International Branch Campuses: Can They Be Research Universities?

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Many international branch campuses (IBCs) are established by research-intensive universities in their home countries, such as Monash University Malaysia and NYU Abu Dhabi. There are also cases when a partnership needs to be formed between foreign and local universities; Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University in Suzhou is an example of an IBC whose "parent" universities are both classified as research universities. However, these IBCs are not usually seen as research-intensive universities. IBCs are often considered teaching institutions without adequate capacity to undertake in-depth research.

Factors Inhibiting Research at IBCs

Many factors contribute to a lack of research focus among IBCs. The initial motivation to establish branch campuses is often profit generation. British and Australian universities, two top IBC exporting countries, faced continuous funding cuts from their governments and had to be entrepreneurial in looking for additional sources of funding, consequently establishing IBCs in emerging Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Intensive research, which demands substantial funding, is thus rarely the priority.

Support from local host governments can be difficult as they see IBCs as "foreign" entities. These host governments allow the establishment of IBCs mainly to absorb unmet demand for higher education at the undergraduate level. Postgraduate courses are on offer chiefly to increase professional skills—thus coursework programs, rather than research programs, are on offer in most IBCs.

With regard to the academics involved in the IBC operations, many involve fly-in, fly-out lecturers from the home countries who spend short periods at the IBCs delivering intensive courses, without real opportunities to conduct research. If they are engaged in any research during their stay, it most likely takes the form of short-term data collection. The bulk of the research work is completed back in the home country universities. Their publications are associated with the home country universities.

As the number of IBCs continues to increase, some are becoming more permanent features of the local higher education scene, notably in Malaysia. It is natural to think that these campuses will begin to have the capacity and aspirations to do research. The recruitment of academic staff will be for longer terms and fewer fly-in, fly-out lecturers from the home country universities will be involved. The new faculty will have better opportunities to do research locally. Some IBCs also have some access to local host government research grants. Recently, Chinese and Malaysian governments, main host countries for IBCs, have voiced their aspirations to make these campuses more research focused. While the possibility to be more research focused is starting to emerge, will these IBCs in the long run become research universities?

Etzkowitz's "Triple-Helix" model seeks to clarify how entrepreneurial research universities function. The model requires three key elements working in unison: government support, research-oriented human resources in universities, and partnering industries. When applying this model to analyze IBCs, the partnership with industries is perhaps a key problem in turning IBCs into research universities. This of course is not an exclusive problem of the IBCs. National flagship universities throughout emerging economies face the same issue. The establishment of IBCs in industrial parks or special economic zones does not guarantee close relationship with industry despite the geographical proximity. Many of these special zones house multinational companies whose research and development departments are located on the opposite side of the globe. They do not need basic scientific research to be carried out locally. Therefore, although local governments can contribute with substantial funding to bring research universities and IBCs to their shores, as exhibited by some of the wealthy Gulf countries, funding alone may not be sufficient to instigate university–industry partnerships—a key factor that supports the operation of research universities in many developed countries.

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Possible Scenarios

With such a predicament, is it then correct to assume that it is impossible to turn IBCs into research universities? It is perhaps too early to say whether IBCs will remain in their present state as teaching institutions. Three possible scenarios may change their outlook in the future. First, host government policies on IBCs have always changed according to national interests. Governments are becoming more aware of the fact that allowing IBCs to function as mere teaching institutions does not serve their interests if they aspire to be industrialized nations with knowledge-based economies. Host governments may mandate IBCs to undertake more research to support their economic and industrial needs. While giving mandates does not necessarily make IBCs function as research institutions, the persistent ones will try to adhere to these mandates to maintain their presence. Otherwise, they may have to abandon their investments in terms of building infrastructure in the country, and also suffer reputational damage.

Second, demands and opportunities from industries (both local and multinational) to conduct applied research may speed up the transformation of IBCs. For example, some local industries in China are emerging as global players with sufficient funding to set aside for research and development. The establishment of IBCs that are specifically aimed at conducting research and technology transfer—such as Guangdong Technion Israel Institute of Technology and Shenzhen Moscow State University–Beijing Institute of Technology (MSU–BIT) University—attests to the attractive university–industry partnership opportunities made available by local high-tech industries and entrepreneurship ecosystems. IBCs can draw on their "parent" universities' research strengths and on local or multinational industries' technology transfer needs to do more research in the host countries.

Third, when demand for research qualifications increases, IBCs will start offering research programs and become research focused. Countries such as Malaysia and China, which are now undergoing a massification of their higher education, may soon enter a period where the main demand for tertiary education systems lies in research qualifications. Due to massification, local national universities are becoming very adept at providing teaching programs, but may not be adequately prepared to offer research programs yet. Coupled with their governments' ambition to become knowledge-based economies, students will more likely access IBCs to obtain research qualifications. More empirical research is of course needed to ascertain how these scenarios are currently being played out in the real world.

Changes are possible for IBCs in developing countries, but transforming them into flagship research universities may not happen in the near future, if at all. However, there are niche areas of applied and technology transfer research that they will be able to fill in sufficiently to be perceived as research universities by their communities. This will occur in a way that is particular to the context of the IBCs, distinct from their "parent" universities. ■

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Internationalization of Universities: The German Way

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The concept of internationalization at German universities, which has regained considerable strength since the late 1980s, has historically been based on the idea of cooperation and partnership, thanks to the post-1945 belief that only a Germany that was firmly anchored in Europe and the world could be internationally accepted and economically successful. There has been, therefore, a tradition of political support for the exchange of students and researchers embedded in international university partnerships based on an equal footing and on trust. In the 1990s, numerous binational initiatives, such as the Franco–German University and the Sino–German College for Graduate Studies, exemplified this idea of trust-based cooperation for the purpose of promoting cultural exchange and understanding between people. This cooperative approach to internationalization has since received further vital impetus from the education programs of the European Union, which require the full integration of student mobility into regular study programs.

More recently, growing competition within the German system, coupled with the effects of globalization, have resulted in the emergence of a more competitive approach. Interestingly, it was again the European dimension which provided crucial impetus here, especially the goal defined by European education ministers in 1998 of creating a competitive and internationally attractive European Higher Education Area aiming to gain a sizeable share in an expanding worldwide market of globally mobile students and researchers. It is worth noting that German universities approached the standard rhetoric of the "horse race for talent" with a degree of hesitation. The idea of self-promotion was rather foreign to them for several reasons. First, both rela-