



A fifth transnational hub for the Gulf: Bahrain announces plans to create a 'Higher Education City'

The Gulf state of Bahrain recently announced plans to establish a higher education hub in co-operation with a foreign partner. Through an agreement between the country's Economic Development Board and a Kuwaiti investment company, a 'Higher Education City' will be created, featuring a fully fledged branch campus of an undisclosed "top" US university, an international centre for research and studies, and a specialist academy (no further details available). The new hub, which is looking to attract local as well as regional students, is far from the only initiative in the Gulf aimed at increasing national capacity and decrease study abroad rates through imported foreign higher education provision. Three similar projects are already in operation in the neighbouring countries, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar and a third is underway in Abu Dhabi, UAE. With the financial means to make it attractive for foreign institutions to establish a presence, these countries now host a number of well-known universities from across the world. What are the details of the announcement from Bahrain? What characterises the higher education sector in the country where a number of foreign institutions are already operating? And finally, with the other hubs reportedly enrolling a relatively low number of students, what is the reasoning behind the establishment of yet another zone for transnational education?

At the end of last month, Bahrain, a small country situated in the Persian Gulf, announced its plans to establish a 'Higher Education City' in co-operation with the Kuwaiti Financial Investment Corporation (KFIC). In addition to academic and research establishments, housing, entertainment and sports facilities will also be made available. Whilst very few details are forthcoming at this stage, it is understood that provision in the new hub, scheduled to open in 2010, will focus on subjects in engineering, business and science where a gap in provision and graduates has been identified. The chief executive of the Economic Development Board, Shaikh Mohammed bin Essa Al-Khalifa, commented: "The education city will attract some of the world's leading universities and specialise in programs in engineering and scientific research. The site will incorporate all the required infrastructure for a world-class centre, with supporting facilities like scientific laboratories. It will be a truly integrated, state-of-the art centre for science and learning".

The KFIC will be the project's main investor and developer and the vice chairman and chief executive officer of the company, Abdulrahman Ali Al Saeed, has emphasised the private-public partnership nature of the project, which will allow "the private sector to innovate and deliver projects that add real value to Bahrain and Bahrainis". He also has mentioned that despite competition within the region to attract investment in education and training, Bahrain was the company's preferred location due to its highly developed infrastructure, effective and transparent legislation and efficient transport system and links to surrounding countries. According to the agreement, the KFIC will be working with international experts to attract universities and specialised education providers to the new facility. The company is also going to invest in infrastructure development. The EDB is going to facilitate and secure the necessary government approvals and will integrate the promotion of the academic city with general efforts to advertise Bahrain, which won the 'Middle East City of the Future' award in 2006, as an attractive site for investment. The project is also aimed at contributing to the establishment of Bahrain as a regional hub for science and technology and helping to fill skills gaps in the current and future labour markets in Bahrain and in the Middle Eastern region as a whole. It is anticipated that the Higher Education City with its international provision will be able to attract local and regional students and provide an alternative to studying abroad in Europe, the US or beyond.

Similar to other countries in the region, Bahrain is keen to develop its knowledge-based economy so as not to be purely dependent on the oil industry and increased participation in higher education is viewed as a key element in achieving this aim. The country's higher education sector is relatively 'young' with the major institutions being established within the last 30 years. The national Bahrain University, offering undergraduate and postgraduate provision, was formed in 1986 through a merger between a local college and a polytechnic. Degree level courses are also offered through the Arabian Gulf University established jointly by the Gulf Co-operation Council countries (Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman) in 1979. There is a range of domestic institutions providing certificate and diploma level courses and a number of foreign programmes are also offered in the country (see below for details). According to UNESCO, home students are charged a minimum of US\$7,950 and a maximum of US\$13,260 a year in tuition fees and the languages of instruction are Arabic and English. The gross enrolment ratio was 34% in 2004 (this figure indicates the number of pupils enrolled in tertiary education, regardless of age, as a percentage of the population in the theoretical age group for the same level of education).

The majority of the 2,555 graduates who completed their degrees from domestic institutions in 2004, were female, accounting for 70% of the total number (not unusual for Gulf countries especially in contrast to the study abroad population where male students often dominate). 19% of those who graduated from local institutions obtained degrees in science and technology with more than 40% graduating in social science, business and law.

There is no centrally collected information on transnational education offered in the country and the student take-up of this. However, an analysis of available data and research undertaken points to a relatively high level of activity considering the small population of the country (just under 700,000 inhabitants). According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there were 333 students enrolled on UK programmes offered in Bahrain in 2003-04. 86% of them were registered on taught Master's programmes and business and management courses accounted for 88% of enrolments. Male students accounted for 77% (in stark contrast to enrolment on programmes offered at domestic institutions) and 44% of the total number of students were in the 30-39 age group. Whilst a survey of Australian offshore activities carried out by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 2003 does not feature any programme offerings in Bahrain, the Department for Education, Science and Training lists 16 students resident in Bahrain and enrolled on courses offered in the country by Australian institutions. There is no comprehensive source of information on US activities in the country.

A number of collaborative arrangements with foreign institutions as well as branch campuses are in operation. The University College Bahrain, which was previously supported by Canada's McMaster University, now appears to be offering degrees in collaboration with the American University of Beirut. In 2004, it was announced that the German Hanover University would support the establishment of a new institution, the 'Euro University'. Specialising in environmental sciences, the new university is scheduled to open in September 2007 with an initial enrolment of 150 students on Master's and research degree programmes. Students are to be recruited from across the Middle East and will spend 12 months on campus and six months doing on-the-job training in Europe, with Germany as the obvious location. Hanover is cited as a leader in environmental engineering but the precise role of the university in the new venture is unclear. A group of Middle Eastern and European shareholders have invested in the new institution. UK's University of Westminster has since 2004 worked with the new private Kingdom University in Bahrain. The British institution is providing curriculum development services in the areas of business studies, English language and computer science at the foundation and degree level and is also assisting with the development of quality assurance mechanisms.

A branch of the Philippine AMA International University opened in Manama, Bahrain's capital in 2002 and currently offers four Bachelor's and two Master's programmes in computer science, international studies, business informatics and engineering. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland has been operating its 'constituent university', the Medical University of Bahrain since 2004. The institution offers programmes in medicine, nursing and health management and enrolls both local and international students. A purpose built campus is currently under construction and scheduled to finish in 2008. India's Birla Institute of Technology has established a branch campus, the Birla Institute of Technology International

Centre, Bahrain as a private institution with government approval in Bahrain. The Centre offers a four-year engineering degree with the first two years of studies provided in Bahrain and the last two to be completed at the home campus in India. An MBA and various Bachelor's and diploma programmes in business, commerce and technology are also being offered. The New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) has operated in Bahrain since 2003 and opened a new purpose built branch campus in Adliya in June 2005 from where it offers programmes in business administration, computer science, and interior design at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The Arab Open University has an operation in Bahrain (in addition to its branches in Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia). The web site for the Bahrain branch is currently unavailable so information on new initiatives and developments is not forthcoming. However, as [reported](#) by The Observatory in 2005, a partnership between the Bahraini branch and the US mobile content provider, Hot Lava Software, to launch a 'Mobile Learning Environment' (MLE) was agreed a couple of years ago. In the first instance, the co-operation was reportedly aimed at enabling lecturers and students to develop e-content for the University's MBA programme and English language studies. The current internet penetration rate of 21% (in 2006) might limit the take-up of online offerings. However, with a growth of 282% in users between 2000 and 2006, the number is increasing significantly and on par with other countries in the region (except for the UAE where it is somewhat higher).

Bahrain has a study abroad rate similar to other countries in the Gulf region. In 2004, 2,108 tertiary education students were enrolled in institutions outside Bahrain, accounting for 11% of the total tertiary education population. The most popular destination was the UK with 871 students followed by the US with 444, Saudi Arabia with 153 and Jordan with 147. Similar to other Middle Eastern countries, recruitment to the US declined after 9/11. During the academic year 2002-03, 451 Bahraini students were enrolled in US institutions but this number had fallen by almost 20%, to 377 only two years later. The recruitment to the UK has risen over the same period by almost 24%, from 780 Bahraini students enrolled in 2002-03 to 965 in 2004-05. Undergraduate students accounted for the majority of enrolments over the three year period. Australia recruited 111 Bahraini students to the country in 2004 but no historical data is available in the public domain to track trends over the past few years. The most popular subject area for Bahraini students enrolled on Australian programmes offered onshore or through transnational provision, was management and commerce, accounting for 44% of enrolments in 2004, followed by IT with 19% and engineering and technical subjects accounting for 11%.

In 2004, 1,331 international students studied in Bahrain, accounting for 7% of total enrolment and the majority of them were from other Arab states.

Bahrain's Higher Education City project is another example of the trend in the Gulf region towards establishing regional education hubs through the import of foreign provision. Three such establishments are already in place: Knowledge Village in Dubai, [University City](#) in Sharjah, both in the UAE and Education City in Qatar. Plans to establish an 'Academic City' with foreign higher education provision has also been announced in a third part of the UAE, the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The project is currently being developed with details on the operational model, participating institutions etc. yet to be finalised. However, as previously reported by [The Observatory](#), France's University of Sorbonne has already started to offer courses in Abu Dhabi through temporary premises.

The details of investment vary from hub to hub with Qatar providing purpose built facilities and financial incentives to the five North American institutions currently operating in Education City, whereas Dubai's Knowledge Village has established the physical infrastructure for universities to rent and provides tax incentives and exemption from the regulatory framework in place for the UEA proper. The academic hub model for transnational import is only seen in the Gulf states which have the financial means to make an invitation to operate in their countries seem an attractive option. Whilst the gross domestic product per capita for Bahrain at US\$23,100 (Power Purchasing Parity - PPP) is lower than for neighbouring countries such as UAE and Qatar (with US\$43,400 and US\$27,400 respectively), it is significantly higher than for Saudi Arabia (US\$12,800) and other countries in the region such as Egypt and Jordan (US\$3,900 and US\$4,700 respectively).

The hubs are aimed at increasing higher education opportunities for domestic as well as regional or international students and stemming study abroad and the outflow of financial and human resources connected to this. In addition, a diverse higher education sector seems to fit with the demographic profiles of the host nations, which all have significant proportions of expatriates, most of them long-term residents but often without citizenship (33% in the case of Bahrain). However, with the announcement of the establishment of yet another transnational hub in the Gulf region, the question of whether there is sufficient demand in the region is a pressing one. After all, the kingdom of Bahrain exhibits a small population and already has a range of foreign programmes in operation. Recruitment of regional and international students seems to be essential to the successful development of the hub. Enrolment figures for the three hubs currently in operation are not readily available in the public domain, however, anecdotal evidence points to a relatively low number of students being enrolled in at least two of the zones. Collectively the 15 or so institutions operating in Dubai's Knowledge Village are enrolling a substantial number of students (the last official figures indicated a total enrolment of 6,000), but on average this is less than 500 students per university. Figures for the institutions in Qatar are on par with those in Knowledge Village, with no university reported to have more than 400 students enrolled (and some significantly less).

Whether there will be sufficient demand to operate five or possibly more hubs in the region will depend on whether participating institutions can succeed in attracting students not only from the Gulf region but the entire Middle Eastern region and beyond, future tuition fees and living costs, the attractiveness of other study abroad destinations, competitiveness of domestic institutions etc. Demonstrating sufficient student demand and/or already viable operations will also have an impact on the attractiveness of these hubs for foreign institutions. Whilst it might financially make sense for them to operate in the zones, particularly in those that are heavily subsidised by the host countries, foreign providers will most certainly be looking for other advantageous outcomes, such as academic benefits, increased brand visibility, research and development collaboration, in order to provide a continued commitment to these transnational establishments.