

## Getting a foreign education

By **Otto Pohl** International Herald Tribune  
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### Qatar opens up by importing universities

**DOHA, Qatar** Qatar may seem an odd country to be leading education reform in the Gulf region. The country's ruler, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, tolerates no political dissent, and many areas of public life remain off-limits to debate.

Yet Doha has become home to one of the boldest experiments in higher education in the world, and certainly the boldest in the Middle East. Four U.S. universities - Cornell Medical, Virginia Commonwealth, Carnegie Mellon and Texas A&M - have opened branch campuses in this tiny Gulf country over the past two years, and a fifth is expected soon.

With post-Sept. 11 visa restrictions curbing access to top universities abroad, Qatari officials have decided that the best way to fill the growing demand for world-class education in the Middle East is to import it.

Sheik Hamad, while keeping a lid on dissent, has encouraged economic and social change; education reform is intended to further help his subjects help themselves. This is democracy, one degree at a time.

The foreign universities are located in a development called Education City overseen by one of Sheik Hamad's three wives, Sheika Mozah. She is leading the overhaul of the country's entire school system, including Qatar University, the largest in the country.

When completed, the 1,000-hectare, or 2,500-acre, site will include several more universities, a 300-bed teaching hospital, and a science and technology park.

Al Jazeera, the satellite television channel based in Qatar, plans to broadcast a children's channel from a building in Education City beginning in May.

Qatar can afford to dream big. This tiny country, which occupies a small peninsula jutting off of Saudi Arabia, pumps 900 million barrels of oil a day and will soon be the world's largest producer of liquid natural gas.

The government faces few financial restraints and, with only 150,000 citizens, limited social pressures.

Virginia Commonwealth University, the first school to open here, is housed in a futuristic building designed by Ibrahim Mohammed Jaidah. Cornell is next door, in a stark building by a Japanese architect, Arata Isozaki.

Much of the rest of Education City, however, is only in the planning stages. Newly planted palm trees, leaves still wrapped, line walkways between unconstructed buildings.

While universities have long organized educational exchanges and semesters abroad, few have ever opened a fully equivalent degree-granting branch campus overseas.

So far the only foreign universities in Doha are American, but the president of Qatar Foundation, Charles Young, said that discussions are under way with schools from

other countries.

"What we're trying to do is build a center of excellence in a region which is filled with mediocre practices," said Sheikha Abdullah al-Misnad, president of Qatar University and a board member of the Supreme Education Council.

The Qatar experiment is on the leading edge of a larger trend to internationalize education.

Singapore is establishing a large number of international graduate degree programs with internationally recognized universities including Duke, Stanford, MIT, Insead from France, and the Technische Universiteit Eindhoven from the Netherlands. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland opened a branch campus last October in Bahrain, a small Gulf country just to the north.

In Qatar itself, there are currently about 350 students at the U.S. branch campuses.

Officials expect up to 8,000 when development is completed, with about two-thirds of them from Qatar. In order to help gifted students from marginal educational backgrounds gain access to these new universities, the Qatar Foundation runs a one-year bridge program that culminates in an international baccalaureate degree. About 200 students are enrolled, including nine from Iraq.

Many of the students were attracted by the combination of a Western education in a Middle Eastern setting.

"It's a lot like Saudi Arabia," said Anaya Sarkar, a first-year pre-med student at Cornell. "It's just a smaller version of where I lived."

One of her friends, who is currently studying at George Washington University in Washington, is considering transferring here, said Sarkar: "There is too much of a cultural gap."

That gap works both ways, however. At home, in Saudi Arabia, Sarkar is obliged to shroud herself in the big billowy black cloth known as the abaya. In Qatar, some students wear the abaya to class, but there is no dress code.

This is helpful, noted Sarkar: "It's kind of difficult to do lab in an abaya."

Tasnim Khalife, 18, a first-year student, wears a head scarf rather than the long cloak.

"In Saudi Arabia, if I walked around like this I would get weird looks," she said.

Many of the social and cultural aspects of university life in the United States are absent here.

Male and female students live in separate dorm rooms under strict curfew. There is no alcohol near campus. The potentially difficult issue of religious study has been minimized by largely avoiding it.

Some students at Qatar's foreign universities admit they would rather have gone to the United States. Miryam Shafae, a first-year pre-med student at Cornell's Qatar branch, for one, was unable to obtain an American visa.

Even when applying from Doha, with Cornell supporting her application to attend summer school in New York, the visa process took so long that she missed the classes she had hoped to attend.

The branch universities in Doha maintain close contact with their home campuses.

Some classes, like the radiology class at the Cornell medical school, are taught by videoconference from New York. In order to maintain academic standards, the universities maintain complete control over staffing and admissions.

Although the university experiment here is largely successful, cultural differences surface in unexpected ways.

A professor at Carnegie Mellon, John Robertson, describes teaching a Victorian-era novel in a freshman seminar. He explained to the class that, in writing from that time, nature reflects the inner turmoil of the characters.

He found that the students missed the implication for the main character, however, in one key scene where the skies darkened and rain loomed.

"We live in a desert," Robertson recalls one student telling him. "Why should we think that clouds and rain are a bad thing?"

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