The common perception of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of growth, freshness and innovation. No discussion on the status of dentistry in the Emirates would be complete without offering a brief insight into this unique context.

The UAE became independent in 1971 and is comprised of a federation of seven emirates with a current population of approximately 7.2 to 7.6 million inhabitants. Along with Qatar, another Gulf country, it was one of the two fastest growing (>10 per cent) populations in the world between 2000 and 2010. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are the most populated emirates and comprise about 67 per cent of the UAE population — approximately 88 per cent of the population is expatriate. Currently, there are four colleges of dentistry in three emirates. The first postgraduate dentistry educational initiative to operate in the UAE was the European University College, which began offering its programmes in 2007. The Boston University Institute for Dental Research and Education had offered academic programmes from 2008 but closed in June 2012. The newest postgraduate facility in the UAE, the Dubai School of Dental Medicine, began operating this month.

Dental education in the Emirates, like the UAE federal monarchy, draws upon best practices primarily in Western countries. The dental curriculum at the University of Sharjah was modelled on that of the University of Adelaide in Australia. Boston University used its own American template to compile postgraduate specialty curricula. The European University College collaborates with Swedish universities and is influenced by the American Dental Association accreditation guidelines, while the postgraduate curricula at Dubai School of Dental Medicine is patterned after the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

The phenomenal growth witnessed in Dubai is matched by the extraordinary efforts and proficiency demonstrated by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) established in 1999 by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In my view, the CAA has established world-class UAE educational standards based upon the best educational practices primarily in the USA, Europe and Australia. These best practices are represented in the CAA Standards for Licensure and Accreditation to which all UAE education in dentistry is held accountable.

Besides being a career dental academic and administrator, I have been an American citizen with the perspective of a UAE expatriate for nearly six years. In my opinion, the status of dentistry in the Emirates is impressive, but while the Emirates embodies growth, freshness and innovation, there is significant resistance to products of the UAE’s own making. When you are in the dental education business, this resistance is tangible, palpable and real, and gets in the way of progress and the betterment of all.

During the past decade, the UAE has been creating its own dental education identity by appropriately retrofitting Emirates dental education standards to Western paradigms. But the hybrid product of doing so has not been widely accepted in the UAE. Western education on Arab soil is meant to represent the same high standards expected in the USA, Europe or Australia but it appears that resistance to Western dental education in the Emirates will prevail for some time to come.

Dr Donald J. Ferguson is a professor and Dean of the European University College in Dubai, UAE. On Wednesday, he will be presenting a paper titled “Comparing and contrasting techniques to enhance orthodontic treatment efficiency” during the Rapid Orthodontic Symposium that is part of this year’s AEEDC scientific programme.