Rethinking the Relevance of International Branch Campuses

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Abstract
International branch campuses are a small but relevant niche in the higher education environment, but it is surprising to see how much more research attention is focused on them than on other cross-border education projects, which are less visible but have a bigger impact and more uncertainty. In the current global environment, there is cause to worry about the future of IBCs.

After almost a half-century, international branch campuses (IBCs) are now a small but established part of the global higher education landscape. Some ("Branch campuses can widen access to higher education," *University World News*, December 14, 2019) posit that they have a bright future and can play a significant role. We are highly skeptical, and argue that IBCs are, and will continue to be, a tiny part of the postsecondary landscape—and that many are probably not sustainable.

In 2017, there were 263 IBCs in 77 countries, having more than doubled in less than two decades. China overtook the United Arab Emirates to be the number one host of IBCs. The United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom are the largest "home" countries sponsoring IBCs, with Russia and France as additional key players. Perhaps as many as 225,000 students study at IBCs worldwide. This means 1 percent of the over 20,000 universities in the world, 5 percent of the globally mobile students, and 0.1 percent of the total student body. IBCs are a small but relevant niche in the higher education environment, but it is surprising to see how much more research attention is focused on them than on other cross-border education projects, such as franchises, articulation programs, and others, which are less visible but have a bigger impact and more uncertainty.

IBC Instability

International branch campuses depend on several potentially unstable forces for their survival. The host country has primary control over branch campuses within their territory—and changes in political or economic circumstances or policies, decisions by various higher education authorities including quality assurance agencies, changing student interests or markets can all quickly affect IBCs. Failure to meet student enrollment goals may rapidly create problems. The example of Japan in the 1980s is illustrative. More than 21 branch campuses, largely of little known American universities, were established in Japan, mainly at the invitation of municipal and prefecture governments. They quickly ran into regulatory problems with Japanese authorities and for this and other reasons were unable to meet their enrollment goals. All but three disappeared. The Singapore government, which welcomed branch campuses, has over time closed down several for a variety of reasons, while others in the region were closed by host institutions or other authorities due to financial, enrollment, and internal political constraints. Many IBCs fail to even start, such as the 2018 plan of the Dutch University of Groningen in China.

Who Pays?

While there is little, if any, research on the details of the financing of IBCs, several things are reasonably clear. The first is that few home universities have paid for the campuses or facilities that they occupy in the host countries. In some cases, such as New York University in Abu Dhabi, the campus was built by the Abu Dhabi government. In some other cases, local property developers provide buildings in an effort to lure an IBC to a development. The Qatar government built its Education City to attract the nine IBCs located there. Many IBCs are expected by both home and host sponsors to earn a profit or at least to break even on the provision of educational programs. Some others are heavily subsidized by host authorities. A more recent phenomenon are IBCs related to home countries with a promotional and soft-power mission. It is unlikely that many IBCs would survive if they were fully responsible for all of their costs. And those who are trying to do so, or receive too little support from host or home countries, tend to fail and become bankrupt.

Why Do IBCs Exist?

The motivations for establishing and maintaining IBCs are complex and vary for home and host (see Rumbley and Wilkins on a revised definition for branch campuses in *IHE* #93). For hosts, branch campuses can bring the prestige of a foreign university, provide student access where there is a shortage of places, keep students at home who might otherwise go overseas for study, bring new ideas about curriculum, governance, teaching, or other innovations, and especially in the case of private enterprises, earn money. Several locales—Dubai, Qatar, and South Korea for example—see themselves as "education hubs" and have attempted, with varying success, to attract foreign universities to set up branches to serve local or regional markets. Especially in the Middle East, IBCs provide to women, who may be less able to travel overseas, an opportunity to study at a "foreign" university.

Home universities also have a range of goals. In some cases, they see their branches as a means of recruiting students to study at the home campus and to build their brand image. Many are focused on earning income. Some countries see their IBCs as part of "soft power" initiatives. Some universities see their branches as part of an international strategy for the university and as a means of internationalization, especially when students from the home campus study at the branch. New York University has been particularly successful in providing study opportunities for home students in its branches in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. Invitations from potential hosts, especially when combined with significant investments, are also attractive. In some cases, for example branch campuses of Indian universities in Dubai and the Caribbean, branches are intended to serve expatriate communities. Xiamen University's branch campus in Malaysia, funded mainly by the local Chinese community to serve Malaysian Chinese students, is another model.

This very partial list of motivations on all sides of the IBC equation indicates the complex, and sometimes conflicting, goals of the many elements involved.

Are IBCs Innovative, And What Do They Contribute?

There is little evidence that international branch campuses have contributed much to the reform of the higher education systems in which they operate. They seem to operate in their own context and reflect the educational programs, and to some extent the teaching and learning approaches, of the sponsoring university. As Jason E. Lane and Hans Pohl state in this issue of *International Higher Education*, IBC contributions to research are with some exceptions quite limited. There is little or no evidence that they contribute to the improvement of higher education in the host countries. On the contrary, there are frequent tensions concerning academic freedom and ideological requirements of the host countries' governments, as recent examples in China have demonstrated.

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Do IBCs Replicate Their Home Universities?

A basic underpinning of the IBC idea is that the branch should as much as possible replicate the curriculum, faculty, and ethos of the home campus. There is little evidence one way or the other on this key topic. In a few cases, such as New York University's branches in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi, and Yale's campus in Singapore, the home university has tried to maintain its academic standards and ethos—at considerable cost. The US universities in Qatar's Academic City, again with substantial funding from the host sponsors, also seek to replicate the home university. Many branches, especially those that focus on earning a profit for the home university, offer the home campus degree but use mainly locally hired faculty, and have rather basic facilities. There are serious questions to be asked about the match in academic standards and quality of education at IBCs, compared to the home institution.

An Uncertain Future

IBCs will likely continue to exist as a small niche element in the broader sphere of global academic internationalization. When they provide quality education and have appropriate links with academic institutions in the host countries, they are useful. When they bring nontraditional educational ideas, such as liberal education, and important academic norms such as academic freedom, they can be significant additions to a host country.

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In the current global environment, there is cause to worry about the future of IBCs. As countries build sufficient capacity and quality in their own academic systems, it is not clear that IBCs will be either useful or attract students. In countries such as China, where academic freedom and autonomy face increasing restrictions, IBCs may find it difficult to operate. Also, the agendas behind IBCs might start to differ between host countries and home institutions. And there is an increasing variety in models, funding schemes, national regulations, and quality of institutions, making it difficult to address IBCs as one category.