

USC CENTER ON
PublicDiplomacy

*A Partnership of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and the
USC College of Letters, Arts & Sciences' School of International Relations*

Education: An American Growth Industry in the Arab World

By Gordon Robison

**Senior Fellow
USC Annenberg School of Communication**

July, 2005

**A Project of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy
Middle East Media Project**

**USC Center on Public Diplomacy
3502 Watt Way, Suite 103
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281
www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org**

Education: An American Growth Industry in the Arab World

By Gordon R. Robison
Senior Fellow, USC Center on Public Diplomacy
Director, Middle East Media Project

Education City, on the outskirts of the Qatari capital, Doha, is not a university campus in the conventional sense of the term. The complex consists of enormous individual buildings standing alone in the desert, separated by acres of sand and rocks. Walking from one building to another (which hardly anyone does because of the crippling heat and humidity that descend on the Persian Gulf region for much of the year) would take 15 or 20 minutes at a minimum.

Approached from an air-conditioned car it seems a bleak place. And yet, Education City is a model of innovation, an academic complex that plausibly claims to be unique in the world. The individual buildings are satellite campuses of prestigious American colleges and universities. Virginia Commonwealth University is here, as are Texas A&M and Georgetown. Near the center of the complex sits a huge white structure shared by Cornell's medical school and, until their own building is ready to go, Carnegie Mellon University.

These institutions are not operating study-abroad programs in this desolate corner of the Gulf. The buildings in the desert are actual satellite campuses of the American schools in question. They teach the same curriculum. They offer the same degrees.

In a telephone interview from his office in Doha, Dr. Daniel Alonso, dean of the Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, praised Education City's backer, the Qatar Foundation which, he said, "has brought these branches of these institutions and agreed to let them function as they would in America."

Weill Cornell, he said, is "totally comfortable" in its ability to teach as it wants and to select its own faculty and students."

"All the resources come from the Qatar Foundation. We had serious concerns about reputational risk and, obviously, we had to know how the project would be financed," Alonso said. In fact, the Qataris pick up all of the bills.

"We have been able to do exactly what we planned to do. In spite of the distance, the different culture, we have succeeded, and that's quite remarkable. There were a lot of skeptics, including on our board."

Education City and Weill Cornell are but one example of a new trend in the Arab World: the growth in popularity of American-branded education.

This can take a number of forms: There are actual overseas campuses of U.S. institutions, as in Qatar. In other places one finds an ever-growing number of joint-degree, partnership and student-exchange programs. Some local institutions have signed contracts under which a U.S. school provides management, administrative and consultative services. Finally, there are schools of widely varying quality and reputation whose first, and most powerful, marketing tool, is having the word "American" in their name.

Until recently this particular niche in the Middle East's educational market was dominated by two schools: The American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo. Founded in 1866 and 1919 respectively, these have long been the schools of choice for the region's elite, offering a style of education unobtainable elsewhere in the Arab world.

AUB's provost, Peter Heath, says his school regards itself as an international university, and sees three different kinds of challenges as it competes for students. "In terms of academic quality, the main competition is for those top 5 or 10 students in a class in an international school, or in an English-language school, or a French-language school... who prefer to go to MIT or Tufts or the Sorbonne as opposed to coming to AUB."

Then, he says, there "is the local competition in each region that offers a respectable measure of academic quality... AUC is a fine university. We consider them friends and rivals, but there's a lot of respect. Our goal would be to say, can we go to Egypt and get, not the students that AUC gets, but get a good measure of them? Have them regard AUB in the same way that they might regard Tufts?"

"The third market, and this is the market that really involves a lot of the up-and-coming places, is thinking about how better to educate the parents about the distinctions: that not every four-year college that has the word 'American' in its title is the same thing. And, that's a much more long-term process."

Asked which of the region's new universities most closely resembles the longer-established institutions, Heath cites the American University of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates.

Indeed, AUS is, in its own way, as ambitious a project as Qatar's Education City. Founded in 1997 by the Emir of Sharjah (who holds a doctorate from the UK's Exeter University and styles himself "Sheikh Dr. Sultan Al-Qasaimi"), AUS is an attempt to build an international university at high speed from the ground up.

After initially soliciting AUB's help with planning and curriculum development, the emir "for whatever reason, after a relatively short period of time... decided to turn to an institution in the United States to assist in the project," according to AUS's chancellor, Winfred Thompson.

American University in Washington, D.C., eventually became AUS's "partner institution," with a five-year contract (recently renewed) to recruit senior administrative staff and set up both financial and IT systems for the new school. Under the arrangement Thompson (who spent 13 years as president of the University of Central Arkansas before joining AUS), the vice chancellor for academic affairs and "some, though not all, of the deans" are actually employees of American University in Washington, not of AUS.

AUS opened its doors in late 1997 with 287 students but has grown rapidly. It now has approximately 4,000 students enrolled in a college of arts and sciences; in schools of engineering and business management; and a school of architecture and design.

About half of the AUS faculty comes from the United States. "When I took the job probably my gravest concern about the prospect for success was would we be able to recruit faculty members. It has not been as difficult as I thought it would be," Thompson

said. "In the early years we tended to look at faculty members who had experience teaching because it was a new institution.... Now, we're beginning to look more at people who are coming fresh out of graduate school, and we have a significant number of those who will be coming to the campus in the fall."

AUS has striven to create a campus atmosphere similar to that of a school in the United States. Sharjah's climate is just as harsh as Qatar's, but at least AUS's buildings are close enough together that one can walk from one place to another. While many students commute to campus, a large number also live in university dormitories.

Education City and AUS also operate on very different financial models.

While the institutions in Qatar are fully funded by the Qatari government, AUS has a more complex business model. Thompson says AUS "really doesn't have a clear comparison with either a public or a private institution in the United States in that the funds for its establishment were provided by the ruler of Sharjah, or the government of Sharjah. All of the buildings were constructed with funds from the government of Sharjah. And yet it is independent in the sense that our operating budget is not part of the budget of the government of Sharjah. We do not go through any approvals of any governmental agencies in Sharjah for our operating budgets. We operate, in that regard, very much like a private university in the United States."

How this will work over the long term is less certain. "As a part of the establishment it was agreed that the ruler would provide utilities and grounds maintenance for the first 15 years of the institution's life.... But, for our operating expenses we are dependent on tuition and fees. At this point we do not have a significant endowment. We have approximately \$1 million endowment, but, obviously, that's too small an amount to produce a significant amount of money for operating income. And we really have not, at this point, undertaken any kind of significant fundraising efforts. That's something we're beginning to look at now as an area of focus in the future."

Several hundred miles to the north, the American University in Kuwait is an example of yet another approach to institution building. Housed for the moment in a modest

compound near the center of Kuwait City, the school opened its doors only last fall, taking in an initial class of 520 students (the eventual goal is to have 2,000).

AUK operates without government support, according to its president, Shafeeq Ghabra, receiving funding instead from several large Kuwaiti industrial companies. This makes it, technically, a for-profit venture, though Ghabra stresses that the university's stakeholders see their investment more as a long-term one in Kuwaiti society than as something that will yield a direct financial return.

"It's not for-profit and it's not non-profit. It's somewhere in the middle," Ghabra said. "Everything that AUK is making is going back to AUK, and that will be the case for a long time to come." He cites faculty hiring requirements (adding around 20 per year for the foreseeable future) as well as the cost of the custom-built campus now under construction on the city's outskirts. "That will run into many millions. And, therefore, I don't foresee how we will be able to profit. So, whatever AUK makes, AUK will have to be dependent on a lot of loans and a good financial plan in order to succeed."

Heath and Thompson both cited AUK along with the American University of Dubai as examples of for-profit schools of which prospective parents and students should be wary. Ghabra heatedly rejects that criticism. Whether this is the first sign of a developing regional rivalry, or of worthy academic criticism, is open to interpretation.

"Our faculty are full time.... More than 96, 97, 98 percent are full time. They are American-hired. They are mostly Americans--hired in the states. PhD holders, except intensive English where the requirement is an MA degree."

AUK, he notes, also has a memorandum of understanding with Dartmouth under which the Ivy League school advises AUK on the institution-building process and is represented on faculty hiring committees.

"You can declare yourself a non-profit organization and be in deficit for millions and cut the benefits for half of your faculty, if not all of your faculty, and end up lowering the standards in order to recoup what you have lost financially. This institution is managed

properly, is managed on good financial standing, is able to get the financial support it needs," Ghabra said.ⁱ

These different models raise the question of what, exactly, it means to be an "American" university. As AUK's fact sheet for prospective parents notes, there is a widespread misperception in the region that the various "American" educational institutions are all branch campuses of a single U.S.-based entity.

Moreover, it seems strange that at this moment when, throughout the Arab world, all things American are "toxic" (to use Thomas Freidman's phrase), education appears to be the exception that proves the rule.

"That's the great irony in the situation," Thompson said. "And the further aspect of that is that, insofar as I can tell, there's very little spillover of that negative attitude toward much of what the United States has come to represent in the Arab World in the educational environment. It is as though the educational system exists in a kind of protected bubble from the very negative attitudes that many people in the Arab world have come to have toward what the United States seems to them to represent nowadays."

Ghabra can, perhaps, speak with special authority on this score. Unlike Heath or Thompson he is a Gulf Arab – a Kuwaiti political scientist with a BA from Georgetown, an MA from Purdue and a PhD from the University of Texas at Austin. "American education was never unpopular in the Arab World," he notes. "American education has been kind of differentiated from American policy in the region. People have sought American education and criticized American policy."

To be an "American" university, he continued, "basically means utilizing the practices of American higher education in your educational strategy, in your educational system. It means instruction in English, it means a curriculum that is based on textbooks that are mostly in common use in American colleges, it means looking at general education requirements in models that exist in the American educational system. It means looking at business or anthropology or sociology or English literature or marketing also within models that exist in the American style of education. It means curriculum in the classroom is similar to ways of teaching and methods of teaching and instruction

practiced in the U.S. by some of the best universities and colleges. It also means setting up a support system: a library, an IT center, and the whole sense of a community and extra-curricular activities similar to what you see in American campuses."

Ultimately it also probably means some form of U.S. accreditation. "I was quite surprised when I first came here the number of parents who came to me immediately to enquire about the accreditation status of the institution. I had not fully realized that that was the standard on which they were judging whether or not an institution was truly an American institution," Thompson, of AUS, said.

AUB (chartered in New York), AUC and AUS (both licensed by Delaware) are all accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Ghabra says that AUK, barely a year old, has also begun the process of applying for U.S. accreditation.

Alonso, at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, cites the "extraordinary quality" of U.S. education as the core of its appeal in the region. There is, he said, a "huge difference" between what an American system offers when compared to most of the rest of the region, and in choosing foreign partners "the leadership wants to be totally assured of quality."

Indeed, government control, overstretched infrastructure and rote learning remain the dominant image of many of the Arab world's older universities. "It has been the failure of the state institutions for funding reasons, for political reasons, for structural reasons that has led to the beginnings of all these private schools," Heath said.

This means that for the new "American" institutions in the Gulf, the challenge will be to build their reputations while maintaining and improving the quality of the educational experience they can offer. It also requires that the better institutions find ways to distinguish themselves from lesser ones.

Heath, representing the region's oldest "American" educational institution, offered some general criteria: "a concern for liberal arts," at least 65 percent of the faculty being full-time employees, some level of extra-curricular life, "so that you're educating the whole

student....When they do that, then, even if they are not very good academically, they have my respect. Because they're on the right path."

Thompson, at AUS, spoke of the difficulties of building a new university from the ground up: He pointed to "large numbers of people coming over a very short period of time into an institution with no kind of established institutional standards, culture, traditions. And the necessity to develop in fairly short order a kind of institutional identity which everyone can work with is probably the biggest challenge I've had of all," he said.

In the final analysis, it may simply be too early to say which of the region's new institutions will succeed and prosper academically. AUB and AUC aside, many of the region's "American" institutions of higher education are still less than a decade old.

"In 1866, if somebody had said that, in 140 years, AUB will be this, nobody would have predicted it," Heath noted. "So one has to be critical of these new institutions, but one shouldn't be dismissive. Who knows what they'll be like in 100 years? It's not bad that they're around, and, in general, competition is good."

END

ⁱ The American University in Dubai is a branch of the for-profit American International University. Officials at AUD did not reply to any of several requests for an interview.

* * *

Gordon Robison, Senior Fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication, is based in Amman, Jordan where he writes regularly for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.

About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?