



Educational Institutions Still Eager to Establish a Branch Campus in Dubai

Stephen Wilkins

The Emirate of Dubai, one of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has a population of only 3.65 million but more than 70 higher education institutions. In recent years, researchers and commentators have concluded that Dubai's higher education market is saturated and has reached its peak. Indeed, the total enrollments at some institutions have fallen by as much as 30 to 40 percent compared to enrollments five to seven years ago. Still, each year foreign institutions continue to arrive, eager to establish a new campus in the emirate. This begs the question as to why any institution would want to enter such a competitive market. This article reports the findings of research that sought to discover the motivations of the new arrivals for establishing a campus in Dubai, the strategies they intend to implement, and the impacts of these new ventures on Dubai's higher education market.

New Arrivals to Dubai in 2022–2023

In 2022 and 2023, seven foreign institutions arrived in Dubai to establish a branch campus. Two of these institutions are based in the United States (Georgetown University and Harrisburg University of Science and Technology), two in France (ESCP Business School and EM Normandie Business School), two in Italy (Luiss University and Istituto Marangoni), and one in Germany (University of Europe for Applied Sciences). Most of these institutions occupy relatively high positions in regional and global rankings, or they are well-regarded in their specialist field. The new arrivals bring the total number of international branch campuses operating in Dubai at the start of 2024 to 29.

Motivations of Institutions for Establishing a Campus in Dubai

For many institutions, owning campuses in all corners of the globe provides support for their claims of prestige and world-class status. In many cases, international branch campuses are regarded as a lucrative opportunity that also helps a university to establish a global brand. Many institutions appear to have become addicted to international expansion, seeking to open as many branches as possible, as quickly as possible, and in as many exotic locations as possible. For example, EM Normandie Business School aims to establish three more branch campuses in 2024 and 2025, in the United States and Vietnam.

Governments and infrastructure providers invite desirable institutions to establish a branch campus, and these invitations often come with incentives such as funding or ready-made premises. In some cases, the Dubai government makes clear to institutions the programs that are needed to achieve the country's economic and social objectives. For example, ESCP Business School was asked to deliver programs that will meet the challenges of the future in the areas of smart cities, digital transformation, and sustainable development. Once established, there appears to be no shortage of student demand for places in the new ventures.

Foreign institutions often find it easier to begin operations in Dubai compared to other countries because the Dubai government is supportive, there are few onerous requirements, and the higher education infrastructure is well-established. Harrisburg University opened a campus in Panama in 2022 and has found progress slow due to the less developed higher education infrastructure. The institution claims to have learnt from this, and accepted ready-made premises in Dubai Knowledge Park, one of Dubai's two major purpose-built education hubs.

Abstract

The Emirate of Dubai has a population of only 3.65 million but more than 70 higher education institutions, making its higher education market fiercely competitive. However, each year foreign institutions continue to arrive, eager to establish a new campus in the emirate. This article discusses the motivations of these institutions for establishing a campus in Dubai, the strategies that they intend to implement, and the impacts of these new arrivals on Dubai's higher education market.

Competitive Strategies of the New Institutions

In a competitive market, it makes sense for institutions to identify subject areas for which there is demand but no or minimal existing provision. Harrisburg University claims to be a leading STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) university in the United States, and it recognizes that Dubai has few STEM-focused providers.

Most of the new entrants seek to offer something new or different, even in a subject area with abundant provision like business. For example, students at Luiss University's Dubai campus can study fashion and luxury business, tourism management, and sport management. Other institutions aim to deliver applied and vocational education that prepares students for the labor market. The University of Europe seeks to appeal to students who are prepared to "get their hands dirty" (the university's words). Also, by having a physical environment that is bright, open-planned, but cozy—including a small library complete with an electric fireplace—this university hopes to create a unique "boutique vibe."

Dubai's transnational education institutions serve mainly the huge expatriate population, and few institutions have already started capitalizing on Dubai's potential as a regional education hub that could attract international students from the entire Middle East region, as well as from East Africa and South Asia. Harrisburg University hopes to recruit students from neighboring countries as well as from within the UAE. The university recognizes that the Dubai government is keen for students to stay and work in the country after they graduate.

The new institutions may appeal to students who would like to undertake some of their programs at the university's main campus—which most of the institutions allow—or who hope to live and work after they graduate in the country where the university is based. For example, students who graduate from the University of Europe in Dubai are eligible to apply for a six-month German job-seeker's visa, but if they complete their last semester in Germany, they will qualify for an 18-month visa.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most higher education stakeholders in Dubai viewed online and virtual education with a degree of suspicion, but attitudes changed quickly during the pandemic. Online and hybrid models of learning are now much more accepted by students, parents, employers, and the UAE ministry of education. This has encouraged several of the new institutions to deliver graduate programs in hybrid mode, using both virtual and in-person learning.

Impact on Dubai's Higher Education Market

The new universities in Dubai have expanded higher education capacity, which will make it easier for students to obtain a higher education place. The increased competition may also help keep tuition fees from rising too much. But most importantly, the new arrivals offer subjects that are currently not available or which are under-supplied. In most cases, the new programs will support the educational and research aspirations of the Dubai government as well as delivering social, cultural, and economic benefits for the emirate. By delivering in-demand programs that equip students with the knowledge and skills demanded by employers, graduates will enjoy increased employability.

Supporters of transnational education often claim that the presence of foreign institutions increases market competition and encourages existing providers to improve their quality. Indeed, the high level of competition in Dubai has helped ensure the survival of only the highest quality institutions. Students have quickly shunned poorly performing institutions or those with declining reputations. During the last decade, at least eight institutions have closed, either because they were no longer financially viable or because they were compulsorily closed by the regulators for failing to achieve the required quality and accreditation standards. As a result, new institutions may recruit students who would otherwise have enrolled at one of the failed institutions, but they still need to differentiate themselves from the competition, whether through rankings and accreditation or graduate employability and campus vibe. ▲

Supporters of transnational education often claim that the presence of foreign institutions increases market competition and encourages existing providers to improve their quality.

Stephen Wilkins is professor of strategy and marketing at The British University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. E-mail: stephen.wilkins@buid.ac.ae.