

Focus on International Joint Universities and Regional Universities: Collaborative Models

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This article analyzes international joint and regional universities, differentiating them from international branch campuses and international franchise universities. It demonstrates that cooperation between governments and universities in partner countries to co-found, co-fund, co-govern, and co-develop curriculum and research projects differs significantly from establishing a satellite campus or exporting courses to a foreign-country institution on a franchise basis. Rationales, benefits, risks, and challenges are identified for international collaborative universities.

The last three decades have seen an exponential increase in all forms of international academic mobility—students and scholars; programs and providers; policies and regulations; and the universal exchange of knowledge, ideas, values, and culture. The diversity in forms and types of mobility today is unprecedented. This has brought new opportunities and has raised new issues and potential risks. All this points to the dynamism and responsiveness of the international higher education mobility landscape; it also contributes to confusion and misunderstanding of principles and key characteristics of the different forms of mobility.

The four generic terms used to describe international academic mobility are cross-border, transnational, offshore, and borderless education. These terms are commonly used interchangeably even though they mean different things to higher education actors and stakeholders. For many, transnational education is understood to cover higher education programs and providers moving across national borders. This differs from cross-border education, which is wider in scope and includes student and scholar mobility in addition to program and provider mobility. Borderless education was once thought to include new developments in distance, virtual, and online education but has since broadened to include any kind of academic mobility in terms of space, time, and discipline. Offshore education is a well-known term, but landlocked countries do not see it as relevant, and use of the term has declined. Thus, these terms are broader in concept but less meaningful in practice. The challenge is to have clarity and a common understanding of them without trying to standardize definitions, thereby ignoring local context, policies, and language orientation. Two approaches to transnational education—international joint universities and regional universities—have traditionally been incorrectly labeled as international branch campuses but require more attention and a different categorization.

Differences Between ‘Collaborative’ and ‘Independent’ Models of Transnational Education

International joint universities and regional universities can be described as international ‘collaborative’ models. The salient elements are co-founding, co-funding, co-governance, and co-development of academic programs and research initiatives in the establishment of a new standalone university. Collaborative models differ from the ‘independent’ transnational approach, such as international branch campuses and franchise universities, where there is no co-founding partnership with any host-country institution. International branch campuses are essentially governed by—and offer the academic programs and credentials of—their parent university, which is located in a different country. There may be relationships with local higher education institutions, but these do not extend to ownership, funding, or shared development of the academic offer. This also applies to international franchise universities, which host academic programs and credentials of different/multiple foreign universities on a franchise basis.

The distinguishing features of standalone regional universities and international joint universities are thus: 1) being co-founded, co-funded, and co-governed by two or more countries; 2) the existence of joint laboratories, networks, and centers of excellence; 3) a focus on collaboratively designed and delivered academic programs; 4) joint research and innovation projects; and 5) partnerships with actors from industry, civil society, and intergovernmental organizations in all partner countries.

Founding Dates and Numbers

The first international joint university was the Kazakh-German University, established in 1999. However, 14 of the 24 current international joint universities have been established since 2011, suggesting that this is a relatively recent development. The majority operate in Asia and the Middle East. China hosts the largest number of international joint universities, which it calls

“international joint venture universities.” Germany is partner to seven, called “binational universities.” According to the regulations of the host countries, international joint universities can be classified as either public or private institutions. Of the 24 around the world, 16 are private and eight are public, but all are new standalone joint universities with their own collaborative governance and management structures. These characteristics make the institutions significantly different from international branch campuses and franchise universities.

Regional universities are not new. The founding dates of the 13 regional universities span eight decades, from 1948 to 2011, and cover five regions of the world, with North America being the exception. The number of co-founding and participating countries in establishing a regional university ranges from four to 19, vividly illustrating the collaborative approach. Regional universities can be single-campus, multi-campus, or virtual, while the majority of international joint universities are single-campus-based.

Rationales and Benefits

The rationales and benefits of international collaborative universities are many and diverse. They include facilitating bilateral and regional collaboration for education, research, and innovation; contributing to stronger regional and international relations between countries through knowledge diplomacy; providing increased and diversified access to higher education; and addressing contemporary global and regional issues such as

climate change, migration, poverty, epidemics, and water and food security. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge and examine potential risks and uncertainties.

Issues and Challenges

These collaborative approaches to transnational education merit further investigation, as they face a variety of issues and challenges. At the micro or operational level, the issues include financial stability, quality assurance and accreditation, double and joint degrees, collaborative and interdisciplinary applied research, cross-cultural tensions, and recruitment and retention of academic staff. Meso-level issues are more strategic, such as changing rationales and priorities, the establishment of satellite education centers, the impact of increased online learning, changing national policies and regulations, and visas and immigration. Macro-level challenges concern the political issues between and among collaborating countries as well as wider global geopolitical implications and instability.

Two fundamentally different approaches—the knowledge diplomacy approach and the soft power approach—to the role of international higher education, research, and innovation in international relations merit more research and reflection. Current issues such as censorship, research integrity, and knowledge security in international research collaboration also deserve serious attention and action; these topics also require nuanced thinking in terms of the broad diversity of transnational models that currently exist.

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