



Submission No 18

Inquiry into Australia's trade and investment relationship with the economies of the Gulf States

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TRADE WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG IN DUBAI

The University of Wollongong (UOW) has had a major presence in the United Arab Emirates since 1992. Initially this presence was provided English language programs. However, with the development of undergraduate and graduate programs the University graduated its first degree students in 1996. Whilst originally a campus of UOW, the university has been known since 2003 as the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD).

The University of Wollongong in Dubai is an associated entity of the Illawarra Technology Corporation (ITC) which itself is an unlisted public company subsidiary of the University of Wollongong (UOW), established in 1981 as part of the University's strategy to expand its commercial capabilities. ITC has an independent Board with the shareholder, UOW, holding a director's position.

The University of Wollongong in Dubai has its own Charter with a separately constituted Board of Trustees and Academic Board to ensure high standards of education and corporate governance consistent with the expectations of the Federal Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Abu Dhabi as well as Australian academic standards of educational quality.

It currently has a student population of 1500, with current projections for September 2004 likely to see this number increase to over 2000. It is the fastest growing university in the Emirates and currently operates from two sites at Jumeira and Knowledge Village.

Currently UOWD offers undergraduate programs in Business, Commerce and Information Technology and graduate programs in Business, International Business and Quality Management. It is proposing to offer undergraduate programs in Accounting and postgraduate programs in Educational Leadership, Strategic Marketing, Human Resource Management, Banking, and Information Technology Management. UOWD is also proposing to develop programs in Engineering in the near future.

UAE ACCREDITATION PROCESSES

Whilst originally a welcomed partner in the development of educational excellence, recent difficulties associated with the University's attempts to gain accreditation from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research are causes for concern.

The UAE government requires that all Universities are licensed and each individual program offered by the university must be accredited. UOWD received its license to operate in 1999, and has been seeking to have its programs accredited for over four years.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research was established in 2000. Prior to that, the University dealt with the Ministry of Education, but has sought to comply with every requirement mandated by the Government and its agencies. The Ministry also established a three person Commission for Academic Accreditation in 2000 to assist the desired process of having all universities in the UAE offer only accredited programs to strengthen the educational standards in the Emirates.

Final guidelines for accreditation were published in August 2003. Universities that currently offer programs must seek to have those programs accredited, whilst those programs proposed to be offered must seek accreditation eligibility. To assist the Commission make recommendations to the Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research, expert panels are assembled consisting of academics from the United States. The panels, accompanied by a Commissioner, visit universities and inspect every aspect of the University as well as the content of the program(s) under examination.

Following the inspections, the university receives a Report from the Commission. These reports contain "recommendations" that the university must comply with. They are mandated obligations, and the university must respond to the Commission outlining how it intends to deal with or has dealt with the particular issues raised. The recommendations can cover everything from course content to university services and facilities to admission procedures to governance arrangements.

In February 2004, UOWD underwent its first two accreditation visits in respect of its undergraduate programs in Information Technology and its proposed Masters in Education (Educational Leadership) program. In March, the university received the Commission's reports of these visits.

ACCREDITATION ISSUES FOR UOWD

A number of recommendations contained in the Reports have significant implications for UOWD. In terms of undergraduate programs, the UAE Government apparently is of the view that only American university four-year programs, comprising a foundation year consisting of general credit courses plus a three-year undergraduate degree, are appropriate.

UOWD offers the traditional Australian model and its courses are in fact based on identical courses at UOW, modified for local conditions. A "freshman" foundation year is offered to those students whose secondary school outcomes do not permit immediate entry into the degree program. The Commission for Academic Accreditation would appear now to be mandating that UOWD move to the four-year model, with almost no room for exemption from the foundation year.

The University's concern is that the Commission, and by inference government, has failed to recognize the quality and standards contained within the Australian

undergraduate degree. It is our strong contention that our commitment to quality and excellence in education should be recognized through the continued offering of three-year undergraduate programs.

With respect to UOWD's graduate programs, the Commission's report relating to the accreditation eligibility application for the Masters in Education (Educational Leadership) program contains equally serious recommendations. These relate specifically to mandating that the Masters program be increased from eight to ten units, and that an English proficiency IELTS score of 6.5 be applied for admission.

The logic of both recommendations is flawed. The standard program length for Masters degrees in Australian, British, Canadian and many American universities is eight. With respect to the mandated English score this is clearly discriminatory, as most existing UAE universities require an IELTS score of 6.0 or less for admission to Masters programs.

Our concern is that these recommendations may similarly be applied to our existing and proposed graduate offerings following future accreditation visits, several of which are scheduled for May and June. Again, UOWD offers graduate programs based on similar courses at UOW, and the degrees that are granted are internationally recognized and educationally excellent.

The final major issue raised in the accreditation reports concerns governance and the relationship between the University of Wollongong and the University of Wollongong in Dubai. The Report dealing with the Masters in Education (Educational Leadership) has now mandated the severing of all dependent relationships between the two entities. Other recommendations that mandate how this is to be achieved have significant financial, educational and governance implications.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2003 between the Director of the Commission for Academic Accreditation and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong that clearly established the basis for UOWD operating in the Emirates. That document recognized the nature of the relationship between the two entities, and specified how governance procedures would be established between them. The University is therefore deeply concerned that at least one of the Reports has chosen to ignore these agreed upon protocols in framing recommendations that manifestly render the relationship between UOW and UOWD almost unworkable.

When the University was invited and encouraged to establish in Dubai, it was always on the basis of it offering Australian degree programs through what was essentially a foreign campus of one of Australia's leading universities. Accordingly, the University has invested heavily in its Dubai operation on this basis, both in terms of physical assets and in people.

DISCUSSION

In recent days, discussion has occurred between the Commission and University to endeavour to resolve these issues. It would seem that agreement has been reached. The Commission advised that the mandated 6.5 IELTS score can be modified to a score of 6.0, and that the proposed Masters program can be eight units in length

instead of the ten proposed, provided the material be incorporated in those eight units. A compromise has also been developed for undergraduate programs whereby all students will have exposure to general courses as part of their degree. There will still be the opportunity to offer exemptions for appropriate students. There seems to be a tacit recognition of the Australian three-year degree.

However, these issues will only be finalized when the University is given accreditation for the programs.

The University is presently preparing its formal response to the Commission report. It is also preparing for the next accreditation visits in mid-May.

Of more general concern too is the lengthy and costly process associated with accreditation. Each program has to be individually accredited, not the University as a whole. Whilst the Commission has grouped programs together, it is still time consuming and costly, as the cost associated with each inspection is largely borne by the University.

CONCLUSION

Other Australian universities considering the UAE as a potential destination should consider the Wollongong experience. There are clearly huge barriers to overcome. As education is one of Australia's largest export earners, trade implications should not be overlooked.

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