



Middle East and Africa Business Intelligence

Gulf State Branch Campuses: The Implications for Global Student Recruitment Strategies in the Local Environment

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As one of the more overt symbols of a perceived movement toward the Westernization--indeed the Americanization-- of the Gulf tertiary system, incoming New York University-Abu Dhabi (opening fall 2010) has naturally drawn comparison to the six American degree-granting branch campuses presently operating in Doha's Education City. At first glance, the terms of agreement established by the government of Abu Dhabi and Qatar Foundation appear similar: both projects are comprehensively funded and concede full autonomy in decision-making to the universities. Standards of admission are ostensibly maintained and, thereafter, completion of the requisite curriculum is followed by the provision of degrees that are indistinguishable from those awarded at the home campus. The effort to enroll students in adequate numbers, however, reveals a significant divergence in strategy. These differences will carry major implications for NYUAD's integration into the social fabric of Abu Dhabi.

Qatar Foundation and the Enrollment of Qatari Students:

Qatar—much like the other Gulf Cooperation Council States—has long-struggled with a central dilemma: how should the diversification of the local economy optimally proceed if it is necessarily accompanied by an influx of both skilled and unskilled expatriate (non-national) labor. By 1975, just four years after independence from Britain, 98,000 of Qatar's population of 158,000 were migrant workers and South Asian laborers outnumbered Arabs by a margin of three to one. Education policy has largely been driven by a desire to legitimately qualify the national population for work in the growing mixed and private sectors and, in so doing, contribute to at least the partial reversal of this demographic imbalance.

In accordance with this goal, Qatar Foundation has established explicit targets for the number of Qataris each of the six universities in Education City should aim to enroll. At present, Qataris make up 46% of a student population that, in any case, is not very large (the classes of 2009 totaled around 200 graduates). Qatar Foundation would like to see these numbers increase. Their strategy to counteract low enrollment has been multifaceted but mostly local in focus. Since 2001, Education City has played home to the Academic Bridge Program (ABP). The ABP provides up to two years of preparatory work for students hoping to qualify for otherwise unattainable Education City admission. To similar ends, Texas A&M-Qatar (TAMUQ) has developed the Aggie Opportunity Program, a foundational scheme that sets standards for provisional acceptance and effectively increases the number of Qatari students TAMUQ admits. Seven of nine Qataris enrolled in the AOP in the 2006-2007 academic year were later welcomed as full-time students. And lastly there is outreach to potential applicants. Importantly, this effort has been directed at the GCC States, if not Qatar. Georgetown University School of Foreign Services in Qatar (SFS-Q), for example, made more than 30 visits to Qatari high schools during a five-month span in 2007.

NYUAD's Divergent Strategy

In working toward an eventual (and much more ambitious) goal of 2,000 undergraduates, NYUAD has taken a separate approach. The Abu Dhabi government has not made the enrollment of a desired number of Emiratis explicit policy and University President John Sexton believes that UAE nationals will likely become only a tiny percentage of the student population. As such, there is no foundation year program. Instead, Sexton and NYUAD have ramped up admissions requirements and dubbed the Abu Dhabi venture NYU's "honors college." The "global education" offered at NYUAD will attractively combine with unparalleled financial aid packages and international students who would otherwise attend the Ivies (or else NYU's Washington Square campus) will opt for freshman orientation Gulf-style. An estimated 40 to 50% of the student body will be made up of Americans. And to help fill the rolls, school counselors from the world's most elite secondary schools are being encouraged to nominate two students for possible admission. Recruitment events are taking place in every continent bar Antarctica.

Potential Challenges to this Strategy

Simply put, to approach their enrollment goals in Abu Dhabi, an elite university such as NYU will have to appeal to expatriates. This is certainly in line with NYU's hopes for an enhanced international profile but it is a noticeable departure from Abu Dhabi's historically ambivalent stance toward its non-national demographic. Relative to Dubai (already the most diverse of the six neighboring shaikhdom's a decade into the 1900s) Abu Dhabi has leaned on smaller influxes of culturally similar Arab and Pakistani workers. A more cautious approach to the diversification of the local economy has been

enabled by Abu Dhabi's massive oil reserves, over 90% of the UAE's total supply. Former UAE President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan is on record as saying that a majority expatriate population would continue to pose, "a grave problem which threatens the stability of our society and the prospects for future generations."

Indeed, these anxieties are reflected in present-day Abu Dhabi as well as in the development of the local tertiary education structure. The government declared 2008 "The Year of National Identity," and apart from the selective pairing with two elite branch campuses (Paris Sorbonne University-Abu Dhabi being the other), it has only allowed powerful indigenous families to open its private universities. Prominent examples of this include ALHOSN University (established 2005 with the university slogan, "Global Knowledge with Local Vision") and Abu Dhabi University (established 2003, "Universal Knowledge, Timeless Truth"). Admissions standards for these universities are relatively low, with the end result being that Emiratis are able to enroll locally in large numbers.

Gulf Branch Campuses and Links to the Local Environment:

If NYUAD succeeds it will assuredly become the premier tertiary institution in the Gulf region. Yet in its present form, NYUAD's enrollment strategy is likely to inspire dynamic tension between the availability of world-class education-- comprehensively funded by the Emirate-- and its relative inaccessibility to the local population.

Questions about Education City's interconnection with the rest of Qatari society are common. Its officials and academic administrators have been sensitive to charges of elitism and isolation, and particularly so when coupled with an expressed concern that Qatar University-- the institution representing over 90% of Qataris in tertiary education-- is being forgotten. Qatar Foundation has attempted to counter these accusations with demonstrable links between the branch campuses, the local business community and the national university. One of the major benefits of Education City is understood to be the ready supply of experts at the disposal of Qatar University faculty. In short, Education City acts as a long-term, local consultancy and the SFS-Q assisted establishment of an International Affairs program at Qatar University serves as a prominent example of the benefits of that relationship.

NYUAD is already making comparable inroads. In 2008 it inaugurated its Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed University Scholars Program with collaboration from the Abu Dhabi Education Council. The Scholars program identifies a handful of the most talented upper-year students from the UAE's national universities who then participate in select academic and leadership programming provided by NYU. Given the projected enrollment aims of NYUAD, and also some of the cultural unease that pervades a demographically imbalanced Abu Dhabi, reaching out and expanding tangible links to the community and its existing universities will be of paramount importance.