be a certain way.”

As pressures of adult life set in, Al-Othman is determined to see his students succeed. “We are investing heavily in the career management center,” insists the founder, adding that this buttress remains in place “at least in the first three or four years until they really make it [in the workforce].”

Despite emphasis on seeing graduates through to employment, Al-Othman is adamant that students must not let jobs and money supersede passion. His response to questions about which subjects the current jobs market demands, is simple. Market trends, he says, are not the point of education. Rather, the individual must be totally devoted—“mind, soul and spirit”—to their chosen path.

“Your journey is not to discover the ‘hottest’ thing,” says the founder, “but to discover what is hot in you, and that you will bring to the world.” Al-Othman notices his voice has become louder. He laughs: “I’m getting a bit excited; this is very dear to me.”

That desire to enrich lives through education stems from an unusual place. Describing himself as a ‘credit guy’, Al-Othman spent 15 years in corporate lending at Burgan Bank, Kuwait. Far from the cold, corporate environment one might associate with lending, the leader found such satisfaction in his job that he wanted to share it, often giving evening lectures on credit analysis and risk management. “I found tremendous joy in passing out the knowledge and helping others grow,” he says.

Several years on, for the man with a passion for education, there’s still much to do. “I feel like I’m only at the beginning,” he says. But while the road is long, he’s clear in his direction. As he stands looking out at the campus he created, Fahad Al-Othman is in no doubt as to where the grass is greener. **F**

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