



Student walking at the New York University Abu Dhabi campus located on Saadiyat Island in the UAE on 26 October 2014.

Women and Restrictive Campus Environments: A Comparative Analysis Between Public Universities and International Branch Campuses in the UAE

by Rana AlMutawa

Many nationals have criticized the presence of Western international branch campuses (IBCs) in the “Global South,” perceiving them as a new form of colonialism.¹ These critics argue that the dominance of IBCs allows Western higher education institutions to grow more powerful while local universities devolve into smaller and less important institutions, thus creating further inequalities in global educational power structures.² Though a valid concern, these criticisms ignore an important aspect of what makes IBCs particularly popular in the Gulf where they are commonly found. IBCs offer students a less restrictive environment than public universities (PUs) in the region—particularly for women.

As women in the Gulf states continue to outperform men in educational participation and achievement, a debate over the “reverse gender gap” has surfaced.³ While those who believe that a reverse gender gap exists argue that males have become underprivileged within the education system, schools and universities still maintain patriarchal gender norms.⁴ At PUs in the UAE, for example, female students’ guardians receive a text message every time a student enters or exits campus. Security guards are also stationed at

II. Analysis

each gate, and a female guardian's permission is required to participate in off-campus field trips.⁵

This extreme form of guardianship may negatively impact female students by training them to become more dependent on men. When students' guardians are informed of their whereabouts, the strict secondary school environment is replicated at the university level. Indeed, research has shown that personal autonomy during university provides students more opportunity for personal growth.⁶ This suggests that the restrictive environments at PUs can hinder student development. For example, Omani women studying in the US said they personally grew and became more self-sufficient because of their experience studying away from friends and family.⁷ While conservative society may prefer PUs because students can get an education within the confines of acceptable cultural norms, it's possible that students there benefit less in terms of personal growth.

The benefits of IBCs

Students at IBCs also benefit from the diversity found within their campuses. Private universities and IBCs are home to students from myriad nationalities—the exact opposite of PUs, where almost all students are nationals. Students at PUs barely interact with people of different backgrounds, religions and lifestyles during their university experience. Yet Gulf states are themselves demographically diverse, and PU students would benefit from engaging with non-nationals at an earlier stage. While this is beneficial to both men and women, the fact that Emirati females' social life outside the family are more restricted than males of the same age means that these opportunities at university are especially vital, as they may define a large part of their social relationships.

Another benefit of IBCs is that they are often much more open to the community than PUs are. Universities such as NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) are very active in their seminars and events, many of which are open to the public.⁸ In comparison, PUs such as Zayed University (ZU) host events that are typically open only to students and ZU faculty, and which require ID registration to enter for those unaffiliated with the university.

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The spatial design of these universities is also significant. For example, ZU campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are completely gated, with security guarding every entrance to ensure that females do not leave campus and males do not enter the female-only areas. Meanwhile, NYUAD and the IBCs at Knowledge Village in Dubai are completely open to the public. While some private universities, such as the American University in Dubai, require ID registration for visitors to enter campus, IBCs generally remain more open to the public. The advantage of having open campuses is that they allow students and the broader local community to engage with each other more directly, thereby encouraging the free movement of ideas. Indeed, when the flow of ideas is restricted at PUs, there is less opportunity for students' personal growth and development.

The effects of gender segregation at PUs may also extend into the workforce. Jane Bristol-Rhys, a professor at ZU, has researched this issue. Although she noted that students managed to adapt quickly to a gender-integrated environment, she argued that they would become docile around Emirati men, refusing to discuss or debate things they thought Emirati men were doing wrong.⁹

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PU in the Gulf

That being said, not all PUs in the Gulf are the same. Kuwait University (KU) differs from most other PUs in the region by being open to the public—both students and visitors come and go as they please. Since there is a history of civil society and political participation in Kuwait, political and social activity is generally more noticeable on campus, too.

Despite a growing conservative base in the country, Kuwait is still considered more liberal than other Gulf states.¹⁰ New laws dictate that universities must be gender-segregated, but this has not yet been fully implemented. However, the fact that gender segregation is still a point of contention in Kuwait signifies that Kuwaitis share similar cultural concerns with their Gulf neighbors. In any case, IBCs in Kuwait are still regarded as more liberal and Westernized than KU, and there has even been a conservative backlash against IBCs in Kuwait for this reason.¹¹

Although the quality of education at IBCs is ambivalent,¹² one clear difference with PUs is campus life. Women in the Gulf are outperforming men in educational achievement, but they have not yet broken the bonds of patriarchy. These structures are still engrained in public educational institutions. Women are “protected” from the perceived threats of the outside world, sheltered from men and people who hold different nationalities, religious views and even ideas. Women are expected to embark on their studies while exposing themselves only to what is deemed culturally acceptable. And herein lies perhaps the biggest drawback for women studying at PUs in the Gulf.

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¹ Altbach, Philip G. “Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok.” *International Higher Education* 23 (2001): 2-4.

² Ibid.

³ Ridge, Natasha. *Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States: Embracing the Global, Ignoring the Local*. New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2014.

⁴ Al-Muftah, Esraa. “Women in a Corporatized Higher Education Setting: The Unheard Stories of Qatar University Female Students.” Presented at the Comparative and International Education Society Conference, Vancouver, BC, 2016.

⁵ Bristol-Rhys, Jane. “The Dilemma of Gender-Separated Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates.” In *Higher Education in the Gulf States: Shaping Economies, Politics and Culture*, edited by Christopher Davidson and Peter Mackenzie, 99-109. London: Saqi Books, 2008.

⁶ McDermott-Levy, R. “Going Alone: The Lived Experience of Female Arab-Muslim Nursing Students Living and Studying in the United States” *Nursing Outlook* 59 (2011), 266-277.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ NYUAD events: <http://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/news-events/abu-dhabi-events.html>

⁹ Bristol-Rhys, 106.

¹⁰ Mahgoub, Yasser. “Socio-cultural Sustainability of Future Learning Environments: The Case of the New Kuwait University Campus.” *Open House International* 34 (2009): 68-74.

¹¹ Tetrault, Mary Ann. “Identity and Transplant-University Education in the Gulf: The American University of Kuwait.” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1 (2011), 81-98.

¹² Bhuian, Shahid N. “Sustainability of Western Branch Campuses in the Gulf Region: Students’ Perspectives of Service Quality.” *International Journal of Education Development* 49 (2016), 314-323; Khalidi, Ahmad, and Ahmad Khatib. “Students’ Perception of the Learning Environment in Business Education in Kuwait: A Comparative Study Between Private and Public Universities.” *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2014), 59-68.