

## How Well Are International Branch Campuses Serving Students?

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The academic literature and professional journals both reveal no shortage of criticisms of the international branch campus. Yet, each year, more branches are established all around the world, and existing campuses continue to expand. So, it seems that there must be a demand for these campuses. But how well are they actually serving students? It is interesting that the growth of student numbers at international branch campuses does not seem to have affected enrollments at the home campuses of Western universities. This implies that branch campuses have found a new, additional demand for higher education.

### **WIDENING ACCESS**

Although the majority of branch campuses operate as for-profit enterprises, these institutions provide a service that is much needed and wanted all around the world.

Branch campuses have enabled many students to receive a higher education, who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to do so. In particular, the large expatriate populations in countries such as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are often unable to secure places at state higher education institutions or able to afford overseas study in a Western country. Also, in some cultures it is not acceptable for families to allow unmarried daughters to live and study abroad. Foreign universities have already provided over 30,000 student places in the Arab Gulf States, and in Singapore it is expected that branch campuses will provide much of the new capacity to achieve the country's target of 150,000 international students, by 2015.

#### **CONVENIENCE AND COUNTRY-SPECIFIC ADVANTAGES**

A recent study, conducted in the UAE, found that students chose to study at a branch campus in the UAE, rather than at the home campus of a Western university—for a mix of convenience and country-specific reasons. The convenience reasons were associated with avoiding financial expense, “hassle” or effort, or maintaining the status quo in the student's personal and working lives. The convenience reasons were concerned with specific attractive features associated with living and studying in the UAE—such as, personal safety, religion, familiarity, and the comfort with the local culture and lifestyle, and improved prospects in the local/regional labor market after graduation.

#### **IMPROVED PROSPECTS IN LOCAL LABOR MARKETS**

A degree from a country with a respected higher education system—such as, Australia, the United Kingdom, or the United States—opens the door to opportunities in the labor

market in many of the countries, where branch campuses operate. Most branch campuses specialize in professional subjects—such as, business, management, and computer science/information technology—due in part to the fact that these fields are relatively cheap to establish and can cater for large numbers of students. In the UAE, these courses are popular with both expatriate and national students wanting to start or progress careers in industries—such as, banking, finance, and human resource management—but for students wanting to study subjects in the liberal arts there are far fewer options.

Youth unemployment among nationals is high in several of the Arab Gulf States. Thus, equipping young people with the skills needed to take up employment in the private sector has benefited both individuals and governments. During the last two-to-three years, many institutions have widened their product, by offering to include subjects from different disciplines and those that are particularly relevant locally. In Dubai, for example, Heriot-Watt University offers a postgraduate degree in petroleum engineering, and Murdoch University offers an undergraduate program in environmental management and sustainable development. A number of branches globally have also begun to offer doctoral-level programs.

### **STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

While it is generally accepted that students at branch and home campuses cannot possibly have the same educational experience, students, parents, employers, and quality-assurance agencies expect the student experience at each location to be at least comparable or equivalent. Ten years ago many branch campuses had libraries with

limited collections, no student accommodation, and no sports or leisure facilities. This is no longer the case. The desires and expectations of many students in transnational higher education have increased. Moreover, in markets that have grown quite competitive, many institutions feel the need to differentiate themselves from the crowd, by offering additional services and facilities.

The majority of branch campuses worldwide still, each, have less than 1,000 students, and, thus, so they do not possess the scale necessary to offer the range of facilities and experiences available at home campuses. Furthermore, the need to produce profit, or at least break-even, deters institutions from higher investment in facilities and resources. However, there now exist several purpose-built full-scale branch campuses around the world that are intended to replicate the home campus experience—both educationally and socially/culturally. Examples include New York University Abu Dhabi and Monash and Nottingham in Malaysia. The large-scale “replica campus” format seems to be largely successful, and it may prove to be the most sustainable form of the international branch campus, over the next two or three decades.

#### **STUDENT SATISFACTION**

To date, there has been limited research into student satisfaction at international branch campuses. However, the created research—including a study of Australian transnational higher education programs in South East Asia and another in the UAE—has generally found high levels of student satisfaction, both with institutions and programs. Students at branch campuses seem content that they are achieving the same

qualification that students at the home campus receive, and they generally have realistic expectations about the comparability of the student experience at branch and home campuses. The majority of students regard their programs as effective, worthwhile, and relevant to their job/future career intentions.

## QUALITY

Many writers seem to assume that it is not possible that for-profit institutions achieve high quality. In transnational higher education, the division between for-profit and public-sector institutions becomes somewhat blurred, anyway—given that even most public universities need at least to break even overseas, as they cannot rely on funding generated at home. Only a handful of institutions globally are relatively free of financial constraints—such as, New York University Abu Dhabi and Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, which are both funded by the local government.

An expectation exists among all stakeholders that an international branch campus will deliver the same programs and adhere to the same standards and procedures that are demonstrated at its home campus. Branch campuses are subject to accreditation requirements and quality-assurance audits from agencies—located both in their home countries and locally in the countries, where they operate. Although franchised and partner-delivered programs have frequently been criticized by quality-assurance agencies, the branch campuses of Australian, UK, and US universities have generally achieved favorable reports. Foreign accreditation and quality-assurance bodies have already closed branch campuses on quality grounds, but none have been institutions based in a Western country.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS**

International branch campuses have filled a gap in the market and are simply meeting the demand for foreign higher education that exists in many countries. The sector is not free of problems, and more institutions are likely to fail; but as this happens, the surviving institutions will grow further and become even stronger.