



**James Stafford,
Executive Manager,
International Business Development,
Box Hill Institute, Victoria**

<http://www.bhtafe.edu.au/index.htm>

Box Hill Institute, near Melbourne, is a medium-size TAFE with a strong emphasis on transnational education. The Institute has established Box Hill College in Kuwait, which provides vocational training for women.

The Institute also partners with the Dubai-based construction giant, Emaar, in developing vocational campuses across the Middle East and North Africa region.

James Stafford's key message: Think in terms of years if you want to establish a successful presence in Kuwait.

Box Hill College Kuwait is one of those overnight success stories that was literally years in the making. It started with a contact through Austrade in 2001.

'We worked on relationships in the Middle East for three to four years before ink got on paper.'

'It was a long-term ambition of our CEO. He was very keen that we plan carefully.'

'In Australia we underestimate how important personal relationships are. Business (with Kuwait) can't be done on the telephone or by email. Trust is critical and face-to-face contact. It relies literally on a handshake.'

The college is an example of an Australian enterprise identifying and occupying a niche in the market. James Stafford says Kuwaiti families are aspirational for their daughters, but reluctant to send them away for education. Matching this need, Australia is one of the few countries in the world with a national vocational training system.

'The advantages of Kuwait are that it is one of the more sophisticated and Westernised countries of the Middle East. It is more advanced in terms of literacy, education, GNP and support for women. Also it is very small, so it's easy to move around.'

James Stafford nominates the difficulty of getting direct access to a local decision-maker as one of the challenges for business.

‘Often you are dealing with the Kuwaitis’ representatives, who might be from the USA, Syria, Pakistan or India. Two of our executives sit on the College Board, so we are able to have direct influence that way.’

Having the right Australian staff to send to Kuwait has also been an issue.

‘A number of staff have gone over with different degrees of success. You have to have a capacity to deal with ambivalence and shades of grey. This takes resilience and patience. Personalities that are black and white may strike trouble.

‘We have an extensive period of counselling. We have discussions about the personalities you will meet, we draw up scenarios to see how staff will react.

‘The successful staff are “people” people who can build good relationships. The business will follow.’

The institute produces a handbook for its staff, condensing the mass of political, cultural and religious information available online.

So what would James Stafford do differently?

‘I would act with more reserve initially. I would disclose information more incrementally.

‘You trust that you will automatically make relationships when you arrive, but you need to build relationships by spending time with people, eating with them, talking with them.

‘Then you watch the barriers break down.’

James Stafford says it is necessary to maintain the relationship you have made.

‘We build in two to three relationship visits a year minimum. We don’t want our Arab colleagues to say “You get on a plane, you go away and you forget us.” You can’t allow that perception.’