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Different Emirates, Different Models: Creating Global Institutions in the Gulf States

By Spencer Witte

We can bring people from Syria, from Pakistan, from Iran, from everywhere to give them an American education. It's the American global dream that can only happen in Dubai because it's such a global city.

Abdullah Al Karam, Former Chief Executive Officer, Dubai Knowledge Village (Bardsley, "Tuition fees checked by universities' expansion," 2008)

The concern is the quality and many people look at education as a business... In the end we will be left with only the good institutions— you can't compare institutions like the Sorbonne and NYU with the others.

Abdullah al-Khanbashi, Vice Chancellor, United Arab Emirates University (personal communication, September 21, 2008)

Currently, the education system of the United Arab Emirates consists of more than 60 public and private colleges and universities intended to meet the needs of just over 5 million people. Almost all of its systemic expansion has taken place in the last decade, and much more expansion has been promised. For example, Warren Fox, director of higher education at the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), has recommended quadrupling the number of graduates from Dubai's private universities in the next ten years (Mills, "Emirates look to the West for prestige," 2008). The Emirate of Abu Dhabi has pursued ambitious partnerships with the likes of Paris-Sorbonne University and New York University. The Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, while smaller and shorter on resources, announced a \$1 billion scheme for the development of its own free zone for education. If this plan is carried out, it will involve as many as 15 foreign institutions and accommodate 38,000 students (Bardsley, "Economy needs more graduates," 2008). And, according to the 2007 strategic plan produced by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR), public institutions can expect an additional 20,000 Emirati enrollments by 2020 (UAE MOHESR, 2007).

This chapter seeks to contextualize the arrival and proliferation of foreign degree-granting branch campuses in this complex and dynamic policy environment. It would be a

mistake, however, to examine the UAE tertiary system in the aggregate. The emirates are separate entities pursuing largely separate higher education strategies. To demonstrate this crucial point, special attention will be given to recent agreements linking two of America's strongest universities with the two largest emirates, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. There is much to learn from each case. Michigan State University-Dubai (MSU-Dubai) is largely vocational in emphasis and is operating on a self-sustaining financial model. New York University-Abu Dhabi (NYU Abu Dhabi) will be a full liberal arts research university when it opens in fall 2010. It will draw on comprehensive federal funding toward its goal of enrolling more than 2,000 students.

The terms of each arrangement are highly revelatory of the divergent economic and social aims of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Branch campuses are an important window into understanding the dispositions of each emirate toward their respective expatriate populations. The speed with which tertiary institutions are being introduced—as well as the range of degrees on offer—is also suggestive. It mirrors the historical disparities in the pace and nature of development between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. And lastly, their choice in partnership models reflects different economic and social priorities arising from incongruent levels of wealth.

Before weighing the recent histories of the two emirates against their present-day higher education strategies, it is necessary to briefly examine the challenges that the UAE has faced in its provision of public higher education. Autonomy at the level of the individual emirates allows for policy responses that are consistent with the respective histories of Dubai and Abu Dhabi and, typically, inconsistent with one another.

Challenges to Public Higher Education Provision

The UAE's public tertiary institutions consist of the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU; founded in 1977), the more vocationally oriented Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT; 16 campuses, the first of which was founded in 1988), and Zayed University (ZU; initially founded as a women's-only university in 1998). From the start, the UAE's public higher education system adopted a Western orientation (Peck, 1986, p. 76), and this has only become more noticeable over time. Zayed's curriculum was designed to conform closely to the U.S. model (Halloran, 1999, p. 330) and it recently received accreditation from an American agency.¹ UAEU is also pursuing American accreditation (Mills, "Emirates look to the West for prestige," 2008). Expatriates predominate in the education ministries and also occupy key administrative positions within the public tertiary institutions.² Today, 35,000 students are spread between UAEU, HCT and ZU (UAE MOHESR, 2007, p. 12).

Despite growing enrollment, federal spending on higher education remained dangerously stagnant until very recently. ZU, for instance, experienced a 52 percent increase in students over a six-year period, but nonetheless worked with a fixed budget in that time (UAE National Media Council, 2009, p. 229). Even with considerable concurrent nominal GDP growth, public expenditure on education as a percentage of UAE GDP stood at just 1.6 percent in 2002 (World Bank, 2008, p. 312).³ However belated, an infusion of federal money and a reworked funding formula that adjusts institutional budgets according to student numbers was welcome news for the public tertiary system in the 2009–2010 academic year.

There can be little doubt that the UAE public tertiary system remains overburdened. Emirati nationals are promised free schooling through the university level, and the maintenance of separate gender segregated facilities in public institutions adds substantially to costs (Bristol-Ryhs, 2008, p. 101). A 2007 government memo estimated that as many as 3,000 qualified applicants to the HCT had to be turned away because of concerns over inadequate space and diminished quality (Davidson, 2008a, p. 208). There is also a widely held view that the public system has underperformed, creating neither value-added research nor needed links to the private sector. Walters, Kadragic, and Walters conclude succinctly, "...the typical 'tier II' university in the United States has more patents issued to its faculty in a year than do all citizens and residents of the UAE combined" (2006, p. 4).

In part because of the traditional availability of public-sector jobs and also the potential for steady revenue through the *kafil* system, Emirati men are underrepresented in higher education. The *kafil* system mandates that at least 51 percent of all UAE-based companies be nationally owned. This arrangement makes it possible for a national partner, or sponsor, to earn a lucrative sum by simply signing on to a foreign-based business venture. In 2003 over half of all male students who were approved for admission to federal universities failed to show up for registration, and men overall make up just 28 percent of enrollment in public higher education (Fox, 2008, p. 120–121).

Male graduates are entering the job market underqualified and with unrealistic expectations for employment. The public sector has reached a point of saturation and simply can no longer accommodate these graduates. More than 19,000 nationals are projected to enter the job market in 2010. Considering that Tanmia, a federal organization responsible for assisting Emiratis toward occupational placement, was only able to place just over 12 percent of its 6,563 job-seekers in 2003, this number becomes especially daunting (Nicks-McCaleb, 2005, p. 327).

In marked contrast, the UAE's private sector has shown considerable recent growth, accounting for 52.1 percent of available jobs. Emiratis make up between 15 and 20 percent of the total population, but just 13,000 out of 3 million total workers in the private sector. It is estimated that by 2020, Emiratis will make up less than 4 percent of the total workforce (UAE National Media Council, 2009, p. 210). To help redress this imbalance, the UAE has enacted long-running labor nationalization policies, often collectively called "Emiratization." But estimates suggest that expatriates now willingly assume salaries 135 percent lower than similarly qualified nationals (Davidson, 2008a, p. 207). Although Emiratization policies continue, to date, they have largely failed. Expatriates are widely presumed to be better trained, harder working, more cost effective and also more easily fired.

At the emirate level, policymakers have demonstrated a clear desire to better direct their own educational policies even as a coordinated strategic planning at the federal level is taking form. In 2005, Dubai and Abu Dhabi created separate education policymaking bodies, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) and the Dubai Education Council (DEC). The initiatives of the latter have since been subsumed by the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). Disparate emirate-level strategies make establishing a consistent and

effective federal policy even more challenging. We now turn our attention to the level of the individual emirates.

The complete text will be available in the printed volume.

¹ Zayed University received accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education—America’s accrediting agencies are also increasingly active abroad.

² Wyatt Hume, former provost of the University of California system, has been tagged as the new provost of UAEU. Daniel Johnson, former president emeritus of the University of Toledo, was recently appointed provost of Zayed University.

³ Kuwait spent 7.1 percent in the same year.