

The Sorbonne in the Desert

Next Fall, the Paris IV unit in Abu Dhabi will welcome its first students.

Proof of the prestige that the French higher education system is still prestigious: the inauguration in October of a true "Sorbonne Two" in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates! Housed in temporary premises while awaiting its own campus in October 2007, this branch of the Paris-IV university will initially welcome two hundred students, the number of which will increase to not less than 1,500 over the long term.

A real central player in this somewhat crazy idea: the advisor in international relations, Pascal Renouard de Vallière. A connoisseur of the Emirates where he has worked for 25 years and has a vast relational network, an eternal militant for the French-speaking world, a friend of Jean-Robert Pitte in charge of the Sorbonne, he easily convinced Pitte of the project's opportunities, also supported by various French parliamentarians, led by Olivier Dassault.

In parallel, he won the approval of the Emir of Abu Dhabi who succeeded his father at the end of 2004 and, like him, hoped to strengthen ties between France and the Emirates, which led to the signature of an agreement on 19 February 2006 in the presence of the French Minister of National Education, Gilles de Robien, the Minister of Higher Education of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, and Jean-Robert Pitte, the President of Université Paris-IV.

The result had to be grandiose: a real, small university town is currently rising from the ground at Khalifa Bay, close to Abu Dhabi's airport. While the cost of construction, estimated at €25 to €30 million, is fully paid by the Emirates, like the future cost of operations, the education will be identical to that of the Pantheon: gender blind and secular, provided in French by French professors (on secondment or via the internet), with the program designed in Paris and full equivalence of the diplomas of the home office and its "subsidiaries". The only difference, but a fundamental one: the students in the Emirates will pay between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per year in fees, a percentage of which will be transferred to the Sorbonne, providing it with non-negligible breathing room.

"More than a simple educational project", insists Pascal Renouard de Vallière, "this is the beginning of a friendship based on education and culture. All other types of relations, in particular economic ones, will benefit from it, even if they are not its main objective."

Gérard Gachet