



A PERFECT MATCH FOR A MISSION

With more than 4,000 students, GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis has had to consider thoughtfully how to provide relevant and meaningful learning opportunities for all. Offering the Career-related Programme has provided a satisfying choice for those who have a specific career pathway in mind.

The Career-related Programme (CP) has been offered at GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis for only three years, Secondary Principal Damian Bacchoo pronounces it a success already. “I can judge it on the first two cohorts: everyone who graduated achieved what they had set out to achieve,” Bacchoo says. “We had a highly engaged [CP] student body who enjoyed their programme and looked forward to graduating and engaging in a career or higher education. 100% of our university applicants went to their first choice of university, and this trend has continued throughout the three years we have been operating the programme.”

CP students at the Academy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, “are in a programme they value and respect. They’ve chosen it because they want to pursue a specific pathway in a sector or industry,” Bacchoo says. The current cohort—which he describes as highly aspirational—consists of some 50 students.

GEMS Wellington Academy—Silicon Oasis also offers the Diploma Programme (DP). By offering both the CP and the DP from the International Baccalaureate (IB), the school “ensures that students can build personalized learning pathways” Bacchoo says. “If we just offered the CP or the DP, we would become less inclusive. We want to be an inclusive school.” In addition, the academy provides the National Curriculum for England and is one of the largest single sites to do so.

Like any good organisation, GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis considered what its vision would be when it was established in 2011. That meant deciding what the school wanted for its students, Bacchoo says, which led to the realisation that it shared the philosophy of the IB: an emphasis on preparing to be global citizens and lifelong learners and successfully preparing for careers and university. “We wanted to make sure we actually did that,” he says. “The CP is a way we felt we were able to achieve our mission.”

GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis (private):
Early years-Year 13

First offered the CP:
2013

Total number of students:
4,100

Secondary principal :
Damian Bacchoo

Executive principal CEO:
Michael Gernon

“
We wanted to make sure there was a pathway for every student to carry on through to the end of the school.
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— DAMIAN BACCHOO,
SECONDARY PRINCIPAL,
GEMS WELLINGTON ACADEMY –
SILICON OASIS

Having a clear goal does not necessarily mean the path to that goal is clear, however. The Academy, which recruits mainly from the UK, was originally planning to provide a British programme of study to **Post 16 students (those aged 16 and older)**. Thus, the proposed addition of IB programmes was an unexpected change in direction at the time. Parents, teachers and students were expecting the Academy to follow the traditional British pathway, Bacchoo says, which many UK parents were familiar with. In addition, teachers had experience with their traditional programme but not the IB programmes, and some were initially worried about losing their 'currency' to teach in the UK when they returned home. Students also expressed concern about how challenging the IB programmes might be.

So school officials worked with all three groups. To parents, "we explained what an IB education was" Bacchoo says. It took time, but "they quickly became enthused about their children receiving a gold-standard international education". To teachers, "we explained that investing in them developing as IB educators would be both new and exciting and that diversifying their teaching portfolio would be in their professional interest". Students learned that the IB programmes could help them get into the university of their choice, Bacchoo says, and they began to have confidence in their ability to meet the academic and personal demands of both programmes.

In preparation for offering the CP, the school did market research on which areas to focus on. Parents were surveyed, local opportunities were considered, and the Academy's facilities were assessed. For their career-related study, GEMS Wellington Academy CP students can choose among creative media production, business, information and communication technology and sport. CP students can take almost all of the Academy's DP courses thanks to the digital learning opportunities offered by the unique blended approach to IB learning adopted by the Academy.

Some of the choices for the career-related study, which is provided by BTEC, were obvious, given the Academy's location in Dubai, home to a number of international businesses. Eventually GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis is considering adding Engineering, which supports the UAE National Agenda, to its CP offerings. The Academy also has partnerships with some of the many universities that have campuses nearby. With the hope that a university could help teach some modules, exposing students to higher education and potentially interesting them in that university, Bacchoo explains.

Providing the CP has worked well for both students and teachers at GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis. "A significant number of teachers have industry experience and have 'lived' the career they are preparing students for. We have teachers who are very proud to be running the CP," Bacchoo says. "They're not just teaching a subject but a subject within the context of a career, and they're supporting young adults." The teachers see themselves as growing their relationships with students and helping them take the first steps toward their adult careers, he says. "They love that responsibility and thrive on it."

Students like the opportunity to focus, Bacchoo says. "They no longer have to be all things to all people." The students who have completed the CP can be described in three words, he says: motivated, confident and autonomous. "I don't think that last one comes on day one of the course," he says. "These things change over the course. The result of autonomy is that students have more control of their destiny."

When upper school Principal Damian Bacchoo started teaching, he worked in his school's sports department. "I wondered about it when former students would come back in, knocking on the door and saying hello." A colleague told him, "That, my friend, is a sign of a healthy school. If they come back, we're OK."

So Bacchoo is delighted to find exactly the same thing happening at GEMS Wellington Academy – Silicon Oasis. "I'm pretty happy that they feel strongly enough to come back. They want to tell us about their latest project and how they are doing."

