



**SAUDI ARABIA**

**Thuwal**



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GLOBAL EDITION

# >> DESERT

Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf neighbors are importing Western-style teaching



# ADVANCE

and research — at a rapid pace. >> BY STEPHEN GLAIN

## >> DESERT ADVANCE

**ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates** — The best Middle Eastern texts are “written in Cairo, printed in Beirut, and read in Baghdad.” That saying, popular in the 1960s, has since become an epitaph for lost scholarship. The ensuing decades of war, political convulsion, and economic decay left the Arab world intellectually depleted. Home for centuries to some of the world’s finest universities and academies, the Arab states have seen their technological and scientific talent shrivel over the past 30 years. According to the World Bank, they have lost 23 percent of their engineers, 50 percent of their doctors, and 15 percent of bachelor-of-science degree holders.

Now, as if emerging from hibernation, the Arab world is struggling to close the higher-education gap. But the academic axis has shifted from Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the emirates of the Persian Gulf, which are lavishing petro-riches on new campuses and research centers staffed and led, in many cases, by Americans. While technology is emphasized, liberal arts are starting to flourish. So Westernized is gulf higher education becoming that at universities in the United Arab Emirates, Arabic — once the language of science — is giving way to English in the classroom, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports.

If this trend seems ironic at a time when many Arabs are heaping scorn on U.S. policies toward the Middle East, it is profoundly pragmatic. While still enjoying a windfall from world oil prices that soared last summer to over \$140 a barrel, Persian Gulf leaders face pressure from several sources: Arab countries have the world’s highest birthrates, foreshadowing severe unemployment and widespread discontent unless their economies grow. Oil supplies are finite, forcing these economies to diversify. The drive for energy independence and fears of global warming are pushing the industrialized West toward renewable sources of energy closer to home. And religious institutions, some of them militant, have been rushing to fill the education vacuum created by the region’s backward schools.

In Saudi Arabia, the richest and largest gulf economy with the greatest political obstacles to reform, one result is the ambitious and grandiose King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), a graduate-level institution due to open this year with the sixth largest endowment in the world, at \$10 billion. KAUST will offer master’s and doctoral degrees and a research agenda that draws on partnerships with leading universities and scientists in the United States and Europe.

More striking in a country where citizens are segregated by sex everywhere from mosques to shopping malls, and where female education is apostasy in some circles, KAUST will teach men and women in integrated classes. While Saudi Arabia’s hierarchy of conservative clerics vehemently opposes coeducation, “they’ve caused so much unhappiness in the country that if they pushed too hard against it there would be a backlash against them,” says Jean-François Seznec, a professor and Middle East expert at Georgetown University. In a clear snub to the country’s religious elites, King Abdullah appointed Saudi Aramco, the ultraefficient, Western-centric state-owned oil company, to oversee KAUST’s development. KAUST’s pledge to offer an educational opportunity for both sexes and not discriminate on the basis of religion was persuasive enough for Princeton University President

Shirley Tilghman to agree to serve as a trustee, along with Frank H.T. Rhodes, president emeritus of Cornell University, and Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and United Nations high commissioner for human rights. Harvard-trained engineer Choon Fong Shih of Singapore has been named KAUST’s first president.

## >> AN EDUCATION DESTINATION

The kingdom has so far refrained from inviting foreign universities to set up shop. That sets it apart from its neighbors, where locally funded, foreign-operated classes and campuses are sprouting like oil derricks. Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), nestled



on some 25 million square feet of prime real estate in the dazzling instant city, is one of the largest Arab enclaves of foreign and regional universities. By the time of its scheduled completion in 2015, the \$3.2 billion complex will include dormitories for 40,000 students.

DIAC represents an expansion of Dubai Knowledge Village (DKV), a mix of university classrooms and corporate training facilities. There students mingle between classes in a study lounge that includes a travel agency and a convenience store or sip lattes at a Starbucks café. The complex accommodates some 10,000 students and 200 nationalities. DKV, which opened in 2003, is financed by Dubai’s municipal government, and its budget is a tightly guarded secret.

The facility and its growth plan fit with the city’s goal to diversify its economy — only 4 percent of Dubai’s economic output comes from the energy sector — with an array of indigenous professional skills.

In addition to an emphasis on higher learning, Dubai is developing media and Internet “cities” (along with the world’s tallest building and its biggest airport; no one does anything small in Dubai), which it hopes will attract service-sector expertise from India and China, as well as from Europe and the gulf.

“We were forced to make Dubai a prime education destination in response to a serious brain drain,” says Dr. Ayoub Kazim, DKV’s executive director. “Our students would study in the West because of

will carry only two courses per term, with half their time dedicated to research. Each will get a full scholarship, free textbooks, personal computer, health insurance, and an apartment.

Russel Jones, who served as president during the institute’s start-up, says Masdar will help fill a desperate regional need for research-driven, quality graduate programs. He believes Masdar graduates could become to the gulf what Stanford is to Silicon Valley, the vanguard of engineers transforming the global economy: “This is an opportunity to build the first graduate program in the region while working on the biggest problem of our time, which is getting past oil.”



## >> ‘THE BIG PICTURE’

The education invasion won’t be all science and high tech. New York University, which received a \$50 million donation from Abu Dhabi, plans to open a liberal-arts branch campus in 2010 led by Alfred H. Bloom, who is stepping down as president of Swarthmore. And the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research has teamed up with Qatar University to establish what it calls “a leading source of social science research in the Arab Gulf region.” In a departure for institutions in the gulf, it will focus on conducting local social-science research.

Nor does the United States have a monopoly on Western outposts here. Paris-Sorbonne University currently conducts classes for 275 students – culled from 8,000 applications. It occupies an undistinguished office complex on the Abu Dhabi city’s outskirts, but this will soon change. In September 2009, Paris-Sorbonne University-Abu Dhabi is due to open the first phase of a permanent campus that will eventually be large enough for 2,500 to 3,000 students. Courses, in French, will range from the humanities to social sciences, with postgraduate offerings in such areas as law, political science, and economics. Omar Al Bitar, the vice president of PSUAD and a major general in the UAE military, describes the school as an oasis for the study of literature, art, and philosophy in a region with a strong science and technology bias.

“Graduates of the humanities and social sciences are great planners and thinkers,” he says. “They are people who see the big picture. They can employ their knowledge and skills to conduct dialogue and resolve conflicts at a time when it is needed most.”

Though not the stated intent of most of the programs, these new gulf education ventures can’t help but weaken barriers of mistrust between Arabs and the West, as becomes clear at a campus in Qatar established by Carnegie Mellon University, one of five U.S. schools to locate at Education City outside Doha, the capital. Twice a week in the U.S.-Arab Encounters course, a professor sets up a videoconference screen connecting classrooms in Qatar and Pittsburgh.

Face to face across thousands of miles, students debate such issues as America’s support for Israel and team up to work on joint projects. Charles Thorpe, Carnegie Mellon’s dean in Qatar, told the *Vancouver Sun*: “It doesn’t always change people’s opinions, but it does help to build understanding and tolerance.”

the greater opportunities there, and they’d never come back. Then 9/11 happened, and that changed everything,” he said, referring to restrictions on student visas to the United States. “So we thought of this.”

If Dubai builds it, so goes a local conceit, the world will come. Two years ago, 36 universities applied for licenses to set up their branch campuses at DIAC, and three were accepted. Last year, according to Kazim, it received 54 applications and accepted four. Recent arrivals include Michigan State University and Australia’s Murdoch University. “We have to make sure university standards here are at parity with their domestic ones,” Kazim says. “We scrutinize their credentials, and we do our due diligence.”

If Dubai’s globally recognized brand helped establish it as a center of higher learning, Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s once sleepy capital city, is catching up fast. Its Masdar Institute of Science and Technology is shaping up to be the most elite of academic enterprises, concentrated on energy technology. Established by the Abu Dhabi Future Energy Co. in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Masdar has hired 24 faculty members from nine countries. It hopes to have enrolled 100 students by the time it opens in summer 2009 and 800 by 2015, along with a cadre of 150 lecturers. Postgraduate students

*Stephen Glain is a freelance writer specializing in the Middle East.*