

Global Education Services Not a Priority

By Lee Berthiaume

Published by Embassy, February 20th, 2008

Ten years ago, the Qatari government decided to start looking for an international partner with which it could build a post-secondary institution that would provide the Middle Eastern country with much-needed training, especially in the oil and gas sectors.

Following a protracted global search, they decided on Canada, eventually settling on a partnership with the College of the North Atlantic (CNA) in Newfoundland.

Since then, the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar has thrived, employing 500 Canadians in the Gulf state who teach 2,000 students a variety of skills, not all related to oil and gas.

The partnership, in turn, has generated hundreds of millions of dollars for the college and the provincial and federal governments, according to a CNA official.

Yet government and education industry officials say the Canadian presence in the burgeoning international education services industry is woefully small, even as other countries are moving full steam ahead.

Last year, members of the Standing Committee on International Trade visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. In their final report, tabled in the House last November, the members noted the huge opportunities for Canadian educational services that existed in those countries.

"If there was a common refrain to our meetings," the report reads, "it was that there are vast opportunities in the region when it comes to the provision of education services."

Of particular note was the need these countries had for specialized schools. Saudi Arabia alone, rich as it is with oil money, was planning to grant 82 licenses to private universities over three years.

Countries like Australia, New Zealand and even Malaysia were highlighted as being extremely active in the region, while members heard that "Canada's large universities are complacent about offering services abroad."

"In spite of the opportunities for education, it is clear that the sector is not a priority for Canada," the report reads, adding that Canadian trade commissioners are not actively promoting the sector.

And the opportunities aren't limited to the Middle East. During a recent trip to India, Conservative MP Ted Menzies noticed that Australia and Norway, among other countries, were extremely active in promoting themselves to young Indians.

"I felt like we were the Johnny-come-lately on the education front," said Mr. Menzies, who also participated in the Middle East trip with the Trade committee.

"Since I've come back from that, and this Middle East trip as well, any time I've met university presidents and representatives, I've encouraged them to pursue this, have a look at this.... Expand your borders."

Mr. Menzies said such programs create links between the host countries and Canada, bring money into the country and help Canadian post-secondary institutions by expanding their student populations.

However, Mr. Menzies said it's really up to individual institutions to take the initiative, especially since they lie outside federal jurisdiction.

"I sense the only thing we can do at this point is encourage them," he said. "It may be something that we can share office spaces with them and the provinces...maybe we need to focus."

However, Liberal Trade critic Navdeep Bains, who participated in the trip, said he could not understand why education services have not been prioritized for promotion by Canadian trade commissioners.

"What we need to have is have trade commissioners identifying opportunities with our institutions here and matching them up and pairing them up," he said.

"Ultimately it's going to be institution-to-institution, but the government can put a focus on it, prioritize it, facilitate it in a more meaningful way and drive that agenda."

Politics Affecting Education

Kevin Baker, vice-president of the College of the North Atlantic's Qatar project, estimated the 10-year deal with Qatari officials would net \$300 million to the provincial and federal governments, as well as good financial returns to the college itself.

In addition, knowledge transfer and expertise sharing have been major side benefits.

Not to say that everything has been smooth sailing. There are countless challenges that have popped up since the college opened its doors in September 2002, Mr. Baker said.

"Working the Middle East, regional instability is constant," he said. "Those kinds of things don't impact us directly. But they certainly cause some challenges in recruitment.

"Even from a geopolitical level, government's views of the Middle East as a region that should be or should not be pursued, these things seem to be in a state of flux, and as relations warm or cool, these things seem to trickle down and have some impact on

your relations with the partner."

At the same time, there have been countless challenges to be overcome, many of them at the federal level. Such problems include taxation and visa regulations.

Mr. Baker said the best thing the federal government can do is pay more attention to the opportunities and facilitate such deals, as well as increase its diplomatic and political presence and attention to the region.

"The government is an enabler," he said. "They open doors for these kinds of opportunities. I think we need take a leadership role."

Jennifer Humphries of the Canadian Bureau for International Education, which facilitated the CNA-Qatar deal, said more Canadian institutions are starting to realize the potential benefits that can be derived from such agreements.

"Canadian institutions are becoming more interested in this area and willing to take the leap, but it is something that we have traditionally been reluctant to do," she said.

"Although we're recognized as having the quality, we're not willing to make the leap. I think many institutions, though, are poised to take that leap."

http://www.embassymag.ca/html/index.php?display=story&full_path=/2008/february/20/global_education_not_priority/