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N.Y.U. in the U.A.E.

By **SUZANNE DALEY**

IN a small classroom at [New York University](#) Abu Dhabi, Paulo Lemos Horta was pushing his students to explore the difficulties of translation. In some ways, it might have been a class on any American campus — except that virtually everyone was fluent in a second language.

Between them, Mr. Horta's six students spoke Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, Polish and English. They were able to take a poem written originally in Portuguese and, with occasional help from Google, translate it over and over from one language to another, considering the shifts in meaning and emphasis that resulted.

"You can see," said Mr. Horta, "that some things just cannot be said in another language."

N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi isn't much to look at yet — a low-rise building of steel and purple (one of N.Y.U.'s colors), about the size of a high school, sitting in a drab part of this fast-growing city where minarets and cranes fight for air space.

But it is taking shape nonetheless, opening last September with 150 students and about 45 professors, some like Mr. Horta having moved here for newly created tenure-track jobs. Its modest campus, surrounded by a patch of green grass, belies the scope of the ambition at work here.

Many American colleges and universities have

created outposts around the world. But N.Y.U. is the first to open a liberal arts college intending to roughly reproduce the experience students get in Washington Square. It aims to have 2,200 undergraduates within the next 10 years, part of a plan by New York University's president, John Sexton, to create a worldwide network with N.Y.U.'s name on it. Last month, he announced a similar project for Shanghai, to open in 2013. Mr. Sexton says that the original founders of N.Y.U. saw it as a university "in and of" the city. Now, he believes, it is time for the university to become "in and of the world."

The financing of N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi is noteworthy. The college is being entirely paid for by Abu Dhabi, the largest and richest of the United Arab Emirates, which has so far provided generously, including financial aid for many students and a promise to build a sprawling campus on nearby Saadiyat Island, where branches of the [Louvre](#) and Guggenheim museums are under construction.

Whether the college will succeed, however, remains an open question. It is too soon to say, for instance, what, if any, impact the unrest in the Middle East might have on recruitment. And universities that have tried smaller projects in the region have failed spectacularly in the last year — some, like [Michigan State](#), losing millions of dollars in the process.

"John Sexton has a very entrepreneurial vision here," says Ben Wildavsky, senior fellow at the Kauffman Foundation and author of a book on international education, "The Great Brain Race." "He is trying to turn N.Y.U. into a global talent

magnet. It may not work for many schools. It may not work for N.Y.U. But it is an audacious new way of thinking about a university.”

For now, the students live in a glass office tower, a noisy, dusty 20-minute walk across several eight-lane roads from the purple building, which is already fading in the intense sunlight. But beyond that, they are experiencing a Cadillac education. Most of their classes run like senior seminars. And they don't lack for comfort or entertainment. On a recent evening, a half-dozen students took swimming classes at a local country club. There was kayaking the evening before and a horseback-riding trip planned for the weekend.

Students travel farther afield, too. Mr. Horta's literature class is studying the Portuguese poet Luis de Camoes and the influence that living in the Arab world might have had on him, and he has taken them to a Portuguese fort on the Strait of Hormuz. Rubén Polendo, who teaches a class on theater in the Arab world, is taking his students to India to meet artists and participate in workshops, including one with his mentor.

Laith Agel says he tried not to describe his school to friends when he went home to Wayne, N.J., over break. “They would all just be jealous. I don't talk about it.”

The project is not without its critics, many of whom wonder how an American-style university can manage in a country still ruled by a royal family, where most Emirati women cover their heads and wrap themselves in black [abayas](#) when they go out, and local universities are single sex.

Some N.Y.U. professors have said they feel cheapened by the deal. Some worry that the money can stop at any minute. Others do not want the university affiliated with a country that has a troubling history regarding academic freedom and human rights.

“The faculty was not consulted on this plan,” says Andrew Ross, the chairman of the N.Y.U. chapter of the American Association of University Professors. “If it had been consulted, I’m not sure many of them would have said yes.” But hundreds of faculty members have volunteered to work there on a temporary basis.

“There is a lot of money sloshing around, and that has helped recruit faculty support,” he says. A faculty member could expect to earn a large bonus — in some cases the equivalent of two-thirds of a year’s salary, Mr. Ross says — and “on top of that there are first-class tickets to go over there, your family can go with you, your children can go to private schools for free.”

Officials won’t say what kind of deal they have with the royal family, which gave N.Y.U. \$50 million before the project ever got off the ground. Beyond that, Mr. Sexton will say only that a yearly budget is discussed (he says he has never been “disappointed”) and a 10-year plan exists. The new campus is supposed to open in 2014.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY has waded into a market that may be big but is poorly understood. According to Mr. Wildavsky, the number of students traveling outside of their home countries

for school has grown to three million in the last decade and could reach eight million by 2025. All sorts of universities are making a bid for those students in all sorts of ways.

In 2009, the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education counted more than 160 branch campuses around the world offering full degrees, outposts of universities from 20 countries. After much resistance to sharing the brand, even [Yale](#) is getting in the act. In March, it announced that it would start a liberal arts college in Singapore, also totally financed by the government. The college will be based on Yale's signature resident college concept, in which students live, study and take classes in an intimate setting. Unlike N.Y.U., however, the college will not issue Yale degrees. Diplomas for Yale-N.U.S. College will come from the National University of Singapore.

While Asia, particularly China, has gained traction, the emirates have been at the forefront of the branch campus movement. Qatar's futuristic Education City hosts [Carnegie Mellon](#), [Georgetown](#), [Northwestern](#), [Virginia Commonwealth](#), [Texas A&M](#) and [Cornell](#), the first American medical school to offer degrees overseas. The charter class of doctors graduated last year.

But predicting the market may not be so easy. Some efforts to expand in this region have ended badly. Michigan State, which opened a branch campus in Dubai in 2008, announced last July that it would be canceling all its undergraduate programs. Meanwhile, George Mason, one of the first American universities to open in the United

Arab Emirates, closed its Ras al-Khaimah campus in May without having graduated a single student. Both institutions had trouble attracting strong students and lost financial backing during the economic downturn.

“There may be a vast untapped market, but how big it is, nobody knows,” says Philip G. Altbach, an expert on international higher education at [Boston College](#). “And what it is, nobody knows.” Mr. Altbach says he has seen too many universities rush in “starry eyed” when they are offered money by local governments. “It makes you very au courant to have a foreign branch,” he says. “But they are risking their name brand and reputation. Those institutions that have gone belly up have lost some of their luster or at least looked pretty stupid.”

Mr. Altbach says there are many potential pitfalls out there for the N.Y.U. model. “For one thing, why would foreign students go to N.Y.U.A.D. if their parents can afford an American education? And for Americans, why go to Abu Dhabi if you are interested in the Middle East? Abu Dhabi is a highly scrubbed, highly unrealistic version of the Middle East. It’s kind of a false environment.”

Another issue that has nagged foreign programs is keeping a high-caliber faculty. In the first years, there is some interest, he says. But it quickly wanes.

For his part, Mr. Sexton says N.Y.U.’s presence in Abu Dhabi was simply the natural progression of his desire to make the New York University experience more global. Originally, he was only

envisioning another study-abroad program when he went to meet Sheik Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, in 2006. But the sheik made clear that he wanted nothing less than a full-fledged sister school issuing N.Y.U. diplomas.

The curriculum is based on N.Y.U.'s, but re-engineered for a far smaller institution with cross-cultural perspectives. Instead of focusing on the great books of Western civilization, for instance, the focus is on great books and fundamental ideas of different culture. And classes are small, usually with fewer than 15 students, which for freshmen is practically unheard of.

Several of the professors, like Mr. Horta, who was born in Budapest to Brazilian parents, were attracted to both those aspects. As a bonus, he says, the student body was academically talented and imbued with a certain idealism. "These kids have an intangible quality," he says, "the way they relate to each other. There is a great level of civility. There really is no clique-ism here. It is a little utopian."

The generous financing allowed N.Y.U. to take some unusual steps as it sought new students. It hired the Institute of International Education, which administers the Fulbright scholarships, to scour the world for candidates. Top high schools were asked to nominate students. When N.Y.U. admissions officials had settled on about 275 candidates they liked, they flew them to Abu Dhabi for two days — whether the students had already applied or not.

The same process was repeated this year.

The weekend included a dinner in the desert under the stars, shopping in the massive Madinat Zayed Shopping Center, a visit to the Sheik Zayed Grand Mosque (the chandeliers are the largest in the world, made from gold-plated copper with millions of Swarovski crystals) and a farewell gathering at the opulent Emirates Palace, a \$3 billion hotel that offers the sensation of Las Vegas on steroids. There is even a vending machine that sells gold.

The result is a student body that some New York professors who have taught in Abu Dhabi believe is stronger than the one at Washington Square. By any measure the statistics are impressive: the average math and verbal SAT score is 1445.

N.Y.U. will not discuss what percentage of the class receives financial aid — all supplied by Abu Dhabi, including any travel related to studies — but the figure is high. Officials say that without significant aid they could not compete for students from Canada, Australia or much of Europe, where higher education is cheap or free. Annual tuition with room and board is about the same as in New York — \$53,000.

The current class was culled from 9,048 applications, but the number is deceptive because N.Y.U. applicants could check a box saying they would also like to be considered for Abu Dhabi. Just 957 applied to Abu Dhabi alone. (Of students accepted, four of five enrolled, and only one student has dropped out.) For next fall, 1,184 applicants wanted to be considered for the Abu

Dhabi campus only; another 4,670 were interested in both campuses. The admission rate, officials say, is still 3 percent.

Of the inaugural class, 30 percent is American. Students come from 39 countries and speak 43 languages — 40 percent speak three or more — and range from children of wealthy Emirati families to the very poor. One student, Musbah Dilsebo Ormago, grew up in the streets of Ethiopia before being rescued by a charity. He is not sure how old he is, though he guesses 20. He is studying political science. The soccer team is now named after him. “It is like a small heaven here,” he says. “You explain about your life and all they see is courage. It is not like that everywhere in the world.”

On a recent evening, the school team was playing soccer on the outskirts of the city, a huge mosque lit up in the background. Since there are not enough college teams to play against, the students faced a local company’s team. The N.Y.U. coach, undeterred, shouted out instructions and encouragement from the sidelines.

Some students complain there is not much contact with the world around them. Administrators may be doing their best to reach out to other campuses, but it isn’t easy. For instance, student exchange opportunities often have to be along gender lines. A group of female students will soon meet with the student council from one of the local woman’s colleges. N.Y.U.’s men are not invited.

“I expected it to be easier to get into the

community,” says Alistair Blacklock, who comes from Vancouver. “It has been surprisingly easy to stay in the four-block radius of our own neighborhood.”

Jessica Tattersall, from Sydney, says she will be glad next year when the school is bigger. “I miss the experience of having upperclassmen who can tell us where to go, even just where to go to buy things.” The student body is so small that some typical activities have had to be pared back. Ms. Tattersall, who is busy helping found the student newspaper, says weekly publication just ended up being too ambitious. “There just aren’t enough of us,” she says. “So, it’s once a month.”

The students here are keenly aware of the turmoil in countries around them, issues brought home by classmates from the region. “We all keep up with it every day,” says Chani Gatto-Bradshaw, who is from Toronto. They are also well aware of the controversies surrounding their university. They are quick to defend: N.Y.U. has extracted guarantees from the government, they point out, including American-style academic freedom and an understanding that conditions for workers building the campus will be better than elsewhere in the Emirates.

They are more likely to talk about how they might influence conditions than protest them. “I would like to do something about the environment,” says Mr. Blacklock. “There is no recycling system here. If you look around you can see there is not much sense of the desert as a biosphere. It would be nice to be able to raise awareness.”

Ms. Gatto-Bradshaw is fascinated by her host country. She finds the Emiratis to be a lot like her Italian family. "They are family-oriented and they love to get together and eat," she says. She has her own abaya, a present from a classmate who has taken her home for dinner on weekends. She is now skillful at tying her headscarf in both the Emirati and [Palestinian](#) style. "It's kind of fun to wear it," she says. "It's like dressing up." The women's taxis, which have pink lights and are driven by women, are a particularly pleasant feature of life for women in Abu Dhabi, she says. "You don't have to take them, but they are very nice. They always smell good, too."

Dorms have an all-male and all-female floor that the opposite sex is barred from visiting, in deference to Muslim students who are more comfortable in that atmosphere. Otherwise it's business as usual.

Four floors resemble dorm life in the United States. Posters are stuck all over the hallways, and there is hardly a made bed in sight. And some students have proved savvy at finding liquor — in stores that cater to foreigners or hotel bars. "It works just like it does in America," says one student. "The drinking age is 21, but you can get around that."

Many students, though, prefer hookah bars because they are legal. Public drunkenness is against the law, punishable by fines and jailing, and gay rights are nonexistent. Drug laws are even tougher; dealers can get the death penalty. And tourists have been jailed for kissing on the street.

So far, students have stayed out of trouble. Mr. Sexton says an incident is sure to crop up eventually.

“I have them here,” he says. “A couple years ago, I had two students who wanted to copulate on a desk as an art project. So something will happen. I’m sure.”

Suzanne Daley is European correspondent and former education editor of The Times.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 24, 2011

An article last Sunday in the special Education Life section about New York University’s Abu Dhabi campus misspelled the name of a student. He is Laith Aqel, not Laif Aqel. The article also misstated, using information from N.Y.U., the number of applicants flown to Abu Dhabi last year to see the campus. It was 274, not 300.