



# DESS CONNECT

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# WE COULD

## BEYOND THE SCHOOL GATES: THE POWER OF STAYING CONNECTED

Ask any school what makes it special, and you will usually hear about values, teaching and facilities. But look a little closer and you will often find the real magic comes from the people who have passed through its gates and stayed connected. Not out of habit, but because something about the place still matters.

That's what we are trying to build with our DESS Alumni Network. Not a list of names and graduation dates, but a living, breathing community; one that grows in relevance as the years roll on.

An alumni network, when it is done properly, it is not about nostalgia. It is about insight, influence and connection. It's about former students mentoring the next generation, opening doors into industries and careers, or simply being a reminder that the leap into adult life does not have to be a solo sprint.

It is also about giving back - often without giving much at all. A quick message of encouragement. Ten-minute careers talk. A contact passed along. Every little contribution counts.

You know the power of a DESS education. It shaped your journey, challenged your thinking and helped you step into the world with confidence. Now, you have a chance to do the same for the next generation.

We are launching this bold new phase for the DESS Alumni Network; one that connects students with mentors, internships and real-world insights. We are creating a space where experience can be shared, stories passed on and opportunities opened up.

And we would love you to help us by offering an internship or work experience, becoming a mentor, or just sharing your life story or career journey.

Be part of something bigger. Help shape the future of DESS students.

To get in touch email Sarah Kelly, Assistant Headteacher, on [alumni@dess.sch.ae](mailto:alumni@dess.sch.ae) or visit [www.dess.sch.ae](http://www.dess.sch.ae) to get started.

Thanks



# BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP

When Anthony Drayson opened the doors to MotoZone in January 2020, he had a clear idea of what he was building. It was not just a storage hub for off-road vehicles or a place for tourists to rent buggies for a morning in the dunes. It was going to be something bigger. A base. A community. A space where people with a shared love for the desert and the machines that move through it, could find each other.

What he didn't know, of course, was that the entire world was about to shut down.

MotoZone had been open for barely a few weeks when the first wave of COVID hit. Overnight, everything stopped. The tourists vanished. The bookings dried up. The original business model; one built around people, movement and shared experience, was suddenly impossible.

It was, in many ways, a perfect storm. But for Anthony, it wasn't the first time his path had taken an unexpected turn.

Several years earlier, in what should have been the steady middle stretch of his education, he suffered a serious accident - a fall that left him with a fractured skull and a slow-burning concussion that went unnoticed at first. The effects crept in gradually, making it harder and harder to focus. He tried to push through, but eventually, things gave way. Subjects were dropped. Plans for university were shelved. For a while, it felt like everything had been working towards had gone off-course.



It was the DESS College nurse who picked up the signs. With her help and the quiet intervention of a few sharp-eyed teachers, he found another way forward. One teacher suggested revisiting his love for drumming. Not because it solved everything, but because it gave him something to hold onto. He started playing in school shows and rehearsals. It was loud, physical, rhythmic - and, most importantly, his.

He shifted his focus to the business and entrepreneurship BTEC, where things finally began to click. The structure suited him. So did the idea of creating something tangible. He started thinking seriously about business, and about how he might turn his passion for off-road riding into something more than a pastime.

MotoZone began with three people doing everything. The original idea was straightforward: offer storage for off-road vehicles, maybe organise a few buggy tours. But Anthony's connection to the desert ran deeper than that. Bikes were not just a part of his life, they were his rhythm, his clarity, the thing that had always made sense. Slowly, that personal connection shaped the business. What started as a utility project began to evolve into something more personal - and much harder to build.

Then came the pandemic.

With the business barely out of the gate, Anthony and his team had to tear up the blueprint and start again. They moved everything online. Streamlined operations. Rethought what they could offer. It was brutal and unrewarding work - the kind of daily grind that offers no guarantees and very little external validation. But they kept going.

Marketing, in particular, didn't come easily. "It's not something I've ever been naturally good at," he admits. "But I learned enough to make it work. And now I've got tools that help - AI, automation, whatever gets us where we need to be."

Today, MotoZone looks nothing like the modest idea it started out as. It has grown into a full-fledged operation with 14 team members, a fleet of bikes, over 130 vehicles in storage and a fully equipped workshop. It is known not just for its services, but for its sense of community. The free group rides still run. People still come by just to talk about bikes. The soul of the place has not changed.

And while it is very much a business, it is also still a family affair. His sister Shelly is part of the operation, which brings both support and strain in equal measure. Her son, Vinnie, is about to start at DESS College; the same place where Anthony's path first veered off course and, eventually, rerouted into something new.

"He's heard bits and pieces about what happened," Anthony says. "The accident. The business. The tough bits. But I hope what he really sees is the stuff in between; the day-in, day-out reality of building something."

There is no shiny takeaway here. No dramatic reinvention or overnight success. Just a series of choices made under pressure, a passion turned into a plan, and a young man who learned - by force, by necessity, by instinct, how to keep going when the plan fell apart.

MotoZone is still growing. So is Anthony. The work continues.



# HIGHLY STRUNG

Long before she was bowing under the lights of Glastonbury or recording for the BBC Philharmonic, Victoria Stephenson was in a classroom at DESS Primary Oud Metha, trying to play the recorder while waiting for a violin small enough to fit in her hands.

"I was desperate to start," she says now. "But there just wasn't an instrument tiny enough. So, I sang in the choir and joined the recorder club. Anything to be near music."

Somewhere in that tangle of childhood frustration and early ambition, something clicked. There was encouragement, structure, the patience of teachers who saw a spark and knew better than to rush it.

Victoria names them easily. Miss Belsey. Mr Kudsí. And of course above all, her Mum; part cheerleader, part co-pilot.

"Mum never pushed," she says. "She just made space for the dream, then quietly helped make it real."

**"IT'S NOT THAT I NEVER DOUBTED MYSELF, BUT I NEVER DOUBTED THE DIRECTION"**



By the time Victoria left Dubai in 1998, she was leading the UAE Children's String Orchestra. She was barely a teenager, heading to Manchester on a scholarship to Chetham's School of Music. Not long after that, she moved to London, where she earned a Master's in Performance from the Royal College of Music, balancing viola and violin with the kind of discipline that's impossible to fake.

The next two decades are a blur of stages, scores, cities. She's collaborated with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and musicians from the Berlin Philharmonic. Played Les Mis, Hamilton, Romeo & Juliet. She's recorded for Sony, performed under some of the most respected conductors in Europe, and held a seat with the Hallé Orchestra; one of Britain's oldest and most distinguished ensembles.

And still, she returns to the classroom.

Victoria is now a conductor and mentor herself, leading outreach projects with the Merton Concert Orchestra and String Busters. She has helped raise funds for children's charities in Dubai and led performances at venues like the Royal Albert Hall. Not to complete the circle - that is too neat a story, but to stretch it a little further.

"There was never really a backup plan," she says. "It's not that I never doubted myself, but I never doubted the direction. That came from school - from knowing people believed in me before I'd even got going."

There was a brief flirtation with marine biology. She is still drawn to the idea of sailing and wildlife conservation in warmer climates. But music stuck.

"I've never been able to imagine not doing this."

Not every alumnus finds a path so early. Victoria did. And when she talks about it now, it is not with sentimentality, just clarity. The right school, the right people, the right timing. A violin that finally fits.

That is all it took to get started.



**"I'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO IMAGINE NOT DOING THIS"**



# FULL CIRCLE IN FULL COLOUR

## Melina Johnstone's Return to the Art Room

If you had told Melina Johnstone back in Year 12 that she would end up teaching in the same art room she used to escape to at every opportunity, she probably would have laughed. Not because it sounded impossible, just because, back then, she was more focused on making it through the week than mapping out a career.

Melina left DESS College in 2015 with a sketchbook full of ambition and a plan to study Fine Art at Manchester Metropolitan University. There, she met Alexandra – amazingly one of the other Cypriot girls on campus, and who, in an unexpected twist of fate, turned out to be on the very same course. They became best friends, and years later, Melina stood as Alexandra's Maid of Honour.

During her final year, Melina returned to DESS College for a three-week shadowing opportunity that quickly turned into something more meaningful. "Those few weeks really confirmed it for me," she says. "I realised I didn't just want to make art, I wanted to teach it."

At the final Enrichment stage of her PGCE course, Melina seized an opportunity to return to her former school in Cyprus to teach part-time. When a full-time opportunity came up, she was ready to stay. But then a message landed from a friend in Dubai: a teaching position had opened at DESS College.

She hesitated. She didn't want to let anyone down. But when she shared the dilemma with her Principal in Cyprus, she got nothing but encouragement. "She told me to go. She said it was where I belonged."



**“I REALISED  
I DIDN'T JUST  
WANT TO MAKE  
ART, I WANTED  
TO TEACH IT”**

And so, in 2019, Melina came back, this time as a teacher.

Her love of art started early. Raised in Cyprus, she moved to Dubai at 15; an age when leaving childhood friendships behind can be hard. Her dad, a pilot and passionate painter, had introduced her to oils at the age of five. "We used to paint together outside," she says. "Never inside - too risky!"

At DESS College, art was her sanctuary. "I wasn't especially academic, but I always found my place in the art room. That's where I felt most myself."

Today, Melina passes on that sense of belonging to her students. "Art is as much about patience as it is about talent. You've got to want to be good at it. The desire comes first, and the rest quickly follows."

She lives in Dubai with her husband Rory and says that while her route into teaching was not apparent during her DESS College days, it was the right one.

"Coming back to teach where it all started isn't something I've ever taken for granted. It's a reminder that your path doesn't have to be perfect. Just true."





# FAITH, FOOTWORK AND THE LONG GAME

If you want to understand how the story of Jimmy Poon has unfolded, start at the DESS Primary Oud Metha school gates. Not today - though he's often there picking up his own children but way back in 1985, when a young Jimmy first stepped through them as a DESS student.

He was a Leopard back then. Competitive, quick, confident. Always ready for Sports Day on the sand-covered pitch, or a swimming gala, or whatever else was going on. There's a photo somewhere of him with his hand bandaged just in time for Princess Anne's (Princess Royal as she is now) royal visit, a casualty of a mad dash down a corridor. "I'd spent weeks hoping she'd shake my hand," he remembers. "Then suddenly I was hoping she wouldn't!"

Some lessons at school stick with you because of how they're taught. Others because of who teaches them. Headmistress Miss McCarthy, Jimmy says, did both.

Her legendary handshake rules: 'Look them in the eye, lean in, firm grip', were as famous as they were non-negotiable. And for Jimmy, they stuck. "I've followed her advice every day since," he says. "She really was a character-builder."

DESS gave Jimmy a lot, not just confidence and independence, but friendships that have lasted more than 35 years. He and classmate Sam Cordier are still close, and Sam was best man at his wedding. Sam's brother Alex works with Jimmy's business today. Another classmate, Gerard Scott-Brining, is a godparent connection. "Francesca's my goddaughter," he says. "It's surreal and brilliant."

It is the kind of enduring network that only forms when the foundation is strong. And DESS, for Jimmy, was exactly that; a



foundation built not just on academics, but on character, sport, and shared experience. "I wish I could've done it all over again," he laughs. "It was that good."

After school, sport remained red thread. Jimmy went on to play and coach tennis - eventually in the NCAA Division I system at Florida Atlantic University. Straight out of college, he landed a job working at the ATP tournament in Washington, D.C., which was when something clicked. "That was it," he says. "I fell in love with the idea of making the business of sport my life's work."

That meant tough choices. He left a good job in advertising and went back to university for an MBA in Sport Management. Then, in Dubai in 2008, Jimmy founded Boqin, a company that today delivers youth sports camps, runs professional sporting events and manages major government and private sector sport activations across the region.



His last job before launching Boqin? Approving the Virgin Radio logo and organising its Dubai launch, with Richard Branson in the room!

And yet, like any entrepreneur, his path has not been linear. "COVID wiped the board clean," he says. Plans for a global expansion of a popular Tiebreak Tens tennis tournament needed a rethink, and the business had to rebuild from the ground up. The past five years have been a quiet recovery; slower, steadier and with more focus on persistence and stability. "We're in a good place again," Jimmy says. "Not just professionally, but personally. And that feels like something to be grateful for."

That gratitude comes through clearly when he talks about giving back. Boqin now offers internships for DESS College students, something that would have meant the world to his younger self. "It's not just about sport," he says. "It's about learning how to show up, how to work in a team, how to lead."

Today, Jimmy lives in Dubai with his wife Ellen, their daughter Kayla is in Year 3 at DESS Primary Oud Metha and their son Kaden has just started FS1. And Mum Linda - the same Linda who juggled single motherhood and full-time work while Jimmy was at school, now picks up her grandchildren from the same place she once collected her son.

"It's a full-circle moment," Jimmy says. "She's back doing the school run, just like in the '80s. Except now she gets to enjoy it more."

There is something deeply DESS about Jimmy's journey - not just the loyalty, or the friendships, or the sports, but the way he has combined hard work, quiet faith and a deep sense of connection to turn his life into something meaningful. And generous. And real.

"I've learned that success doesn't always look like a straight line," he says. "But if you're doing what you're built for - and helping others along the way, you're probably heading in the right direction."

## Step into the Story Behind the Change

If you cast your mind back to House stripes on shirts and branded signs at every turn, you'll remember that logos aren't just visuals, they are identity markers. Quiet emblems of the DESS community you belonged to (and still do).

Now, decades on, as we continue to evolve, we have reimagined how that identity looks from the outside in.

## Why change? Why now?

The launch of our new school, DESS Primary Academic City, felt like more than just expansion, it was a moment to remember and reassert who we are, how far we have come, and where we are heading. So, we stepped back, looked at our long-loved logos, and asked: how do we honour the legacy while future-proofing the brand?

The result is a clean, contemporary family of logos and a new name umbrella: Dubai English Speaking Schools, linking the Oud Metha and Academic City primary schools and the College, under one clear identity.

## Still DESS at heart.

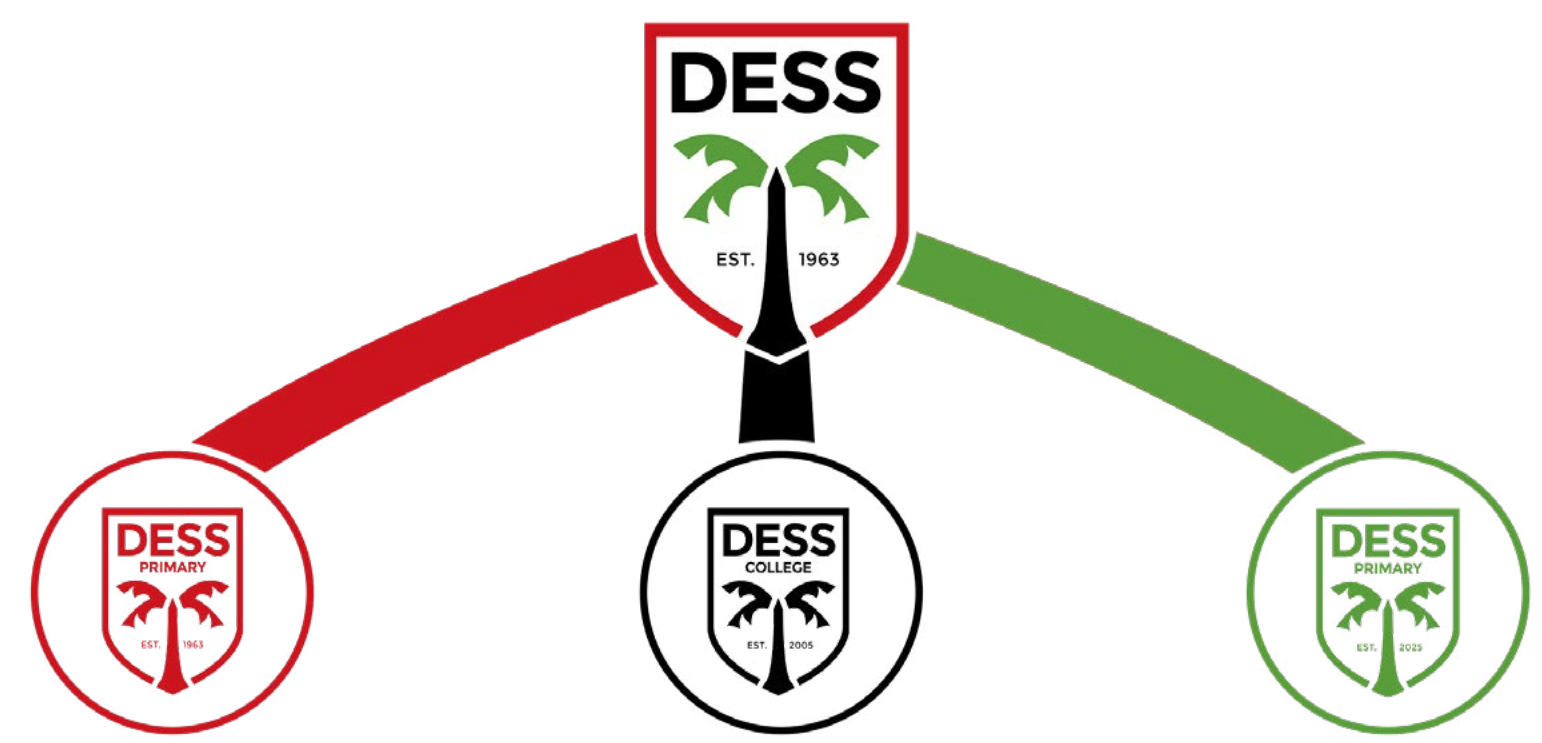
We did not want flashy. We wanted faithful. So, the desert elements remain, the colours nod to our roots and the UAE; the message is unmistakable: this is a modern look for a school community that is always moved forward by looking after its people.

The updated uniform follows the same logic. Practical, comfortable, unifying across campuses and year groups, with details refined through feedback from students, parents and staff. Continuity in spirit, not just style.

## For us, it's personal.

This is not just about aesthetics. It is about clarity, pride and connection. The kind of connection that spans decades, from the very first DESS badge to the new crest worn by today's Foundation Stage One class.

So if you have not seen the new look yet, we think you will recognise it. Not because it looks so similar, but because it feels the same as it always has.





# NO LIMITS

There are still a few things that Marcus Smith has not done.

Though if you exclude reading with his eyes shut, sequencing the human genome and licking his own elbow, there are actually very few.

For instance, what about playing professional rugby and being selected to play in the Dubai rugby World Cup Sevens?

**Done that.**

OK, what about the six-day 250km Marathon Des Sables, then? Billed as the toughest footrace on Earth, it is the equivalent of five and half back-to-back marathons across the Sahara in 50-degree heat. Many starters fail to finish and occasionally, runners die.

**He added that T-shirt to his wardrobe in 2015.**

Well, surely no-one can run 30 full marathons in 30 days – within nine months of being smashed off his bike at 65kph by a truck and left for dead?

**Tick. That was November 2018.**

Ah, but has he ever run on his own without support for 230km through Kenya within a few months of running 195km across the island of 13,000ft of elevation?

**Sure has.**

Aside from the huge physical demands made on him during of a life packed with such astonishing achievements, much of what gets Marcus from the gun to the tape, is mental. He would tell you that he has been driven by curiosity and a deep-seated need to find out where his limits lie.



“IF IT DOESN'T FEEL  
RIGHT, IT JUST CAN'T  
BE RIGHT – SO I DON'T  
DO IT”

He arrived in Dubai with his Mum, Dad and sister Claire in January 1983 and while Claire went straight into DESS, he had to put up with nursery school next door until it was his turn to start – in Reception Yellow with Mrs Baher.

From senior school, Marcus went to Leeds Met University and from there into his first job in sales with Oakley back in Dubai. After a spell on Australia's Gold Coast he seized a chance to return to Dubai to work for Reebok, Addidas and then Nike.

With his professional rugby career behind him, he tried his hand at a marathon - and hated every minute of it! That said, he did not hate it enough to turn down a chance to take part in a 300km single stage ultra-marathon in Oman in 2013!

His first Innerfight gym opened in Al Quoz in 2013 and in 2015 he went to Southern Morocco to tackle the grueling Marathon Des Sables. Since then he has conquered multiple Crossfit and extreme endurance challenges.

Then in 2018 whilst training to set a world record in ultra cycling, he was struck by a truck while on his bike at 65kph, and left for dead on the road.

Having just turned 40 and with extensive injuries that may have rendered any future sport impossible, he clawed his way back to fitness and went in search of an ultimate challenge.

It came in the astonishing shape of a crusade to run 30 marathons of 42.2km each, in 30 days – with the 21st of the 30 coming to a triumphant close back at DESS, where his discipline, resourcefulness and never-say-never approach to life was cultivated.



# SINE OF THE TIMES

Widely respected and admired by all his colleagues and students, Former DESS Primary Oud Metha Deputy Headteacher Arnie Cartwright is remembered particularly fondly by one of his highest profile former maths pupils; Dubai 92 breakfast radio host Nathalie (Nats) Shariat, who invited him and wife Barbara to step back in time when they visited her studio.

After completing DESS and secondary school in Dubai, Nats went to Emerson college in Boston, Massachusetts from which she emerged with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts.

Back in Dubai she got her first break in radio with two 8pm-11pm music shows each week while she was also a TV news reader on Channel 33. After a quick spell back in the USA, she returned to the UAE and Dubai 92 as a news reader. Persuaded to have her own regular daily music show, she was given the station's mid-morning slot, before taking over the noon-4pm show. It was while there that producers and audiences relished Nats' lively handover banter with fellow Dubai 92 presenter Jono; whose show preceded hers. The pair were united in a drivetime show before being switched to the breakfast show where they continue to dominate each morning's airwaves.

"It was really fabulous to see Mr and Mrs Cartwright again and take a trip down memory lane together," said Nats. "Everyone has their own special memories of DESS and while my vivid ones include taking a shine to rounders and country dancing - and dashing from school to grab a traffic light iced lolly from the cart outside the gates, it was Mr Cartright's involvement in my school life and early learning journey that had one of the biggest and most enduring impacts on me both at school and subsequently. He was truly inspirational – not just as an amazing maths teacher but as a fair and supportive, true gentleman."

**“ EVERYONE  
HAS THEIR OWN  
SPECIAL MEMORIES  
OF DESS ”**





# BUILDING HER CASE

## Kaylah Juggles Cheer, Challenge and a Future in the Law

If you had asked Kaylah Skerritt in Year 12 where she saw herself in five years, she might have said law - maybe even becoming a solicitor. What she could not have predicted was sitting in a final interview with two partners, one of whom specialised in corporate law, and finding herself deep in conversation about a topic she first explored at DESS. Years earlier, she had written her Extended Project Qualification on the Corporate Manslaughter Act, inspired by the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Now, that same research formed the basis of a lively discussion - one that stood out, and helped her connect with someone who knew the field inside out.

Now freshly accepted into a prominent global law firm's Paralegal Academy based in the north of England, Kaylah is taking a big step toward her long-term goal of becoming a solicitor. And while her university years shaped her in many ways, she is quick to point out that the journey really began at DESS.

"I was a student prefect, on the student council, and captain of the netball team. I didn't realise it at the time, but those leadership roles taught me how to handle pressure, speak up, and take responsibility. That foundation gave me confidence - not just in school, but later in life."

At university, she tested that confidence. Joining the cheerleading squad on a whim in her second year, she had no experience and no background in the sport, but she went for it. She made captain straight away and was coach in her third year.

"It became a huge part of my life," she says. "It pushed me, and it gave me a community. Managing that team alongside a law degree was hard, but it taught me how to lead and stay grounded."



There was also work - actual work. Not internships or CV-fillers, but shifts in a busy restaurant, balancing coursework with customers. By the end, she had been promoted to floor supervisor, overseeing the whole team.

"That job probably taught me as much as some of my modules," she laughs. "Time management, keeping calm under pressure, juggling responsibilities - all of that has helped me just as much as my academic training."

And then there was the law society; a space to engage with legal ideas beyond the lecture hall and connect with people on the same path. It gave her a taste of what the field looked like in the real world; collaborative, fast-moving, competitive. And she wanted in.

Now, standing at the edge of that world, Kaylah says the path has not been a straight line. But it has been hers.

"There's this idea that success is all about big milestones," she says. "But honestly? It's the small things. Showing up. Saying yes to something new. Learning to trust your own process."

And as for DESS? She says it gave her more than a great education.

"It gave me the courage to raise my hand. To put myself forward. To try. And I've carried that with me ever since."



“DESS GAVE ME THE COURAGE TO RAISE MY HAND. TO PUT MYSELF FORWARD. TO TRY. AND I’VE CARRIED THAT WITH ME EVER SINCE”



## Why Entrepreneurship Is the Boldest Move a DESS Alumnus can make

Let's face it, there is no map for a road that hasn't been built yet.

That's what makes entrepreneurship both terrifying and exhilarating for DESS alumni stepping out of the familiar rhythm of school or college into the wild freedom of business creation. No timetables, no syllabus - just you, your idea and the world.

But why do some graduates sprint toward the uncertainty of startups while others pursue more conventional careers? And for those with even a flicker of entrepreneurial interest, how do you know whether to indulge it?

This edition of DESS Connect takes a look at what it really means to follow the founder's path.

## What Makes an Entrepreneur? (Spoiler: It is Not Just Ideas)

There is a romanticism around entrepreneurship: the 3.00 a.m. brainstorm that becomes a billion-dollar app, the lone founder against the odds. But behind the myth is a more nuanced truth.

Great entrepreneurs are not just Branson-style 'idea people'. They are problem solvers. Pattern recognisers. Relentless executors. They think like scientists, not gamblers; testing hypotheses, analysing feedback, pivoting constantly.

What matters more than the brilliance of the idea is the clarity of purpose and the tenacity to pursue it. The best founders don't wait to feel ready. They start before the fear wears off.

## The First Challenges: Identity, Isolation and Imperfection

The initial transition from school to business owner is jarring. You go from structured routines and academic validation to a wide-open playing field; where you are the structure.

- You will not have all the answers. But you will need to make decisions anyway.
- Your ego will take hits. Learning to hear 'no' without crumbling is essential.
- You might feel alone. Especially if peers are landing stable roles in consulting, finance or law while you are pitching potential backers with a shaky prototype.

And yet, this phase is also deeply rewarding, because growth is unfiltered and rapid. You are not just building a business. You're building resilience.

## When it is the Right Path, and When It Isn't

Entrepreneurship is not a shortcut to success. Nor is it a prerequisite for impact. The world needs ambitious intrapreneurs as much as entrepreneurs; leaders who drive change within existing organisations.

So how do you know if this path is for you?

- You thrive in ambiguity. If uncertainty excites you more than it paralyses you, that is a signal.
- You spot problems everywhere and cannot help dreaming up fixes.
- You are ready to fail forward. Mistakes do not scare you but inertia does.

If you are more drawn to structure, mentorship and honing craft within a larger system first, that is just as valid. You can always pivot later. Entrepreneurship does not expire.

## The DESS Edge: Global Mindsets, Local Insight

As DESS alumni, you are already operating with a unique advantage: a global outlook grounded in the multicultural dynamism of the UAE. You have likely been exposed to diverse perspectives, rapid innovation and a startup culture that's rapidly maturing - particularly in sectors like fintech, sustainability, logistics and education.

You are also part of a growing alumni network of builders, dreamers and mentors. Leverage that.

## A Call to the Bold — and the Seasoned

To those alumni still debating whether to leap: the first step is not quitting your job. It is testing your thesis. Talk to customers. Sketch a prototype. Start small.

And to those who have already walked this road: share it. Mentorship can be a lifeline to a new founder. Let's not just celebrate success, let's open-source it.

The future does not build itself. Entrepreneurs do. Whether you are just graduating or a decade into your career, if the itch to create will not leave you alone, pay attention.

Because maybe, just maybe, it is your time to leap.



# DESS CONNECT



Dubai  
English  
Speaking  
Schools