

The Shifting Geography of International Branch Campuses: Findings from the 2026 C-BERT Update

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The 2026 update of the Cross-Border Education Research Team database identifies 386 international branch campuses (IBCs) worldwide, up from 333 in 2023, spanning 40 home and 85 host countries. The data show continuity in terms of some of the major players but also highlight emerging actors. The findings also highlight growing geographic diversification, increased South–South activity, and India’s dual role as both sender and receiver, signaling a more complex and evolving global IBC landscape.

International branch campuses (IBCs) are often framed as instruments of institutional internationalization, motivated by reasons that range from economics to reputation to soft power. While institutional motivations are important, especially in countries with significant higher education autonomy, globally, IBCs are better understood as part of a broader geopolitical and economic landscape, where higher education intersects with national strategy, talent development, and global influence. The location of IBCs therefore deserves attention.

Recent data from the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) identify 386 operational IBCs worldwide as of April 2026, up from 333 in early 2023. This is a net increase of 53 campuses in just three years, reflecting both new institutions and older ones newly identified. IBCs now originate from 40 home countries (up from 39) and operate across 85 host countries (up from 83). The growth is meaningful and reveals the evolving structure of global higher education.

Persistent Home Country Leaders, Expanding Field

The overall distribution of sending countries remains anchored by a familiar set of leaders. The United States continues to have significantly more IBCs than any other country at 97, representing approximately a quarter of the global total. The United Kingdom follows with 53 campuses, Russia with 41, France with 39, and Australia with 23. Together, these countries continue to shape much of the global footprint of transnational higher education (TNHE).

Beyond these leaders, the ecosystem is expanding to include new participants. India now operates 19 IBCs abroad, placing it close to the top of exporting countries. Germany, with eight IBCs, maintains a broader transnational education presence when binational universities are considered. New IBC exporters include Iran, which operates three campuses abroad through

Islamic Azad University, as well as Singapore and New Zealand. Particularly notable is the emergence of African institutions as exporters, including Mount Kenya University (with a branch in Somaliland) and Uganda’s Kampala International University (setting up in Tanzania). Taken together, these developments point to a growing pattern of South–South mobility in IBC activity, signaling a shift toward more regionally embedded and reciprocal forms of TNHE.

India’s evolving role is especially significant. For decades, India was largely closed to inbound foreign campuses while exporting institutions to neighboring regions. Policy reforms associated with the National Education Policy of 2020 have altered that position. As of early 2026, five IBCs are operating in India, including those established by Deakin University, the University of Wollongong, and Illinois Institute of Technology. This rapid shift from no inbound campuses to five in a short period positions India as both a sender and receiver, making it a rising player in the global system.

Shifting Host-Country Dynamics

Among host countries, China remains the largest importer, with 51 IBCs, including 16 from US institutions. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) follows with 39 campuses, maintaining its long-standing role as a regional education hub, enrolling students not just from the UAE but throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

The most striking development, however, is the emergence of Uzbekistan as the third-largest host country globally, with 17 IBCs. This places it ahead of Malaysia and Singapore, each with 16, and well ahead of Qatar, which hosts 12. Its 17 campuses include institutions from South Korea (Inha University and Ajou University), Singapore, the United Kingdom (Westminster International University), Italy (Turin Polytechnic), India (Amity University), and the United States (Webster University). This diversification reflects a deliberate effort by the Uzbek

government to align higher education with economic modernization, workforce development, and global engagement. In this sense, Uzbekistan is more than a new host market; it is positioning itself as a strategic hub in Central Asia, similar to the UAE in the Middle East.

In fact, more broadly, Central Asia now hosts 34 IBCs across four of its five countries, with only Turkmenistan remaining closed to foreign provision. The regional distribution of campuses reflects both historical legacies and contemporary strategic choices. Russian institutions dominate in Kazakhstan (six of nine campuses), Kyrgyzstan (five of five), and Tajikistan (three of three), reinforcing long-standing educational ties via the former Soviet Republic that continue to function as a mechanism of regional influence.

Africa also continues to develop as a host region, with 32 IBCs across 12 countries. However, this growth remains uneven and highly concentrated. Morocco hosts seven campuses, six of which originate from France, reflecting strong historical and linguistic ties. Mauritius hosts six campuses, drawing primarily from the United Kingdom and Australia. Egypt also hosts six campuses, but with a more diverse set of sending countries, including Germany, Portugal, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

With the emergence of new regions embracing TNHE, the patterns of institutional mobility still underscore the continued importance of historical relationships in shaping cross-border higher education activity. At the same time, the emergence of African institutions as exporters suggests the growing development of TNHE in a region that has long been lagging.

Structural Continuities

Despite geographic diversification, several core features of the IBC landscape remain stable. Significant IBC activity continues to be concentrated in a relatively small number of host countries, with China, the UAE, and now Uzbekistan accounting for a significant share of global IBC importing. While it appears that English remains the dominant language of instruction, we are seeing growth in other languages such as Russian and Chinese.

Quality assurance frameworks also remain fragmented. Most IBCs rely on accreditation systems from their home countries, with limited coordinated oversight from host governments. While this arrangement has enabled rapid expansion, it raises ongoing questions about consistency, accountability, and regulatory alignment.

In addition, while not fully captured in a single-year dataset, closures remain a persistent feature of the sector: more than 70 IBCs have closed due to political, economic, and regulatory reasons. The current list of operational campuses represents only those that have sustained operations. The list does not reflect the broader set of cross-border ventures that have been attempted and, in some cases, discontinued.

Toward a More Complex System

The 2026 C-BERT update points to a sector that is expanding in scale and diversifying in geography while maintaining many of its underlying structural characteristics. Emerging features—new host regions such as Central Asia, the growing participation of institutions from the Global South, and India’s dual role as both home and host—suggest a more complex and multipolar system of transnational education.

From a system-level perspective, these developments underscore the importance of aligning internationalization strategies with broader national and regional priorities. IBCs are increasingly embedded in agendas related to economic development, workforce preparation, and geopolitical positioning. As a result, their future trajectory will depend not only on institutional decisions, but also on how effectively governments coordinate and support cross-border activity.

The first generation of IBCs was defined largely by expansion into a small number of well-established hubs in the Gulf, China, and Southeast Asia. The current phase is characterized by greater geographic dispersion and a broader set of actors. Whether this leads to a more balanced and sustainable model, or simply a more complex one, remains an open question. What is clear is that the map of global higher education is evolving and that IBCs are an important part of that transformation.

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