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GLOBAL CLASSROOMS

In Oil-Rich Mideast, Shades of the Ivy League



Tamara Abdul Hadi for The New York Times

Students in a recreation room at a Carnegie Mellon building at Education City, a 2,500-acre complex in Doha, Qatar. Most students are non-Qatari. More Photos >

By TAMAR LEWIN Published: February 11, 2008

DOHA, Qatar — On a hot October evening, hundreds of families flocked to the sumptuous Ritz Carlton here in this Persian Gulf capital for an unusual college fair, the Education City roadshow.

Global Classrooms Destination: Qatar

This is the second in a series of articles examining the globalization of higher education.

Part 1: U.S. Universities Rush to Set Up Outposts Abroad (Feb. 10, 2008)

Q&A: Charles E. Thorpe

Q&A

Dana Hadan

Dana Hadan, a business student enrolled at the Carnegie Mellon campus in Qatar, answered questions on what it's like being a student at

Qataris, Bangladeshis, Syrians, Indians, Egyptians — in saris, in suits, in dishdashis, in jeans — came to hear what it takes to win admission to one of the five American universities that offer degrees at Education City, a 2,500-acre campus on the outskirts of Doha where oil and gas money pays for everything from adventurous architecture to professors' salaries.

Education City, the largest enclave of American universities overseas, has fast become the elite of Qatari education, a sort of local Ivy League. But the five American schools have started small, with only about 300 slots among them for next year's entering classes. So there is a slight buzz of anxiety at the fair, which starts with a nonalcoholic cocktail hour, with fruit juices passed on silver trays as families circulate among the booths.

"I just came to get my mind together," said Rowea al-Shrem, a junior in a head-to-toe black abaya who came

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an overseas branch of an American university.

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The lunchroom for Carnegie Mellon and Georgetown University. Student life is much like that at colleges in the United States. [More Photos](#) >

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A student in traditional dress in the mirrored hallway of Carnegie Mellon's campus. Classes at Education City are coeducational. [More Photos](#) >

to the fair on her own. "I wanted to know what to expect, so I don't go crazy next year."

At a time when almost every major American university is concerned with expanding its global reach, Education City provides a glimpse of the range of American expertise in demand overseas. Five universities have brought programs here, and more are on their way.

[Cornell's](#) medical school, which combines pre-med training and professional training over six years, will graduate the first Qatar-trained physicians this spring. [Virginia Commonwealth University](#) brought its art and design program to Qatari women 10 years ago and began admitting men this year. Carnegie Mellon offers computer and business programs.

[Texas A&M](#), the largest of the Education City schools, teaches engineering, with petroleum engineering its largest program. Georgetown's foreign service school is the latest arrival. Soon, [Northwestern University's](#) journalism program will come, too.

When the crowd files into the ballroom to hear about the admission process — first in English, with Arabic translation available through headphones, then later in Arabic — what it hears is much the same as at an information session for a selective American college.

"We want to see students who are passionate and dedicated," Valerie Jeremijenko, Virginia Commonwealth's dean of student affairs, tells the crowd. "It's competitive, but don't let that discourage you."

She sounds all the familiar themes: Work hard this year, so you can get great recommendations. Participate in extracurricular activities. Do not obsess about SAT scores, because we look at the whole person.

Education City is so firmly ensconced as the gold standard here that many students apply to several of its schools, knowing that their career will be determined by where they are accepted.

When Dana Hadan was a student at Doha's leading girls' science high school, she wanted to be a doctor and applied to Cornell's medical school. But Cornell rejected her, and her parents did not want her to go to a medical school

overseas. So Ms. Hadan enrolled instead in the business program at Carnegie Mellon.

Now, as a third-year student, she is happily learning macroeconomics and marketing. "I was never interested in business, but now I'm passionate about it," said Ms. Hadan, a lively 20-year-old.

She never considered the locally run Qatar University: "I knew I wanted Education City," she said.

Admission standards, degree requirements and curriculum — complete, in most cases, with an introductory two years of broad liberal arts — at the Education City schools are the same as at the American home campuses. So is the philosophy of teaching.

"There are lots of programs in different countries that are 'kind of like,' 'in partnership

In Kathleen Turner's words

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with,' or 'inspired by' American education," said Charles E. Thorpe, the dean of Carnegie Mellon in Qatar. "But this *is* American education. And for many of our students, that's a very big change. Almost all of them went to single-sex secondary schools. As recently as six years ago, the elementary reader in Qatar was the Koran, so students learned beautiful classical Arabic, but they had no experience with questions like 'What do you think the author meant by that?' or 'Do you agree or disagree?'"

Education City is in many ways a study in contradictions, an island of American-style open debate in what remains an Islamic monarchy, albeit a liberal one by regional standards. Education City graduates will be a broadly educated elite, who have had extended contact with American professors and American ways of thinking, and, in some cases, spent time at their school's home campus back in the United States.

Although it is still small and new, it could be a seedbed of change, with a profound impact on Qatar's future and its relations with the United States — and perhaps, some Qatari parents worry, on their traditional way of life.

Opportunities for Women

Education City represents broad opportunities for women, in a nation where many families do not allow their daughters to travel overseas for higher education or to mix casually with men. Cornell stresses, proudly, that it was Qatar's first coeducational institution of higher learning.

The female students are very much aware of their new opportunities and the support they have received from Sheika Mozah Bint Nasser al-Missned, the emir's second wife and a strong advocate of women's education. She is chairwoman of the Qatar Foundation, which runs Education City.

"I don't want my father's money or my husband's money," said Maryam al-Ibrahim, a 21-year-old second-year student at Virginia Commonwealth. "I want to work for a private company and be myself, and I would like to become someone important here."

Mais Taha, a Texas A&M petroleum-engineering student, glows as she talks about her classes, including Reservoir Fluids — hydrocarbons, she explains sweetly — and Drilling.

"I'm one of the first Qatari girls willing to go out in the field and put on a coverall," she said. "All the technicians were treating me as a princess, because I'd come in wearing an abaya, and then go out in overalls. And I can't wait until I can go out and work on a rig."

No wonder, then, that some Qatari parents are wary of Education City. "I know some girls who applied here, and their parents said they were not supposed to be hanging out with guys, but when they came they realized they had to, because of homework and projects," Ms. Hadan said.

Carnegie Mellon feels like an American institution, with Mental Health Month posters on attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and depression, Starbucks and the student bake sale, where Reem Khaled, preparing a business project, sells Betty Crocker brownies and pineapple cake and surveys customer interest in healthier options.

How much to localize the curriculum is an ongoing issue at the Education City schools, where officials sometimes find that problems and ideas transposed from America do not necessarily make much sense. "We had a problem that involved a boy whose after-school job was shoveling snow for so much an hour," Mr. Thorpe said. The snow was not a problem, since Qataris had seen snow on television, he said. What was fundamentally unfamiliar was the concept of an after-school job.

The Education City schools often mirror American campus culture: Texas A&M holds the Aggie Muster every April, just like the College Station, Tex., campus. And at Carnegie Mellon, Ms. Hadan, working with the student government, helped organize "Crazy Week," culminating in Tartan Day, when students wear the Carnegie Mellon plaid. "Everyone has at least a T-shirt," she said. But on Pajama Day, the divide between Qataris

and non-Qataris, a majority of Carnegie Mellon's students, became clearer than ever. Some non-Qatari students arrived in full sleep regalia, complete with fuzzy slippers and teddy bears.

Ms. Hadan and the other Qataris remained in traditional dress, women in black abayas and head scarves, men in long white robes and headdresses. "Because of my culture, I couldn't wear pajamas; it's too embarrassing," said Khalid al-Sooj, 19.

For many Education City students, one big draw is the opportunity to visit the American home campus, whether for a semester or a few weeks.

"I want to live that experience of studying abroad, because I believe it makes you grow," said Ms. Hadan, who is spending the spring semester in Pittsburgh, with her parents' blessing.

Whether the job market will view Education City graduates the same as American graduates of the same schools is not yet clear. The big test is approaching, as Cornell's inaugural class applies for its medical residencies.

"We're about to find out if they're accepted the same as Cornell graduates in New York," said Dr. Daniel Alonso, the dean of Weill Cornell medical school in Qatar. "They've been doing as well on the tests, but it remains to be seen."

Cornell graduates in New York typically apply for 20 or 30 residencies to sure that they get a place, Dr. Alonso said. But uncertainty among the Qatar graduates prompted Khalid al-Khelaifi to apply to more than 60 American residency programs, just to be safe.

"We're the first batch, so no one knows how we'll do," he said. **Paying the Bills**

Education City is an expensive experiment, made possible by Qatar's immense oil and gas wealth. For the Cornell medical school alone, the Qatar Foundation promised \$750 million over 11 years.

While American universities in other parts of the world look to tuition to support their overseas branches, the branches in Qatar depend on government largess: Qatar pays for the architecturally stunning classroom buildings, the faculty salaries and housing and transportation, and it has made multimillion-dollar gifts to the Education City universities.

"Had the Qatar Foundation not been willing to provide the level of support it did, we wouldn't have considered going beyond a study-abroad site," said Mark Weichold, dean of Texas A&M in Qatar.

Dr. Abdulla al-Thani, the Qatar Foundation's vice president for education, declined to discuss specific gifts but said the foundation had often endowed chairs at the universities that have agreed to come to Education City.

Probably the biggest hurdle for American universities in Qatar is getting the right number and mix of faculty members. Even with free housing, bonus pay and big tax advantages, few professors want to relocate to the Persian Gulf, so many schools depend in good part on "fly-bys" who come for three or four weeks from the United States to give a series of lectures.

"We have half a dozen faculty who moved to Qatar, and 30 or 40 who go for a couple weeks," said Dr. Antonio M. Gotto Jr., dean of Weill Cornell Medical School in New York. "We're trying to recruit as many faculty as possible who will stay over there. About 15 percent of our lectures are through videoconferencing and ideally, I'd like to get that down to 5 percent."

While the Qatar branches have a natural attraction for certain professors — Texas A&M's petroleum engineers, say, or Georgetown's experts in Middle Eastern politics — the Gulf does not interest everyone.

“You don’t get the full range of faculty here,” said Lynn Carter, a computer-science professor in his 19th year at Carnegie Mellon and his second of a three-year contract to teach in Qatar. “You get a lot of people at the end of their careers. It’s not good for young faculty with mortgages and young kids and tenure hopes. Coming to Qatar, where you don’t have graduate students and research grants, does it do any good for getting tenure?”

While each Education City school offers a specialized program, Qatar hopes to meld them into a new entity, almost like a university whose departments are all independent. Students are encouraged to cross-register, so that Texas A&M’s engineering students can take art classes at Virginia Commonwealth.

“Personally, I like what the liberal arts do in the United States, but if you look at what our country needs right now, we need people trained in the oil and gas areas, we need doctors, we need media, so those are the programs we are bringing in,” said Dr. Thani, of the Qatar Foundation. “Now we are trying to create synergy between the different schools on campus, so it will offer more of what a large university would offer.”

In a nation where many Qataris, with their maids and drivers, live quite apart from the non-Qataris who make up most of the population, Education City mixes students of all nationalities. About half of the students are Qataris, and while they have some advantages — including a yearlong academic program to bolster the skills of those seeking admission — the Qatar Foundation supports non-Qataris, too, forgiving tuition loans to those who stay to work in Qatar after getting their degree.

“We think diversity is something very good, and we do not want to reduce our standards to admit more Qataris,” Dr. Thani said.

Opening Young Minds

Many Education City students are excited by their exposure to the broad array of cultures and new ways of thinking. At Georgetown, for example, “The Problem of God,” a required course, is immensely popular.

“It was amazing,” said Ibrahim al-Derbasti, a Qatari student. “We had Christians, Muslims, Hindus and an atheist. We talked about the difference between faith and religion. I had lived in Houston for four years, but I never understood the Trinity. Now I get it. Well, I don’t really get how Jesus is the son of God, but I understand the idea.”

In Gary Wasserman’s “U.S. Political Systems” course at Georgetown, a class on the 1977 litigation over neo-Nazis’ right to demonstrate in Skokie, Ill., quickly took a different course than it might have in an American classroom, with more students concerned with the problems of unfettered free speech. “It’s complicated, because in protecting civil liberties of one group you might be taking away the civil rights of others,” said Tara Makarem, a Lebanese-Syrian student, who had been troubled by the Danish publication of anti-Muslim cartoons in 2006.

And, a Saudi freshman wondered, if the A.C.L.U. defended the Nazis’ right to express hateful views in Skokie, why did no one protect [Don Imus](#) — he called him “Amos” — from losing his radio job for making racially offensive remarks of a kind accepted in rap lyrics?

Professor Wasserman, who previously taught in China, tried to find answers, talking about commercial pressures on broadcasters.

But Mohammed, the Saudi student who did not want his full name used, was still puzzled. “It’s almost like they added another thing to the Bill of Rights, the right for every American not to be offended,” he mused.

Such discussions make Qatar an invigorating place to teach, Professor Wasserman said.

“They come up with questions you hadn’t thought of,” he said. “You see how much they want to be a part of a globalized world, but you also see that they don’t want to have to

give up their faith, their family, their traditions. And why should they?"

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