

# Tech ed key to Qatar's post-oil growth

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Perhaps no one in Qatar is aware of the fact that the country's energy wealth will run out sooner or later than its leader, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Described by some as a benevolent dictator, the emir has taken the initiative to cultivate Qatar's best and brightest to be able to compete globally since he toppled his father from power a decade ago.

Located in the dusty outskirts of Doha, Education City is currently more a community in the making than a traditional academic campus, as bulldozers and construction workers seem by far to outnumber the students. Nevertheless, this brainchild of the emir and his wife, Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser Al-Misnad, is one initiative in which the royal couple is heavily investing in hopes of ensuring Qatar's future when its petroleum revenue starts to dwindle.

"Gas reserves aren't sustainable ... the only sustainable resource is human capital," said Robert Baxter, public-relations advisor of the Qatar Foundation, which is overseeing the development of the project.

In a country with a mere 750,000 people, only 150,000 are Qatari nationals while the remaining 600,000 are foreigners as diverse as Indian bricklayers to British corporate executives. In short, the cash-rich country has been dependent on foreign workers to provide highly skilled as well as manual labor. The plan, however, is to have more natives hold on to executive roles by training them locally and keeping them in the country.

Hence the tie-up with five U.S. universities, namely the Virginia

Commonwealth School of the Arts, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. One of the most popular bachelor's degrees in this oil-centric country is in petroleum engineering offered by Texas A&M, while Carnegie Mellon's computer science and business administration is also hot in the eyes of many Qatari college students-to-be.

"There's no compromise ... a degree from the Education City campus is the same quality that they would issue back in the United States," Baxter said in an interview with United Press International, emphasizing that the B.A. issued by Georgetown in Doha should be regarded in the same light as that issued by the university's home campus in Washington, especially as the competition to get a place in the program is "the same as at the main campus."

The plan is to expand the network of courses and schools even further by offering a journalism school and an Islamic studies center as well as a business school within the next few years.

In addition, providing Western education at home has been particularly appealing for many female students who are often less willing than their male counterparts to go abroad for their studies, Baxter said. Another factor that could be driving the popularity of the Doha colleges is the fact that some students in the region might feel less amenable to going to the United States, given the hostility towards Muslims, perceived or otherwise, and so they could stay in their home country and obtain their diplomas instead.

Of course, the real test of the quality of a degree obtained is what happens after the student graduates, and whether indeed the outside world accepts a Doha degree on par with a degree from the university's base. Education City has yet to graduate students from any of its colleges

with the exception of design students from the Virginia Commonwealth School. Texas A&M will be graduating its first batch of students of about 60 next year, while Carnegie Mellon's first class of 35 candidates won't graduate until June 2008.

Whether or not the students actually stand the test of being able to make use of their degrees therefore remains to be seen, and to date, many universities that have established satellite campuses overseas have found it difficult if not downright impossible to ensure that the quality of tuition provided both at home and abroad are equal. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Qatari royal family is fully committed to make the initiative work. None of the five academic institutions is paying for any costs to be based in the country. Instead, everything from construction fees to the salaries of the teaching and support staff is being paid by the government, signed off by Sheikh Hamad, estimated to be well into the tens of billions of dollars.

Meanwhile, plans to open a technology park that would make full use of the science students next to Education City are well under way, and blue-chip companies such as Microsoft, Exxon Mobil and EADS are expected to have research facilities there once the park opens in 2007. In addition, there have already been benefits from the tie-up between universities and the Qatari government. For instance, Carnegie Mellon's Software Engineering Institute is working together with the Qatari Supreme Council of Information and Communication Technology in setting up Q-CERT, a computer emergency response team to cyber attacks, last December.

The alliance between the government and the university "would have never happened if a relation didn't already exist with Education City," Baxter said.

Indeed, the presence of Carnegie Mellon in the capital has increased the

country's awareness of the dangers in cyberspace, ultimately leading to an improvement of its capability to provide Internet security.

"This is one of the richest regions in the world, so it's a prime target" for cyber criminals, Q-CERT Director Archie Andrews told UPI. "It's also been a technologically naïve population with money ... prone to phishing, (cyber) attacks and spasm."

As a result, the Education City initiative not only is good for training younger Qataris the latest in information technology on their home turf, but it has also made the government take steps to safeguard its Internet system immediately. Given that only four months have passed since Q-CERT was established, it is still difficult to measure just how effective the unit has been in cutting down potential hazards, but Q-CERT Manager Rashid al-Ali pointed out that the demand for the knowledge the group brings is seemingly insatiable.

"Every seminar (on cybersecurity) that we've organized has been oversubscribed," al-Ali said, adding that the next step for the government to pursue will be to establish laws and regulations to govern cyberspace.

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