

and exchange, or a call for a more responsible process of internationalization in reaction to the current political climate and the increased commercialization of internationalization? Who could have forecasted that internationalization would transform from what has been traditionally considered a process based on values of cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits, and capacity building to one that is increasingly characterized by competition, commercialization, self-interest, and status building?

As we look backward and forward, it is thus important to ask, what are the core principles and values underpinning internationalization of higher education that in 10 or 20 years from now will make us look back and be proud of the track record and contribution that international higher education has made to the more interdependent world we live in, the next generation of citizens, and the bottom billion people living in poverty on our planet? ■

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2018.95.10679>

---



---

## Battle of the Brand: Independent “American” Universities Abroad

KYLE A. LONG

*Kyle A. Long is an independent researcher in New York City, US. E-mail: [longkyle@gmail.com](mailto:longkyle@gmail.com).*

Earlier this year, Iraq’s ministry of higher education announced the opening of a new university for the academic year 2018–2019. The American University of Iraq–Baghdad will be the country’s third “American” university. This latest undertaking exemplifies a trend that has gripped the region and reverberated around the world over the past quarter century: the establishment of higher education institutions located outside the United States using the name “American” and issuing degrees at the bachelor’s level or higher, entities referred to here as “American universities abroad.” There are now 80 such institutions in more than 55 countries around the globe—from Nicaragua to Nigeria to Vietnam—with an estimated combined enrollment exceeding 150,000 students. While some American universities abroad can trace their histories as far back as the American Civil War, more than two-thirds have been established in the past three decades. Unfortunately, many of these newer enterprises offer only the name and not the content of American higher education. Indeed, slightly more than half

of all independent American universities abroad appear to be impostors, neither possessing nor actively pursuing US regional accreditation.

### A QUALITY BRAND

Much of the interest in American universities abroad, in the Middle East and elsewhere, can be attributed to branding. A former president of the American University of Beirut once observed that the word “American” is to education what “Swiss” is to watches. With limited legal protections on the highly valued “American” name in many countries undergoing privatization, entrepreneurs have found its use an increasingly attractive option. Some serial entrepreneurs have even established multiple American universities abroad. Serhat Akpınar has created American-labeled higher education institutions in Cyprus and Moldova. Alex Lahlou has done so in Algeria and Libya. Manmadhan Nair

---

**The median institution enrolls between 1,000 and 2,000 students on a \$20 million operating budget.**

---

has taken the “American” brand to several Caribbean countries. While academics, clerics, and politicians have set up American universities abroad, the more dubious operations are associated with those from business backgrounds. The chairman of a Kuwaiti consulting company attempted to establish an “American University” in Maribor (Slovenia), but was forced to abandon the project when the town’s mayor was presented with criminal charges for selling the campus land significantly under market value. A similar controversy is unfolding in Malta, where the prime minister rezoned a protected beach to persuade a Jordanian hotelier to launch his American university project.

When founders of these “American” universities abroad do get their campuses up and running, they too often fall short of the mark of educational quality the label is meant to signal. Among the most egregious examples is the American University for Humanities in Tbilisi, Georgia, which was exposed as a degree mill during the mid-2000s. The episode led the US department of education to suspend and eventually revoke the authority of the American programmatic accreditor that had validated it. It is more common, however, for bad faith American universities abroad to fly under the radar. The “American” brand is strong enough in many locales that it obviates the need to engage US accreditors at all. Students continue to enroll regardless of external quality assurances. And when there are limited checks on

quality, deceivers sidestep transparency. Some use Facebook as their main communications instrument, foregoing websites altogether. Curious researchers are often rebuffed, too.

The rise of disingenuous for-profit institutions exploiting the “American” brand and weak quality assurance regimes has posed a challenge for the field’s legitimate actors, especially those comprising the 28-institution consortium, the Association of American International Colleges and Universities (AAICU). In 2008, AAICU member presidents attempted to codify standards for their rapidly expanding global field by cosigning the Cairo Declaration, a statement of principles affirming the centrality of institutional autonomy guaranteed by independent boards of trustees and quality assurance certified by US regional accreditation. It also asserted the importance of the liberal arts curriculum and nonprofit financial model to contrast the business and technical programs that dominated the offerings of proprietary impostors.

#### ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

Maintaining a united front against charlatans has been complicated by institutional diversity among the genuine. The field includes large research universities like the American University in Cairo and small liberal arts colleges like the American College of Thessaloniki. The median institution enrolls between 1,000 and 2,000 students on a \$20 million operating budget. But the ranges are vast. The Arab American University in Palestine has over 10,000 students while the Irish American University enrolls fewer than 200 at any given time. The annual operating expenses of the American University of Sharjah and Lebanese American University exceed \$170 million. The American University of Armenia and the American University of Central Asia each spend less than \$10 million per year. Increasing heterogeneity makes it more and more difficult to find common cause.

Another key challenge for the field is clarification of institutions’ eligibility for US government funding. Several American universities abroad, incorporated and accredited in the United States, are seeking access to Title IV funds and the ability to compete for National Science Foundation grants. An earlier version of the Higher Education Act (HEA) included a favorable amendment, but legislation has stalled. Some American universities abroad already receive federal funding, principally through US Agency for International Development (USAID) and its American Schools and Hospitals Abroad unit. In aggregate, though, only four percent of AAICU member institutions’ operating budgets come from US government sources.

The worldwide rise of authoritarianism provides yet another challenge to American universities abroad. The Hun-

garian government’s recent crackdown on AAICU member Central European University (CEU) offers the highest profile example. While CEU seems poised to endure, others have not been able to survive such politically motivated attacks. The American University of Azerbaijan closed in 2000 and the American University of Myanmar was shut down earlier this year. Political pressure in Kiev stopped the American University of Ukraine from ever getting off the ground. Repeated assaults on the American University of Afghanistan demonstrate that even institutions with the support of local government are not immune to the damages of political extremism.

#### LOOKING FORWARD

Issues of funding and reputation are likely to dominate the field in coming years. While aid levels have remained basically the same thus far, the Trump administration’s isolationist “America First” foreign policy may eventually translate into even further funding reductions for American universities abroad, thereby raising the stakes for HEA eligibility. Meanwhile, the establishment of knock-off American universities abroad will surely continue apace, especially in low-income countries with permissive authorities. AAICU has had some success during the past decade in fending off brand dilution, but leaders of its member institutions continue to discuss strategies that would preserve the integrity of the “American” name. Options considered by AAICU in recent years include the development of an accreditation and/or rankings function. It may also pursue recognition by the US Treasury as a standards development organization. If AAICU can marshal the collective will, observers should expect one or more of these changes to take effect soon. ■

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2018.95.10680>

## Definitions of Transnational Higher Education

STEPHEN WILKINS

*Stephen Wilkins is an associate professor in business management at The British University in Dubai, UAE. E-mail: [stephen.wilkins@buid.ac.ae](mailto:stephen.wilkins@buid.ac.ae).*

**T**ransnational higher education involves providers and programs crossing national borders. Providers take a variety of forms, with different ownership structures, objectives, strategies, disciplines, and types of students. The