

Elite schools find new base in Emirates

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When Shaikha al-Falasi was filling out university applications last year, she was torn between a desire to challenge herself at a competitive school in the United States or stay close to her family in her native United Arab Emirates.

When New York University's Abu Dhabi campus opened its doors in 2010, she was determined to enroll.

"I am a girl and there are some cultural restrictions that come with the idea of studying abroad, although my family was supportive of me doing it," said Ms. Falasi, now 18, who entered N.Y.U. at the age of 17. "Why would I go abroad, if I can get the same degree, with the same access to quality, here?"

After talks with potential investors in 2008 — and a \$50 million gift made by Omar Saif Ghobash, an Emirati donor — N.Y.U. opened its first full-size campus outside the United States in the autumn of 2010.

Paris-Sorbonne University; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania; and Insead, a business school based in France, have also set up branches in the Emirates in the past few years. Foreign schools face challenges and growing pains, however, in a region where entry requirements for local universities may not be as stringent as those for top schools like N.Y.U. or the Sorbonne.

To encourage local residents without relaxing admission standards, the universities have asked promising Emirati and Qatari students who do not meet qualifications to complete "academic bridge" programs, which often mean an extra year of study after high school.

"The government is putting effort to reform the high school system and improve student skills — we did have students who were not able to stay on board or were asked to do a year of extra training before attending," said Jean-Yves de Cara, executive director of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi. "We cannot change our high standards and risk the reputation of our institution."

Foreign academic institutions, seeded with local government money, have drawn wide interest.

According to N.Y.U., 43,000 students applied to the university last year, 15,489 of whom expressed interest in studying at the Abu Dhabi campus, which offered only 150 spots in 2012. Students come from more than 70 countries, while professors are from N.Y.U.'s New York campus, as well as Harvard, Stanford and the Paris School of Economics.

N.Y.U.'s initial success has led to other plans. A bigger campus on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi is expected to be ready in 2014 and should accommodate as many as 2,200 undergraduate and 600 graduate students. Meanwhile the university plans a second "portal campus" in Shanghai in 2013.

"We knew there was a thirst for a different kind of global education, but were still surprised by the numbers," said Josh Taylor, assistant vice chancellor of N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi. "Initially, N.Y.U. just wanted to set up an exchange program in the Mideast, but it was clearly the right move to establish a full-blown campus."

Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, which is fully funded by the Abu Dhabi government, officially opened in February 2011, although classes have been held since December 2009. The French-language university has 650 humanities students from 64 nationalities.

Its curriculum has been designed to meet local needs. For example, art history and museum studies classes could prepare students for jobs at Abu Dhabi branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim museums, which are expected to open in 2013 and 2014.

"They are opening museums and exhibitions, eager to be involved in the art market, and people need training to navigate this market," said Dr. de Cara of the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi. "These programs are not necessarily ones we have in Paris, but often specially customized for the needs of the country."

Law degrees are also proving popular, since the local legal tradition is derived from French civil code, while tourism is widely chosen as a concentration for business majors.

The universities are also contributing to much-needed original research on the Middle East, which education experts say can be patchy and outdated. The N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi Institute is spending \$35 million on research into Middle Eastern issues. Wharton Abu Dhabi, an office that opened in early 2010, is supervising 30 research projects funded by the CERT Foundation, the entrepreneurial arm of the Higher Colleges of Technology in Abu Dhabi.

"Our goal is to create and disseminate knowledge in the region and the best way to do that was to set up an office in the Mideast," said Pankaj Paul, regional manager for Wharton's U.A.E. office, the business school's sole presence outside the United States.

In 2001, Qatar built a large complex called Education City on the outskirts of Doha, which is now home to the branch campuses of six universities from the United States, plus one each from Britain and France. Last year, École des Hautes Études Commerciales de Paris and University College London opened there, joining schools like Georgetown and Carnegie Mellon.

Journalism courses from Northwestern University in Illinois are available at its Education City branch, which will graduate its first senior class of 36 students this May. Students enjoy small class sizes, with a total of 140 students learning from visiting faculty members.

"We designed a program based on American know-how and calibrated it to the needs of the country and the region," said Everette Dennis, dean and chief executive officer of Northwestern University Qatar. "Our aim is to educate and train people who could be a part of any global media work force."

He added that a challenge in designing a media and communications curriculum is doing so in a region where freedom of expression can be curtailed.

"There are thriving media enterprises in the region, but the public perception of media is slower to catch up," Mr. Dennis said. "Changes are happening, however, that are encouraging."

At Northwestern University Qatar, 36 percent of the student population is comprised of Qatari nationals, many of whom joined after completing an academic bridge program. Similarly, 33 percent of students at the Sorbonne's local branch are Emirati.

"There is no quota to fill or anything like that, but there is a strong urge to have a substantial number of Qataris, given that Qatar brought us here," Mr. Dennis said. "But they have to fulfill the same academic requirements as students at our American campus, so the academic bridge program is a good way to help them prepare for rigorous study while allowing us to maintain our high standards."

Not all attempts to establish foreign university offshoots have been successful. Michigan State University, which opened a branch in Dubai in 2008, shut down in 2010 after two years and millions of dollars in losses.

That case had mostly to do with funding difficulties, according to local newspaper reports. The governments of Abu Dhabi and Qatar are trying to avoid that problem by heavily funding their initiatives for increasing research and improving the quality of the teaching staffs.

Education analysts say there are benefits for the universities as well.

"Setting up campuses in Abu Dhabi and Qatar gives such foreign institutions the opportunity to test new models of education in developing markets and ultimately, to bring back lessons about education and development paradigms to the parent organization," said Mark Juszczak, director of curriculum development at Ebtikarat Education, a Saudi education development company.

"The institutions that already exist in Abu Dhabi are still in growth phase in terms of student capacity and research plans," said Jihad Mohaidat, division manager of global partnerships at the Abu Dhabi Education Council. "The budget for education has increased every year so far." And with it, student applications continue to rise.

"We get many of the same professors that they do in the main N.Y.U. branch, and here, the professors even live in the same buildings as we do, so we bump into them at dinner and interact with them a lot more," Ms. Falasi said. "It's such a benefit for us."

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 27 Mar. 2012, International, On-line.