On the one hand, the population is young and willing to study and, on the other the political situation worldwide restricts the travel possibilities to Europe and North America for many young Arabs and Muslims. Experts are pointing out that the number of Arab students attending American and European universities has decreased by at least 50% in the last five years.
Different types of universities and higher education institutions as well as national strategies are easily identified in various Arab countries. Qatar has founded the state-sponsored “Education City” where leading American universities run among others medical and design schools. The UAE established the “Knowledge Village” in Dubai, where branches of Australian, Indian, Russian, Canadian and British universities are offering many programs on a commercial basis. The renowned French Sorbonne University has recently signed an agreement with the government of Abu Dhabi to open its first campus outside France.

In Egypt, huge local private investments have been made recently in higher education either with international cooperation (the German University, the British University, the French University) or with local know-how (Mısır International University).

Universities are becoming an important factor for modern urban developments. In Jordan, a state-owned German-Jordanian university has been founded and a new US-funded American University is planned. Local and Arab investors run more than 10 private universities in Jordan (Amman National University, Petra University, Zeituna University and others).

The same phenomena can be observed in Lebanon, Syria and Morocco. The first private colleges have been established in Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait as well. Talk about “off-shore” universities, which mean worldwide branches of one “mother-university”. Countries like Australia and India are becoming global players in the business of off-shore universities. They promote the English language as a “lingua franca” for international education and they use their long-established connections with British universities as a marketing strategy and a quality label.

Private and fee-charging universities in Arab countries are generating, on the one hand, new possibilities for local dynamics of socio-economic development: students and teaching staff need housing, transportation and are promoting small businesses (food outlets, bookshops) as well as encouraging various cultural events.

On the other hand, universities are becoming an important factor for modern urban developments; clusters of universities and institutions are dominating whole quarters and are changing the form and character of the cities. In this context, higher education is functioning as a magnet for people and money as well as a marketing element for countries and cities. Qatar and the UAE aim to market themselves as regional centers of qualitative higher education where students from West and South Asia and Africa have the possibility of gaining internationally recognized degrees in a cultural environment that is more or less similar to that in their own home countries. For many Arab, Muslim and Hindu families and students, this cultural environment is crucial for the choice of the university, especially for female students that make up more than 50% of the students in the majority of Arab countries.

The tourism and travel business has been gaining impressively from the changes in higher education in terms of tourism infrastructure and of cities’ images. Hotels and other accommodation facilities are mushrooming in and around the university campuses. Academic activities in universities promote cultural tourism. Cultural tourism that profits from book exhibitions, theater, cinema and fine art festivals is able to widen its offers for domestic and international tourists. Here it is important to mention that the staff and the students of the international universities are the best “marketing” and “advertisement” strategies for whole destinations by addressing and attracting new tourist segments as well as by promoting alternative tourist sites and activities.

"Knowledge Village in Dubai"