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***Enabling our
students with
disabilities
to thrive***

**A learner-centric
approach**

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About the author

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Executive summary



Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ states must revamp their systems for educating students with disabilities so that these students can improve their learning experience, live to their full potential, and contribute to society. However, there are numerous attitudes and obstacles that lead to underestimating the true level of need. Fortunately, GCC states recognize that need is acute and they share a commitment to the well-being of these students.

Although each country has distinct regulatory and societal requirements and is at a different stage of policy development, all must adopt a learner-centric approach for students with disabilities. This approach has four key elements:

1. **Individualized intervention.** There must be more awareness among teachers and parents so they recognize when students have disabilities and understand how to address those needs. Early detection allows professionals to correctly assess students' needs based on diagnostic standards, and to develop an individualized educational plan (IEP) for the students so their educational needs are met.
2. **A learning ecosystem.** There must be fully or partially inclusive educational settings to socialize students with disabilities and educate mainstream students about those with disabilities. Governments should also provide other learning environments, such as specialist schools, to fit learners' specific educational demands.
3. **A supportive ecosystem.** To ensure the right balance of services, fully or partially inclusive schools should offer basic support resources for students with mild and moderate disabilities, and partner with external service providers such as medical specialists to deliver students the precise level of service necessary. The involvement of parents and caregivers outside the school setting is critical to creating this supportive ecosystem.
4. **Assistive technologies.** Education systems should leverage technology advances to improve access to education.

To implement this approach, governments must launch awareness campaigns. They must harmonize responsibilities among entities and ensure the development and enforcement of policies and regulations, including diagnostic guidelines and professional qualifications.

Recognizing the problem

A consensus is growing among GCC states that they must revamp their systems for educating students with disabilities so that these students improve their learning experience and live to their full potential. However, there are numerous obstacles to achieving this, and success depends on a large ecosystem of stakeholders coalescing to change the status quo.

For starters, there are several reasons that GCC countries tend to underestimate the number of students with disabilities: poor awareness and assessment by teachers and parents, unclear diagnostic standards to detect and classify disabilities, and a socially ingrained reluctance to acknowledge disabilities. This masks the level of need.

Even when there is an early and correct diagnosis, educational and support services are sometimes deficient. There is a general lack of qualified special education professionals, for several reasons. Often university training for teachers falls short of providing specialized knowledge of various disabilities, such as autism. Some teachers do not develop strategies to teach students with disabilities.

Adding to the educational challenge is that only rarely do teachers receive professional development training to stay abreast of the latest technologies and methodologies, and their expectations of students with disabilities are frequently too low. Moreover, teachers may not receive the necessary support from therapists and other specialists to provide the right services.

Success depends on a large ecosystem of stakeholders coalescing to change the status quo.

Another obstacle to educating students with disabilities effectively is insufficient planning and coordination among entities in the public, private, and third sectors. This results in the duplication of some services while others are not provided. GCC countries also do not take advantage of the full potential of new assistive technologies — devices such as touchscreens that help people with disabilities perform daily activities with greater independence.

Fortunately, GCC states recognize these shortcomings. Although each country is approaching the situation from a different angle, they all share a commitment to students with disabilities, as enshrined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.² In 2014, GCC countries adopted a Human Rights Declaration which stated, in part, that “all people with special needs have the right to comprehensive care and shall be rehabilitated and consolidated into the community” and “every person has the right to an education.”³ Today, all GCC countries are pursuing numerous initiatives, including drafting national strategies/policies and passing laws, as well as establishing committees to bring attention to the issue, and encouraging the private sector to participate in their efforts to better support students with disabilities (*see Exhibit 1, page 6*).

Exhibit 1

Examples of education initiatives in the GCC for students with disabilities

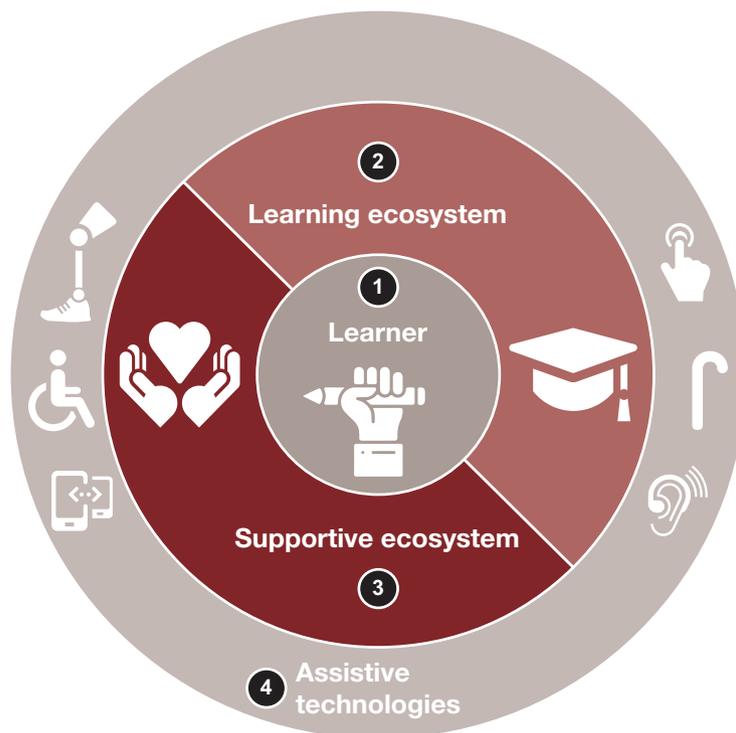
Country	Initiative	Description
Bahrain	National strategy for people with disabilities	The Bahraini government’s strategy includes providing people with disabilities a public education from early childhood. The strategy also stresses the importance of educating teachers, and providing higher education and continuing education opportunities for learners.
United Arab Emirates	Dubai inclusive education policy framework	The law guarantees people with disabilities equal opportunities within all educational, vocational training, adult education, and continuing education institutions. It also guarantees the availability of sign language or Braille or any other appropriate method. The Ministry of Education is working to adapt public schools accordingly.
Oman	The law of care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities	The law stresses principles such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The right to an education and higher education commensurate with the student’s abilities - The right of persons with disabilities to obtain aids, equipment, and materials that assist them in education, training, movement, and transportation
Qatar	Law (2) of 2004	The law provides that people with disabilities have the right to education, learning, and rehabilitation in accordance with their needs.
Kuwait	Establishment of a dyslexia higher educational committee	The Kuwaiti Ministry of Education encouraged the establishment of a Dyslexia Higher Educational Committee to raise awareness of dyslexia in mainstream schools in Kuwait.
Saudi Arabia	National transformation program special education initiatives	As part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is working on initiatives aiming to develop the special education ecosystem in the country while encouraging the participation of the private sector.

Source: Ministry of Social Development, Bahrain (<http://www.mlssd.gov.bh/sites/default/files/img/files/Disabled-peoplestrategy.pdf>); Knowledge and Human Development Authority, Dubai (https://www.khda.gov.ae/cms/webparts/texteditor/documents/Education_Policy_En.pdf); State Council of Oman (http://www.statecouncil.om/Kentico/Inner_Pages/News/912.aspx?lang=en-us); Qatar University, Inclusion and Special Needs Support Center (<http://www.qu.edu.qa/students/supportand-development/special-needs>); UNDP, Disabilities & Inclusion in Kuwait (<http://www.kw.undp.org/content/kuwait/en/home/presscenter/articles/disabilities-inclusion-in-kuwait.html>); Saudi Arabia, National Transformation Program 2020 (http://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/NTP_En.pdf)

Taking a learner-centric approach

To achieve these ambitions for special education and maximize impact, GCC countries should adopt a learner-centric approach. This approach revolves around four key elements. It must begin by understanding the individual needs of each student, then organizing both the learning and the supportive ecosystems for them, and finally, deploying the correct assistive technologies (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
The learner-centric approach



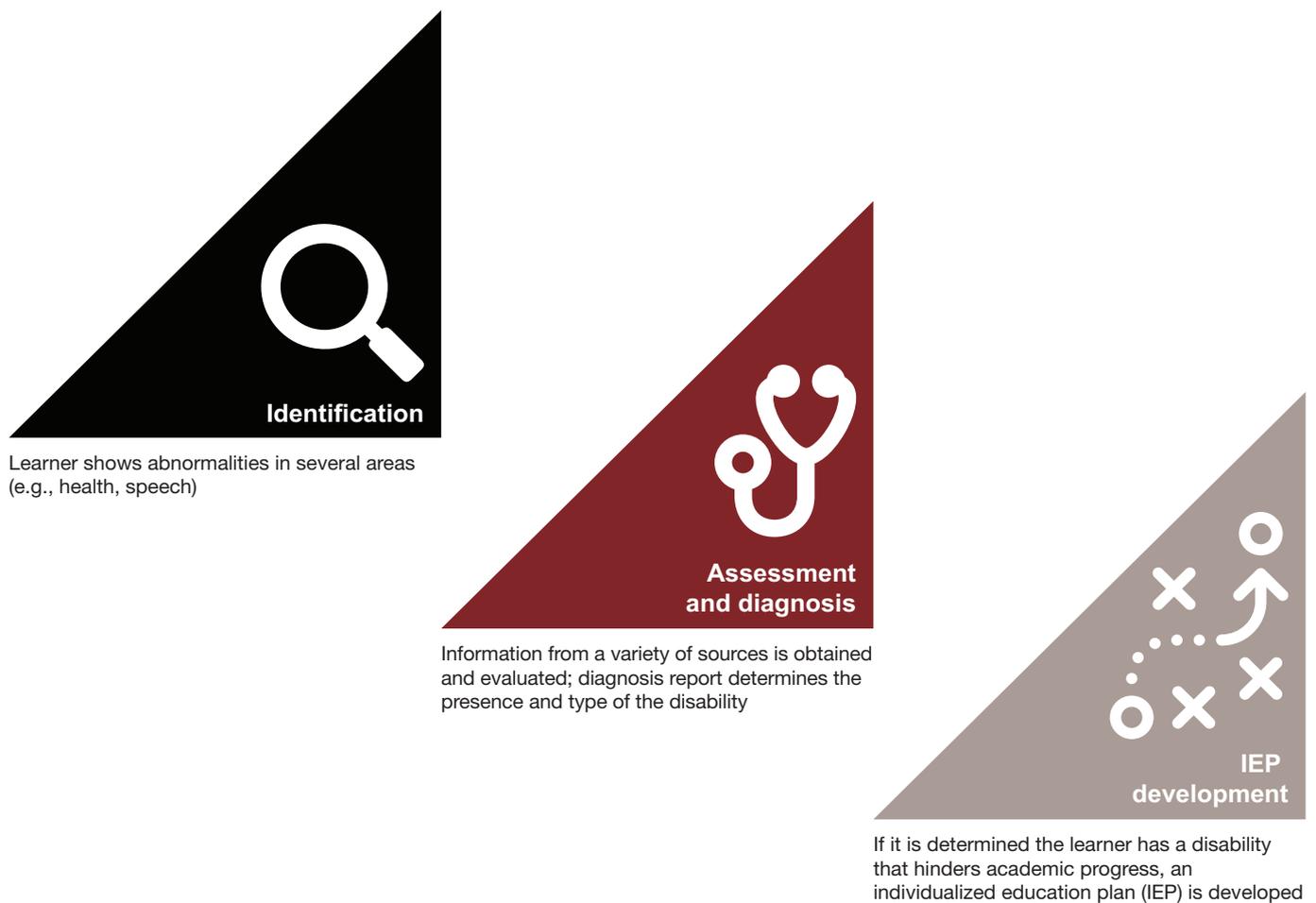
Source: Strategy&

Individualized intervention: Early intervention and IEP implementation

A learner's special needs are typically identified at school or home, and then reported to a medical provider. The medical provider must correctly assess the learner's disability to develop an individualized educational plan (IEP) based on the student's type of disability and its severity, as well as other particular conditions. An accurate IEP is critical so professionals and other stakeholders understand how to support the student's specific needs (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3

Disability identification, assessment, diagnosis, and planning model



Source: Strategy&

IEPs are usually created by a cross-functional committee of education professionals, healthcare professionals, and technology experts, and with the involvement of the caregivers. IEPs specify a continuum of services consisting of different types of support for each educational stage, transitioning from preschool (where the focus is on early identification at home or at school and interventions) to primary/secondary education (where the focus is on making learning accessible with the right teaching methodologies and new technologies) to higher education/vocational education/continuing education (where the focus is on access to employment and integration into society). It is important to have a transition plan for the student to help him or her shift successfully from one educational stage to the next.

Early intervention in preschool is proving particularly critical as a way to lower the incidence of disabilities. Some developed countries have reported a decline in special education needs among students, partly attributed to early assessment and intervention techniques. These early intervention techniques usually depend on general education teachers in preschool recognizing early signs of learning issues. This demonstrates the importance of training teachers about special needs and how crucial it is to the success of early intervention. Of course, some special needs, such as learning disabilities, do not emerge until the later years of schooling.

Learning ecosystem: A spectrum of learning options to fit each student's needs GCC states should support a full spectrum of learning environments so options exist to fit a learner's specific needs, including fully inclusive educational settings, partially inclusive, and specialist schools. This variety of learning environments also allow education professionals to escalate or de-escalate the level of intervention as necessary depending on a student's progress (see Exhibit 4, page 10).

It is critical that these inclusive programs are managed closely. This ensures that teachers are not overwhelmed by the variety of learning needs, students with disabilities do not suffer bullying, and school budgets are not stretched by, for example, needing to hire extra teachers or purchase expensive assistive technologies.

Exhibit 4

Characteristics of education for students with disabilities, based on level of educational inclusion

	 Fully inclusive	 Partially inclusive	 Specialized
	Fully inclusive		Specialized
Examples of disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mild cognitive, learning, or other difficulties - Mild-to-moderate physical/sensory disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderate cognitive, learning, or other difficulties - Severe physical/sensory disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderate-severe cognitive, learning, or other difficulties - Severe/multiple physical/sensory disabilities
Learning ecosystem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General teachers; some special teaching assistants - Instruction in regular classes, with some differentiated learning for students with disabilities - No adjustment to the curriculum - Some adjustment in testing standards based on need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specialist teachers and teaching assistants for special classes - Mixture of mainstream classes and in-school separation - Some curricular modification based on need - Adjustment on testing time, allowance for A.T. or specialist presence during testing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specialist teachers tailored to needs - Separate learning environment, tailored to disabilities - Low teacher : student ratios (around 1: 8) - Adjusted curriculums tailored to student needs - Separate/adapted assessment scale and learning goals
Supportive ecosystem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Basic support services, accessibility adjustment including A.T. based on need - Students with disabilities coordinators for advisory where necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support from healthcare/social care professional based on need - Accessibility adjustment including A.T. based on need - Students with disabilities coordinators for advisory where necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant interaction with health and care professionals - Significant A.T. support tailored to needs

Note: A.T. = assistive technologies

Source: Strategy&

However, full inclusion is the current trend and main goal. Full inclusion is generally better for improving the social competence of students with disabilities while also educating mainstream students about these students through interacting with them. The decision about whether to include mild and moderate cases in a fully inclusive environment will be specific to each GCC country. Issues to consider include the level of awareness, acceptance of disabilities in the country, capabilities of the educational professionals, and their ability to adapt the learning methodologies and assessments to students with disabilities.

Specialist schools mostly cater to severe cases of disability that limit the student's ability to function in a mainstream setting, involve more adjustments to the curricula, teaching methods, and learning environment, and require more specialized teaching professionals. They are equipped to create parallel curricula for students with disabilities.

Supportive ecosystem: A balanced set of targeted, needs-based services
Besides the specific educational needs of students with disabilities, these students require a supportive ecosystem that includes knowledgeable, attuned parents and caregivers outside of school, and support services within the schools appropriate to the type and severity of the disability.

The provision of support services will vary based on the educational setting (fully inclusive, partially inclusive, specialist). Most fully and partially inclusive schools offer basic support resources for mild and moderate cases, and then create partnerships with external service providers on an as-needed basis. Fully inclusive schools, in particular, often lack dedicated facilities and instead use multipurpose rooms for children with disabilities and have specialists on a visiting or contractual basis.

If the student's needs increase beyond the school's scope, the student should move to a specialist institution. These specialist schools should offer a full range of support elements on site, with clinician and therapists in residence and access to the latest assistive technologies.

Full inclusion is generally better for improving the social competence of students with disabilities.

Assistive technologies: New technologies enhance education and increase social inclusion

Assistive technologies (A.T.) are advancing quickly, unlocking new instructional models and, ultimately, better social inclusion for students with disabilities. For example, one A.T. app that translates speech to sign language has helped many students integrate better in mainstream classes for a minimal cost.

Educators can leverage several emerging trends such as digitization, customization, portability, and localization. For instance, concepts/ technologies such as virtual reality, BYOD (Bring Your Own Device), and the flipped classroom help students with disabilities assimilate information faster, making it possible for them to be in fully or partially inclusive environment. The flipped classroom involves using devices for students with disabilities and devoting class time to applying concepts that allow instructors to detect students' needs and errors in a fully or partially inclusive environment.

At the same time, Universal Design (UD) makes it easier than ever to customize A.T. to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. Moreover, A.T. offers important flexibility because students can use them in a variety of settings, not just in a traditional classroom. With that in mind, A.T. is shifting from a conventional model to a “holistic” model that goes beyond basic educational needs and helps students with disabilities integrate into society.

Meanwhile, in some countries entrepreneurs are developing A.T. locally to lower costs, better incorporate the culture and language, and thus increase access to A.T. For example, Tellmate, an A.T. for the visually impaired in India, costs about 90 percent less than a similar global model.

A.T. is shifting from a conventional model to a “holistic” model that goes beyond basic educational needs.

Coordinating public, private, and third sector

For this learner-centric approach to succeed, governments need to define and coordinate responsibilities across public, private, and third-sector actors.

Governments should harmonize responsibilities for policies and strategy across relevant government entities, set regulations, and devise standards — such as diagnostic guidelines and professional qualifications. An alternative approach, used in many countries, is to have an independent public organization that reports directly to the cabinet, conducts inspections, and enforces the regulations.

Governments also need to launch public awareness campaigns to remedy underreporting and help destigmatize the diagnosis. The private and third sectors can help by conducting awareness, advocacy, and advisory activities, and by providing training for special education. In developed countries, the private and third sectors also play an instrumental role in actually delivering special education services to the public.

GCC governments should constantly monitor the education of those with disabilities, identifying new opportunities, such as A.T. or therapeutic, and filling any gaps. As much as possible, governments should also encourage the private and third sectors to operate and innovate in the education sector, such as by easing regulations so entrepreneurs can develop and market local A.T.

Conclusion

By adopting a learner-centric approach, governments will fulfill an obligation to care for all their citizens and bring quality of life, economic, and societal benefits to students with disabilities and their families. By being engaged in their education and then the workplace, these individuals will be more independent with a greater sense of purpose, which makes them financially and mentally healthier.

The benefits to the economy and society are also significant. By improving education and better integrating these students into the workforce, the government's long-term burden is reduced. A proper approach to special education means that these individuals are more likely to become capable of earning a living, paying their way, and contributing their talents to society, instead of the government shouldering the costs of healthcare and social care over their lifetime.

Endnotes

¹ The GCC countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

² United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 1976 (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>).

³ GCC, “GCC Human Rights Declaration,” 2014 (<http://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/CognitiveSources/DigitalLibrary/Lists/DigitalLibrary/Human%20Rights/1453192982.pdf>).

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