

Optimistic Postpandemic Outlooks for International Branch Campuses

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The future of international branch campuses (IBCs) has been much debated by scholars and practitioners of international higher education. Given the often risky financial investments into the physical presences of universities abroad, the question of the durability or sustainability of branch campuses—as an internationalization strategy—has been raised many times. With the current disruptions of transnational education operations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the question has gained new impetus. Will we see a wave of branch campus closures following the pandemic? Or will they adopt new roles and increase in relevance for their mother institutions? Our survey of IBC managers, funded by the Regional Studies Association, shows a surprisingly high level of optimism for the future.

IBCs Severely Impacted by the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the operations of campuses worldwide. IBCs have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, as they tend to rely more on cross-border linkages and mobility of students and staff. The TRANSEDU team at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space conducted a global survey of international campus managers from 15 countries. The sample reflects well the geographies of IBCs: The international education hubs of Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates were each represented by at least one respondent. In total, 29 IBC managers completed the online survey, a response rate of 14 percent. More than 80 percent of all respondents reported that their campus was strongly or very strongly impacted by the pandemic. The challenges that were most frequently mentioned were campus shut-downs, problems with student well-being, and financial difficulties. Most campuses (74 percent) did not receive any financial assistance to help them through the crisis. Other challenges were related to complying with COVID-19 regulations; delivering teaching; human resources and staffing; and a decrease in student enrollments.

IBCs have experienced manifold challenges prior to the pandemic, and campus closures have occurred not infrequently. Geopolitical changes, as well as strategic decisions by host governments to reduce the influence of foreign partners, present further challenges to the existence of IBCs. Recently, and to the surprise of most, Yale-NUS College, a joint liberal arts college operated by Yale University and the National University of Singapore, announced that it will close in 2025 and will be merged with an existing program at NUS (see [Hoe Yeong Loke](#), “Closure of Yale-NUS College: Unclear Reasons, But Clear Implications,” in this issue). Higher education scholars have pointed to the many inherent risks of IBC development, which involves sizable investments of time and financial resources and can lead to substantial financial and reputational losses if the campuses fail. Many campuses have struggled financially and experience considerable challenges in their day-to-day operations. Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic add to these pressures and may push campuses that are already in financial difficulties over the edge.

New Roles and Adapted Strategies

IBCs are a heterogeneous category. IBCs differ according to contexts in sending and host countries, and are set up with a number of different rationales in mind. Some have a highly international student body, while others largely rely on making international degrees available to students in the campus' location.

Abstract

International higher education has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article reveals how international branch campuses across the globe have been impacted by the pandemic and how institutional strategies have been adapted. The results show how international branch campuses, while being heavily affected, simultaneously offer opportunities for geographically diversified teaching that may increase the resilience of the home campus. Campus managers express high levels of optimism about the future of international branch campuses.

Four-fifths of all respondents think that their campus will remain open for at least five more years.

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Interestingly, since the pandemic, two-thirds of offshore campus managers have changed their strategies toward recruiting more domestic students. Campuses located in Malaysia, for instance, have all shifted their focus toward the Malaysian student market. Moreover, several IBCs have been able to enroll students who were set to study in the country of origin of the IBC. More than a quarter of IBC managers used this strategy to increase their student numbers. In Malaysia, the strategy of transforming a transnational education zone into a “transit hub” for students waiting to become international students was launched. In this way, students are able to start their classes at home prior to going abroad.

Although physical cross-border mobility was interrupted, universities with IBCs in countries with high numbers of potential outbound students were able to collect tuition fees from international students. For some institutions, IBCs have constituted an opportunity for geographic diversification, enabling business continuity during the pandemic. To a lesser extent, offshore campus managers recruited students from neighboring countries or within the region, and a few campuses managed to access revenue sources other than tuition fees to deal with pandemic-related financial constraints.

Optimistic Outlook

Despite increasingly challenging environments in many host countries, IBC managers in our survey have an optimistic outlook on the post-COVID-19 future, not foreseeing any waves of campus closures. Four-fifths of all respondents think that their campus will remain open for at least five more years, which even in prepandemic times was a high figure, given the tendency to rather frequent closures among IBCs. Only two campus managers believe that their campuses are not resilient, while a third of those surveyed believe operations at their IBCs to be somewhat resilient, and a striking 59 percent believe that their campuses are highly resilient. Better yet, the University of Nottingham Malaysia decided to buy out its Malaysian joint-venture partners for GBP 23 million and thus increased investments into its IBC during the pandemic.

Given the changing landscape of international higher education and the rise of blended learning, the majority of our respondents believe that IBCs may not only be able to survive a pandemic, but also increase the resilience of their home institutions by enabling geographic diversification and the opportunity to teach across multiple locations in the medium to long term.

This reveals important insights for the postpandemic future of IBCs as a phenomenon. While digitalization and online learning have been widely adopted and rapidly expanded upon during the pandemic, the limits of online-only interaction have also been felt quite severely. Students continue to desire face-to-face interactions, making blended learning a potential growth area. Rather than seeing the end of physical university spaces, we will most likely see a change in the requirements for campus spaces. Universities may opt for several smaller presences operating as a geographically diversified network to support both face-to-face and online learning. Although we may continue to witness closures in the future, the recent experience may give IBCs a renewed boost. ▲