

Blazing a trail with veterinary skills

The first batch of veterinary medicine students at UAEU are now half way through their five year degree course: Sana Panjwani talks to the programme's head of department and meets two future vets...

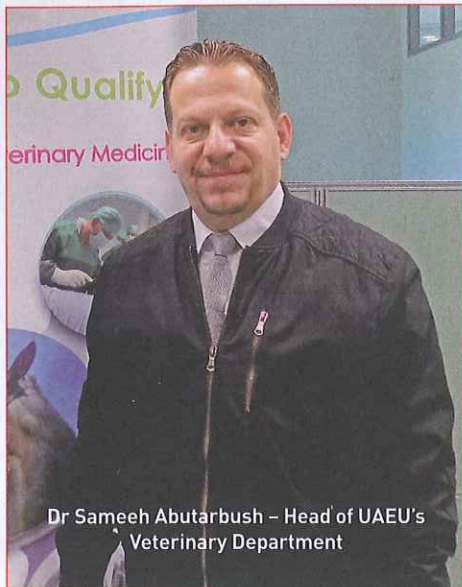
In 2013, the College of Food and Agriculture at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) launched the first veterinary medicine bachelors programme in the country. It remains today the only degree course of its kind in the UAE.

The five-year course is currently only accepting nationals. It was approved and introduced by the UAEU council in an effort to bring an influx of Emirati veterinary doctors into a field where only a handful of nationals out of a total of around 400 vets in the UAE, practise.

Dr Sameeh Abutarbush, the Head of the Veterinary Department, has been in charge of the programme since the start and moved to Al Ain in 2013 to take up this position. "There are four other professors working with me in this department, but we will continue to expand as demand dictates," Dr Sameeh, a Canadian of Jordanian origin, explained.

With close to 17 years of experience in the field of veterinary medicine, he specialises in large animals with a special focus on horses. His career to date has included veterinary positions in American and Canadian colleges and he has held the role of Assistant Professor in Canadian and Jordanian universities.

Dr Sameeh is also the author of three veterinary medicine textbooks, which his students will be using in their final years.



Dr Sameeh Abutarbush – Head of UAEU's Veterinary Department

"There are three parts to the programme," Dr Sameeh explained. "The first is the university's general educational requirement. This is followed by basic sciences such as anatomy, physiology, histology and animal husbandry.

"The third is clinical sciences, which is heavy on practical work and focusses on surgery, reproduction, infectious diseases and internal medicine," he added.

The courses are locally-focussed, featuring training in camel and equine sports' medicine as well as meat inspection in slaughterhouses. It also includes more general courses such as animal welfare, nutrition and ethics.

At the time of the programme's inauguration, only five students enrolled – all female. However, the past three years have seen a steady growth in numbers and there are today, 11 male and 55 female students at various levels of their veterinary training.

The girls from the first batch are currently in their third year, still two years shy of graduating.

Faiza Al Faqi and Wadima Al Dhaheri, two of the students from the first batch, both explained that it was their undying love of animals which prompted them to enrol when they heard that UAEU was offering a Bachelor's degree in Veterinary Medicine.

Both girls were enrolled in different programmes elsewhere. Faiza was at the University of Sharjah, studying dentistry while Wadima was majoring in media at Zayed University. Upon hearing about the programme they both immediately switched and moved to Al Ain to follow their passion.

"I really want to stop the pain and suffering of all animals," said Faiza. "And I want to be the voice for the voiceless," added Wadima, referring to the stray street cats and the magnitude of animal abuse cases.

Outside UAEU, both Faiza and Wadima have engaged in their own personal ventures: Faiza has, since 2013, worked in the Dubai Municipality's veterinary services section, Wadima has taken Al Ain Zoo's two-week vet programme which involved hands-on experience in animal care such as cleaning and feeding.

"I would like to help make a change in peoples' attitude towards animals. I'd like to promote animal welfare in the UAE and go as far as I can in my chosen career for the benefit of my country," said Wadima.

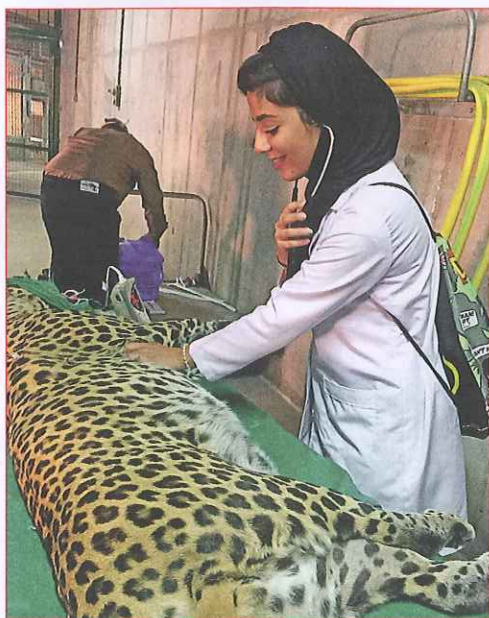
"It's a challenge being a woman in this field. I've had people tell me that because I'm a girl, I won't be able to handle it but I'll show them the opposite," Faiza said.

Graduates of this programme will have the opportunity to work within a range of veterinary avenues such as surgery, research, food and hygiene inspection and management of wildlife.

"There is a huge need and demand for Emirati veterinary professionals in the field," said Dr Sameeh. "If our students were to graduate right now, they would immediately find jobs. The market looks good for the next 10 to 15 years.

"In fact, I doubt that there is any other field in the UAE which is offering as many prospects and opportunities than the field of veterinary medicine," he concluded.

The programme is supported by a number of government authorities including the Ministry of Presidential Affairs (MOPA) as well as Dubai Municipality which offers a select amount of scholarships for the programme.



Wadima conducts a check-up on an Al Ain Zoo leopard