

## Memorandum

**Date:** Monday, May 19, 2014

**To:** THE NYU COMMUNITY

**From:** NYU President John Sexton

**Re:** Today's Article in the NY Times about Abu Dhabi Labor

The occurrences cited in today's New York Times are, if true as reported, troubling and unacceptable. They are out-of-line with the labor standards ([here](#) and [here](#)) we deliberately set for those constructing the 'turn-key' campus being built for us on Saadiyat Island and inconsistent with what we understood to be happening on the ground for those workers. Moreover, they are wholly inconsistent with the level of compliance we know to be the norm for those working directly for NYU Abu Dhabi at our existing campus over the last five years in operational contracts covering services for food, safety, transportation, and all other matters.

We will be working with our Abu Dhabi partners to investigate these reports vigorously.

When we first undertook the NYU Abu Dhabi project, the values of the NYU community as they related to those who would build and work on our campus were very much at the forefront of our thoughts. Where did that lead us?

**To set new, high standards, and establish a compliance process:** The standards we set for workers (see the links above) were well received, even by Human Rights Watch. The standards ultimately encompassed:

- wages (those on NYU's project are paid wages that place them squarely atop the market) and benefits (including healthcare)
- higher standards for housing
- limitations on working hours, and guidelines for overtime compensation
- guaranteed annual leave and maternity pay
- access to personal documents
- health and safety
- reimbursement for recruitment agency fees

In addition, knowing that on any large project there are issues of non-compliance, with our partners we also set in place inspection, compliance, and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the labor standards are met, and to address any shortcomings as soon as they were identified. Since the beginning of the project some four years ago, approximately 1,600 worker interviews have been conducted; nearly 300 payment-record inspections were made; and multiple site visits conducted to the Saadiyat Island construction site, the worker accommodation facilities, employers offices, and the residential facility for NYU Abu Dhabi students and employees, among others, all aimed at discovering and remedying instances when our labor standards were not met.

**To ensure that the standards were applied with utmost conscientiousness for the men and women working on contracts directly for NYU Abu Dhabi:** With regards to those men and women working on assignments directly contracted to NYU Abu Dhabi – over 200 individuals in such operations as food, public safety, and transportation, where they interact with students, faculty, and staff daily -- there have been no questions raised about compliance with the high standards we set. And, indeed, there has been a record of success: All of our directly contracted employees hold their own passports; over the past two years, 20 workers were reimbursed for employment agency fees; and the wages we pay are at the top of the market. Moreover, 97% of these workers were interviewed in the last year alone to ensure compliance with our standards.

**To make safety on the construction site a foremost priority:** In any discussion about labor and any effort to set high standards for workers, the safety and well-being of workers must be a topmost concern. No one has questioned our safety record, which has generally been judged to be an extraordinary success. In spite of the enormous size of the undertaking -- a four-year, 21 building, 4.8 million sq. ft., 38 acre project, involving 51 million person-hours of labor -- the project had an accident frequency rate (AFR, the number of accidents per 100,000 person-hours) of .03, which contrasts very favorably with a UK construction industry average of .55, and an AFR for the London Olympics development of .16.

And so we come to the issue of the application of the labor standards we set on the Saadiyat Island construction site, and the reports in the New York Times. Those cases are very much at odds with what we set out to do and what we understood to be happening on the site of the new campus.

As an institution of higher learning, facts matter to our community; truth matters to us. Though construction on the campus is essentially over, we nonetheless want to know, if we can, whether these were anomalous exceptions – still not acceptable, but a confined phenomenon, perhaps a result of having small subcontractors on the job-site for short periods of time – or whether they represent something more widespread.

As I noted, we are working with our Abu Dhabi partners to investigate these reports and seek more information on these cases to determine why, if the claims are accurate, they were not picked up by the compliance monitor, and to try to correct, to the extent still possible, any lapses in compliance.

It is surely the case that the welfare and safety of the workers who built our campus – which we sought to elevate – should be our focus for the moment. Today's story appears to have found non-compliant conditions which we missed, and which we must address.

But I would also make the following observation: that today's news, as troubling as it is and as demanding of attention as it is, should not come to represent the totality of how we think of NYU Abu Dhabi, because NYU Abu Dhabi is so much more.

Against great odds, we have – through the hard work of many faculty, students, and administrators drawn to the idea of creating a unique, global university -- forged an enormously successful liberal arts research university in Abu Dhabi. It is able to attract students worthy of winning top scholarships, able to recruit outstanding scholars to its ranks of tenured and tenure-track professorships, able to undertake meaningful research, and routinely able to persuade those who visit of its specialness and successfulness. As we approach the graduation of its first senior class, it is worth remembering that it is this community of scholars and teachers and learners that is truly at the heart of NYU Abu Dhabi.

The University will be back in touch when we have more information to share on this matter.