

NYU's Abu Dhabi campus

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JOE JEAN, A 25-year—old Haitian, cannot believe his luck. In the aftermath of the earthquake of 2010, University of the People, an American online university, offered scholarships to Haitians. Mr Jean took one of them up to study computer science and, as one of UoPeople's top students, was offered a place at New York University's Abu Dhabi campus. He gets his tuition and living expenses paid, plus a stipend of \$500 a quarter and two flights home a year.

NYU Abu Dhabi started up in 2008. in 2014 it moved to a new campus on Saadiyat Island, which, in contrast to the rest of the emirate, is intended as a haven of culture and beauty. (...) For now, most of Saadiyat Island is a building site, but NYU's neighbours will soon be local outposts of the Guggenheim, the Louvre and the Sorbonne, housed in equally elegant buildings.

Abu Dhabi's rulers want to turn the emirate into "one of the world's true cultural capitals" and to improve its education system, according to Khaldoon al Mubarak, an aide to Abu Dhabi's crown prince, who is on NYU's board of trustees. (...) For the privilege of hosting NYU, Abu Dhabi has forked out an initial donation of \$50m and paid for the campus. It also covers most students' tuition and living costs. When it is full, there will be 2,000 of them, the great majority of them non-Emiratis. if they cost as much to educate as do students at top American universities, the bill must be over \$100m a year.

The Abu Dhabi campus, along with one in Shanghai, fulfils the dream of John Sexton, NYU's president, to create a "global networked university". It has, he says, led to "an extraordinary elevation of brand", as well as more concrete benefits, including contributions to overheads (including his salary), new jobs and the ability to hire people who would not have come otherwise. (...)

Some faculty are hired directly to the Abu Dhabi campus; some come from New York for stints of a few weeks to a few years. The money is good—up to twice as much as at home—and conditions are exceedingly comfortable (...) The material rewards are not the only attraction. "The teaching is amazing here," says Justin Blau, a professor of biology at the campus. "The classes are really small, the students more motivated." And everything is so new that "it allows us to do things differently." The experimental research building, for instance, brings together biology, engineering and chemistry, enabling scientists to work across departmental boundaries.

Not everybody is happy. Mr Sexton has rubbed the faculty in New York up the wrong way over pay and property development, and the Abu Dhabi venture is another manifestation of his "imperial presidency", according to Andrew Ross, president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors in New York. There have been allegations of abuses of the workers who built the campus, and questions about whether an institution that depends on freedom of speech can flourish

In an autocracy. "It's a monarchy, not an autocracy," says Mr Sexton, describing the crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, as a "philosopher-king". (...)