

## SUMMARY

International branch campuses (IBCs) have a significant presence in Dubai's higher education sector, yet the role of these institutions is not yet fully understood. Moreover, the evolution of the roles of IBCs in Dubai may be strongly influenced by public policy designs. This brief defines three key issues influencing the development of the education sector and relevant public policy. First, in most importing nations, IBCs account for only a small proportion of the total number of postsecondary educational institutions, and most countries already have well established public and private higher education sectors. In Dubai, however, the private higher education sector has developed rapidly and the number of IBCs is nearly half of the total number of education institutions licensed to operate in the Emirate. Second, foreign education providers engage in a variety of capacity-building roles in Dubai, ranging from providing access to expatriates excluded from the public system to signaling the increasing modernity of the Emirate to the world. Consideration should be given to how future public policy decisions may affect these roles. Third, the use of free zones to facilitate the importation of foreign education providers has resulted in dual quality assurance mechanisms at the federal and local levels, as well as a lack of coordination throughout the sector. This has created an environment where there is significant duplication of degree offerings, confusion over regulation, and concern about the quality of some programs. While such constraints are common in rapidly developing educational systems, left unaddressed they can challenge the effective contribution of the entire sector to the development of the Emirate and the nation, as well as the long-term sustainability of each institution.\* This brief provides an overview of key public policy issues and presents a set of questions to help frame the ongoing conversation.

# International Branch Campuses, Free Zones, and Quality Assurance: Policy Issues for Dubai and the UAE

*By Jason E. Lane*

## Introduction

The higher education landscape in the United Arab Emirates has changed significantly since the founding of the country's first university, the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), in 1976. During the first half of the country's history, access to higher education was limited, available almost exclusively to Emiratis through two federal institutions (i.e., UAEU and the Higher Colleges of Technology, or HCT).<sup>1</sup> Since then, however, there has been a rapid increase in the number of private higher education institutions throughout the country, with some emirates seeking to build their educational capacities by attracting outposts of foreign colleges and universities (e.g., London Business School, Michigan State University and New York University). The largest transformation of the private higher education sector has occurred in Dubai, where there are now more than 50 institutions licensed by Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) to award postsecondary degrees and diplomas.

How a government regulates its higher education sector can have a lasting effect on educational access and workforce development. To date, the rapid expansion of the private higher education system in the UAE has been accompanied by a delay in government regulation, as it would be in any rapidly changing system.<sup>2</sup> The UAE now faces challenges in aligning government regulation with its strategic priorities, while simultaneously defining the limits of national and local authority within the higher education sector. In particular, there is minimal diversification of degree levels or academic programs, which

\*For instance, Michigan State University Dubai closed most of its academic operations in July 2010 prior to graduating any students

makes cultivating a dynamic and flexible workforce difficult. Moreover, the lack of regulatory clarity creates confusion among students and institutions about local degree recognition. Dubai, as the largest importer of educational institutions among the emirates, must deal with the quality assurance issues associated with a rapidly developing private higher education sector populated by the largest number of IBCs of any region in the world. As such, there are no similar models to use as guides. The ongoing development of the system and current tensions in the quality assurance discussions suggest that both the local and federal governments will continue to look at new policies in this area.

### **International Branch Campuses**

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of developing countries have sought to attract universities from the developed world (mainly from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) to establish educational outposts and partnerships within their borders. The most prominent form taken by these cross-border initiatives is the international branch campus (IBC). In its basic form, the IBC is a foreign outpost of a university which is owned (at least in part) by the home campus. Further, the outpost must be a physical location in the foreign country from which a student can take courses and receive a degree from the home campus.<sup>3</sup>

A 2009 report from the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) documents more than 160 IBCs operating around the world, which is almost double the number that the OBHE reported three years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Forty-one of the campuses identified in the OBHE report were located in the UAE, making it the largest importer of IBCs in the world. This number does not account for those IBCs which have opened since the last count, nor does it portray the significant role such institutions play within the education sector in Dubai and the UAE.

### **Overview of Private Higher Education in Dubai**

As of May 2010, KHDA reported 53 postsecondary educational institutions licensed to award degrees or diplomas in Dubai. Of these, only three are part of the federal public higher education system (Zayed University and two HCT campuses – Dubai's Men's College and Dubai's Women's College). The remaining 50 are part of the private higher education sector. Approximately half of these institutions are outposts of foreign education providers and exist within designated free zone arenas that exempt them from federal regulation (discussed below).

The IBCs vary in terms of enrollment size, level of degree awarded, and breadth of program offerings. Although there has been no systematic collection of enrollment numbers to date, data collected by this author from the different campuses suggest that enrollments range from fewer than 100 to several thousand. Campuses have been approved to offer degrees at the diploma/associate, baccalaureate, and doctoral levels. Most campuses offer degrees at the bachelor's and master's level. A small but growing number of institutions offer doctorates in education and business. Access to associate and diploma degrees is limited in Dubai, and they are provided almost exclusively by local institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The breadth of programmatic offerings at the IBCs in Dubai is limited. Almost all programs offered by foreign providers are professionally focused (e.g., business, engineering, and education) and appear to be market-driven. Real estate, finance, and business have been the largest areas of job growth in Dubai over the last decade, and the growing number of expatriates with children is fostering the desire for more well-educated teachers at the primary and secondary levels. There are 31 private

institutions offering business-related master's degrees in Dubai; 23 of these are foreign education providers. In contrast, academic programs in the arts, humanities, and social sciences are almost non-existent in the private education sector.

## The Roles of IBCs in Dubai

IBC's are increasingly seen as integral components of economic development policy in developing economies. This is true for Dubai. However, in Dubai, these institutions have quickly evolved to serve a number of roles not typically seen among private higher education providers. Four particular roles played by IBCs in Dubai are detailed below:<sup>6</sup>

### Demand Absorption

Like all of the private higher education institutions in Dubai, IBCs play an important role in meeting the demands for higher education among the large expatriate population. As the three federal institutions are restricted to only Emirati students, private institutions (including the foreign education providers) absorb the demand for higher education from expatriates living and working in Dubai, providing them with the opportunity to access higher education without having to leave the Emirate or engage in distance learning.

### Provision of Something Different

Another reason for the development of private higher education is to provide a type of education that is not available in the public sector. Internationally, institutions in this category generally provide access to a religious-based education experience, and a few private higher education institutions in Dubai have developed degrees with a religious focus (i.e., Islamic Studies or Shari'a Finance). However, most IBCs in Dubai provide something different, in that they provide access to curricula from other countries.

Indeed, IBCs in Dubai provide access to curricula from at least 11 different countries, including

Australia, Belgium, France, India, Iran, Ireland, Lebanon, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This is particularly important for Dubai given the ethnic diversity of its expatriate population and the fact that the private primary and secondary education system educates children in 13 different national curricula. When these students graduate from high school, they are seeking to continue their education in a familiar educational environment.

Moreover, there are a growing number of Emirati students interested in pursuing a different education than is provided at the federal institutions, but who are, for a variety of reasons, not able to pursue such options in other countries. IBCs provide them with access to a foreign degree without having to leave their home.

### Signaling Modernity

For many governments, including that of Dubai, IBCs are a way to signal their growing modernity to the outside world. This may happen in three ways. First, in its simplest form, the opening of IBCs garners international press, bringing more attention to both educational and non-educational activities within the Emirate. Second, associating with a university that has a strong international reputation can suggest (whether true or not) a certain level of quality within the broader education sector.<sup>7</sup> Michigan State University from the United States or S.P. Jain from India choosing to locate a campus within Dubai may signal to outsiders that Dubai is of a sufficient level of global importance and educational significance that it warrants those institutions becoming a part of its educational sector. Third, having a diversity of nations represented among the IBCs may serve as tacit acknowledgement of the Emirate's global orientation and increasing diversity.

### Demand Creation

Unlike other types of private higher education, a unique role of IBCs is to create demand for themselves and for the local system. The fact

that IBCs have an existing reputation of quality and provide an educational experience that might not be available anywhere else in the region may attract new students to Dubai. Thus, the presence of the IBCs may create a demand from students that might otherwise have chosen to pursue their educations elsewhere.

### Free Zones

Free zones, an economic development tool designed to exempt companies from federal regulation, have been one of the most important factors in the growth of foreign education providers in Dubai. Yet, the use of free zones has created a range of challenges, including the rise of multiple accountability schemes. This has fostered discussions about the appropriate role of the local and federal governments, and has restricted system-wide coordination by creating several fairly autonomous subsectors within the education system.

Four free zones currently house IBCs in Dubai. Dubai International Academic City/ Dubai Knowledge Village (DIAC/DKV) hosts the largest number of IBCs, and it is the only free zone dedicated to education. DIAC/ DKV attracts a wide range of institutions from multiple countries. Undergraduate and graduate degrees are offered and students come from throughout the Arab region and around the world. Some institutions offer similar programs, which creates a degree of competition among the various institutions. There is also limited collaboration between some of the institutions, but this is mostly in the area of student activities (e.g., football games).

The other free zones are more strategic in their selection of institutions and more restrictive in the types of programs offered. For example, the Center for Excellence at the Dubai International Financial City (DIFC) serves to attract and retain a diversity of graduate-

level business programs from highly ranked international business schools. There are no duplicate programs. Further, the programs serve not only those employed by businesses within DIFC, but also students from many other countries. The purpose is to help build leadership capacity within DIFC as well as increase the social capital and international networks of all individuals working within DIFC. Similarly, Dubai Health Care City (DHCC) hosts a branch of Boston College's Institute for Dental Research and Education, which supports DHCC's mission to, in part, improve the overall level of dental health within the region. Finally, Rochester Institute of Technology, from the United States, provides an array of business and technology degrees within Silicon Oasis, a business technology-oriented free zone.

### Regulating Free Zone Education

Given the exemption of IBCs operating in free zones from federal quality assurance mechanisms, each free zone has established specific requirements about branch campuses having to provide academic programs comparable in quality to the main campus. However, the enforcement of these requirements has been unequal and sporadic. Moreover, since each of the four free zones is administered by different authorities, there has been a lack of coordination in regard to this enforcement and each free zone has developed its own regulatory structure. For example, DHCC runs its own human subject review board for research conducted by their universities, though no other free zone has a separate human subject review board. Similarly, DIFC restricts its IBCs from offering competitive degrees, while several DIAC/DKV institutions offer the same academic programs. The overall lack of local regulations has created a need for an emirate-level quality assurance mechanism within Dubai.

To address concerns about quality, while recognizing that campuses are based on

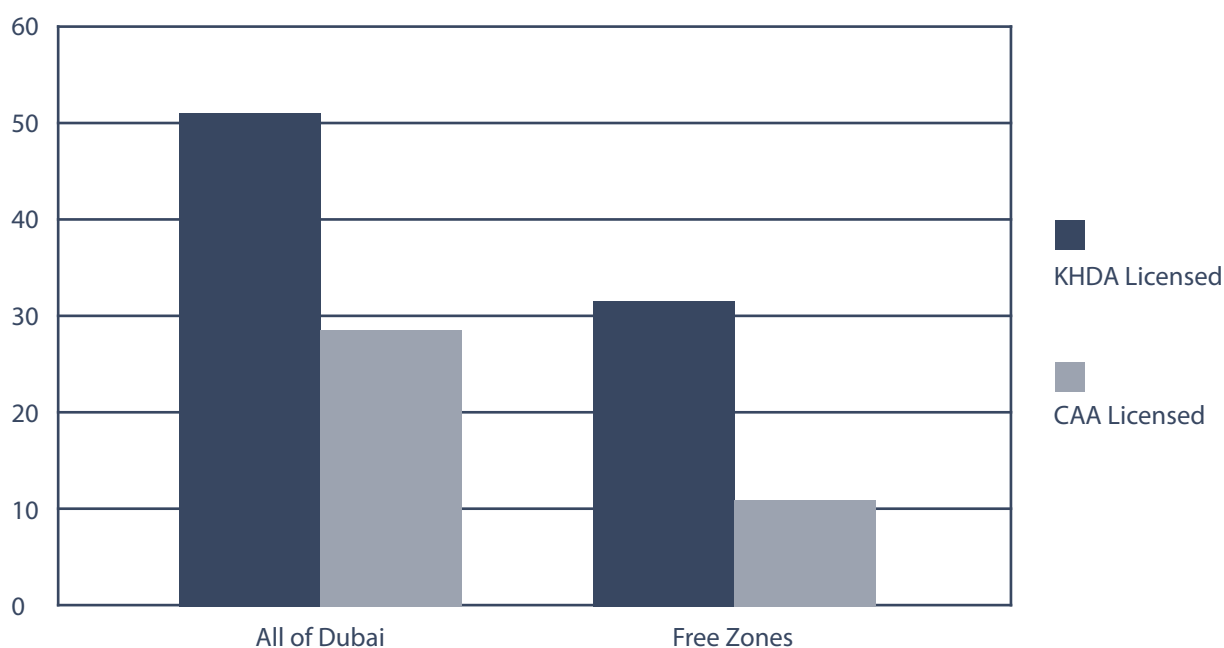
different assumptions about learning and teaching styles, KHDA created a new quality assurance mechanism in 2008. The University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB), comprised of members from various countries, audits institutions to ensure that mechanisms are in place to ensure that the quality of the education provided at the branch campus is comparable to that of the home campus. However, receiving licensure from this body does not attest to a minimum level of quality, merely that the quality of an institution's program is comparable to its home campus.

At the federal level, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), part of the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research, is responsible for the licensure and accreditation of all institutions of higher learning in the UAE. The CAA is responsible for ensuring institutions and their programs meet the same set of quality assurance requirements. As noted above, locating within a free zone exempts an IBC from CAA requirements. This exemption, while allowing

institutions to operate without interference from the federal government, has created problems, with degrees from these institutions not being recognized by the government (particularly important for those applying for public sector jobs) or financial aid not being made available to Emirati students attending these institutions. Notably, even though the free zones exempt institutions from CAA requirements, several IBCs have sought and been granted institutional licensure and academic program accreditation from the CAA. Of the 51 postsecondary institutions listed by KHDA as being approved to operate in Dubai, 29 are licensed by the federal government through the CAA.

The multiple layers of governmental and non-governmental regulation of education underline the challenges facing the development and accountability of IBCs in Dubai and the UAE as a whole. A significant component of the current accountability debate is whether the local or federal government is responsible for the licensure and

**Figure 1: Licensing Authorities for Dubai's Institutions of Higher Learning**



**Source:** This information comes from the list of licensed institutions on the CAA portal ([www.caa.ae](http://www.caa.ae)) and the KHDA Web site ([www.khda.gov.ae](http://www.khda.gov.ae)). Data was collected from each Web site on May 11, 2010.

accreditation of higher education institutions. The accounting of “licensed” institutions partially demonstrates this divide. Further, coordination within the system is minimal. The differing regulations between CAA and UQAIB makes harmonization throughout the system difficult, particularly between free zone and non-free zone institutions. Moreover, the fact that IBCs are spread among four different free zones with four different special authorities and sets of regulations makes it difficult to coordinate among the free zone institutions.

### **Moving Forward**

A number of factors combine to create an education environment in the UAE quite different from that of most other countries. This is particularly true in Dubai, where the number of foreign education providers is about the same as indigenous institutions, and where most foreign education providers operate within free zones. Importantly, in the context of the sector’s rapid development, the role of the local and federal governments in regulating these entities is not yet clear; nor is the route by which foreign education providers can help the government to achieve its strategic priorities. In fact, the approaches of the federal and local quality assurance agencies demonstrate a fundamental difference in approach. Dubai’s quality assurance mechanism, UQAIB, seeks to ensure that each foreign institution provides an educational experience comparable to that of its home campus, leaving it to the student to decide which education he or she wants to pursue. The federal quality assurance mechanism, CAA, licenses institutions based on meeting a common set of minimum standards. This insures that there is a minimum level of quality, and that there is some commonality among all institutions in the country.

From an international perspective, most quality assurance mechanisms are designed

for a postsecondary education sector that consists primarily of mostly indigenous institutions serving predominantly indigenous students. Moreover, in this context, a vast majority of the students can be expected to spend most of their lives in the country which designs the quality assurance mechanisms. In Dubai and the wider UAE, this does not necessarily hold true. While the necessary data is not yet available to provide an accurate profile of students in Dubai, data collected by this author suggests that only a minority of students are Emirati, and that many expatriate students expect to return to their home countries after finishing their degrees in Dubai.

This is not to suggest that existing quality assurance schemes in other nations would not work in Dubai. However, those making decisions in the UAE about the structure of such schemes should be aware of the fundamental differences between their system and most others, and they need to make decisions with full knowledge of how the regulatory system may affect future development of the education sector. For example, the goal to educate a workforce for the UAE may be different than the goal of attracting students to the UAE to take advantage of a choice of institutions from almost anywhere in the world. On the one hand, allowing a diversity of institutional requirements and quality levels may inhibit the development of a cohesive and effective workforce. On the other hand, creating a system of institutions with similar requirements may make the international diversity of institution less attractive to foreign students and work against the goal of becoming an educational hub.<sup>9</sup> The following questions are meant to help guide ongoing public policy discussions:

1. Who are the students being served by international branch campuses and what are their aspirations?

2. What are the reasons for importing educational providers from other countries? Is it to help achieve the Emiratization policies by increasing access to high quality programs? Is it to encourage more Emiratis to study in the UAE? Is it to attract foreign students or retain expatriates already living in the country?
3. When assessing the role of education for expatriate students, how many of them desire to stay and work in the UAE upon graduation? How many will actually stay, and how long will they stay?
4. What are the advantages/disadvantages of having academic programs based on several different national curricula?
5. What are the advantages/disadvantages of having a common regulatory framework (versus different frameworks for foreign/indigenous institutions)?
6. How does any new regulatory framework align IBCs with the government's strategic priorities? And, how does such a framework alter the existing role of IBCs?
7. How does the existence of IBCs affect the indigenous education providers?

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The United Arab Emirates was established in 1971 as a confederation of six formerly independent emirates: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah and Umm Al-Quwain. Ras Al-Khaimah joined the union in 1972. UAEU was the country's only public institution of higher learning until the Higher Colleges of Technology were established in 1988. The country's other public institution of higher learning, Zayed University, was not founded until 1999.
- 2 Levy, Daniel A. 2006. The unanticipated explosion: private higher education's global surge. *Comparative Education Review* 50, 2: 217-240.
- 3 Not all of the foreign education providers in Dubai use the term "branch campus." Its use here is only for identification of a specific subset of private higher education institutions that meet the previous definition, and is not meant to imply any specific type of organizational arrangement. The term is used to differentiate from collaborative or twinning arrangements, as well as research-only ventures such as the research centers being established by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) around the world.
- 4 The increase is likely due to both the development of new institutions and better information about the existence of IBCs.
- 5 According to the KHDA, only eight public and private higher education institutions offer associate or diploma degrees.
- 6 This information comes from a forthcoming article by the author. See Lane, J. E. (forthcoming) Importing private higher education: international branch campuses. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*.
- 7 Such an association may imply a level of quality about the educational programs, the types of students enrolled in the sector, or the quality of graduates in the work force. More work is needed to more fully understand the reputational effects of IBCs on the host government.
- 8 UQAIB membership is comprised of a chairman and ten additional members appointed for a term of not less than four years. According to the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the initial members were drawn from Australia, Asia, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States. (Asian countries are not listed separately.)

- 9 Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have become educational hubs because of the type of education their system provides, which is different from most other countries. This allows them to create quality assurance mechanisms based on similar beliefs about education. However, Dubai has adopted a different strategy, providing access to the educational systems of a number of different countries in one location.

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