Universities warn of more closures

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Universities have warned that more branch campuses may close because of a shortage of students.

"Many have come in with far too ambitious targets and I can see more closures," said Raymi van der Spek, vice president of administration at the University of Wollongong in Dubai.

"I don't believe their numbers are where they expected them to be. There are too many institutions, which fragments the number of students that each can attract."

The US-based George Mason University announced last month that it would leave its Ras al Khaimah campus at the end of the spring term. George Mason launched undergraduate courses in 2006 with fewer than 45 students, and now there are only about 120 degree students with an additional 60 in English-language programmes.

The market for international students is "quite competitive", said Zubair Hanslot, academic director of the University of Bolton’s RAK campus. He added that universities with modest admission requirements, such as Bolton, were better placed to grow than more selective institutions.

Many universities suffered because they offered too many courses at their inception, which is costly and difficult to sustain if enrolment numbers are low, Mr van der Spek said. "The approach taken by many has been to offer a smorgasbord of offerings because they think they need this to attract students, but they end up with a few and still have to provide the facility and the teachers."

He said that in the current economic climate, parent universities might be reluctant to support a branch campus that was only marginally profitable.

"They will be looking after their core business, so their appetite for risk is diminished."

Prof Jim Mienczakowski, head of higher education at Abu Dhabi Education Council, said the closing of branch campuses was not unique to the UAE. Some universities had pulled out of China, for example, so some closings were not necessarily cause for concern.

However, he added that the number of universities in the UAE was high compared with, for example, Australia, which has a larger population yet only 36 universities. And he cautioned that the way that many campuses here focused on a limited range of disciplines posed risks if student preferences shifted.

George Mason announced that it was closing after failing to reach a financing agreement with Edrak, the RAK government institution that funded and provided facilities for the campus. Edrak will launch the American University of Ras al Khaimah to replace it.

The expansion of higher education has been fuelled by the creation of three major free zones: Dubai Knowledge Village, Dubai International Academic City and the RAK Free Trade Zone. There are 28 schools in the two Dubai free zones. Abu Dhabi has not allowed large numbers of university branches to open, although the Paris-Sorbonne University has launched a campus and New York University plans another.

George Mason's closing could discourage students from applying to some smaller branch campuses, said Dr Balasubramani Ramjee, director of Manipal University at Dubai International Academic City. "People may be sceptical about new ones," he said.

Competition was also reduced as universities increasingly specialised, said Maia Manilla, the head of marketing and public relations at Murdoch University’s Dubai branch. "Problems only emerge when you have many universities that compete for students with the same programmes," she said.

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