

Root and Branch

The State of International Branch Campuses

AMONG THE MANY THOUSANDS OF TYPES of cross-border educational collaborations, the international branch campus (IBC) is the most substantial and elaborate, but it can also be the best way for a university to successfully achieve its enrollment, internationalization, and other goals.

According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT), led by researchers at the Pennsylvania State University and the University at Albany-SUNY, there are 249 IBCs currently in operation around the world, serving more than 180,000 students. Following a big boom in Middle East campuses during the late 1980s through the first decade of the 2000s, a 2016 report by Richard Garrett, Kevin Kinser, Jason E. Lane, and Rachael Merola published by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education shows that East Asia is now clearly the center of gravity for the next wave of expansion, and China has overtaken the United Arab Emirates as the host country with the largest number of IBCs (32 versus 31). “The overall condition of the global IBC market remains healthy and growing,” the report says.

Currently, 32 countries have established campuses in 75 host countries, according to Kevin Kinser and Jason E. Lane in a 2016 *International Higher Education* article. The two authors note that since the first IBCs opened in the 1950s, only 27 IBCs—about 10 percent of the current population of overseas campuses—have closed down operations, a notably low failure rate when stacked up against the very high failure rates associated with entrepreneurial start-ups in other sectors.

Two U.S. Case Studies: Opportunities and Challenges

The United States is the largest provider of IBCs globally, currently sponsoring 78 campuses, or about one-third of all IBCs in existence today. Two good examples of the modern U.S. IBC are the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar (GU-SFSQ) and George Mason University Korea (GMUK). GU-SFSQ offers the same liberal arts and international affairs

curriculum offered by the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. GMUK currently offers six undergraduate majors (three from the Business School, two from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and one from the School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution), as well as a master’s program in systems engineering that is scheduled to open in spring 2018.

As is the case with an increasing number of IBCs, both GU-SFSQ and GMUK issue diplomas and transcripts that are identical to those of their sending institutions, which offers potential students a significant inducement for enrollment. The students also receive the same quality of education and earn the same credentials as they would in the United States, with the added global perspective but without the full expense of overseas travel and living. The sending campus and the host country agree in advance to offer the same curricula as in the home country, and the host country agrees to allow the IBC virtually complete autonomy in academic (and other) decisions. Also, in the cases of GU-SFSQ and GMUK, the respective parties agreed to require (or strongly encourage) attendance on the home campus for one or two semesters as part of the requirement for graduation.

Both GU-SFSQ and GMUK are situated within a cluster or hub of IBCs that are interlinked in a larger educational setting—GU-SFSQ in Education City and GMUK in Incheon Global Campus (IGC).

Among the full range of cross-border educational collaborations that exist in higher education, international branch campuses require the highest magnitude of investment and, not surprisingly, carry the greatest risks for the partners involved. IBCs are expensive to set up and maintain. The costs of failure are high, thus



placing a noted constraint on their proliferation. The risks are generally financial and reputational and can affect both the sending country and the host country, albeit in different ways.

Some IBC arrangements involve little or no financial risk for the sending countries. The agreements with the six U.S. campuses in Qatar's Education City pose no financial burden for the sending universities. All costs, including those that arise on the main campus as a result of supporting an overseas branch campus, are carried exclusively by the host country. Qatar Foundation collects all tuition, which amounts to only a minuscule proportion of the outlays for the overall operation. Critics are quick to point out that the Qatar model is not sustainable; but

the projections of continued oil and gas wealth in the Gulf reach decades into the future. In recent years, Qatar has shifted its priorities from Education City to the massive preparations involved in hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022. Coupled with the downturn in the global oil and gas market, this has resulted in substantial budget reductions for universities in Education City. While this does not threaten the viability of the campuses, it has caused a retrenchment and a scaling back of ambitious plans for expansion among the campuses, especially in the areas of scientific research production and collaboration.

George Mason University's experience is more typical of branch campuses in that the host country shares some of the financial burden of operations with

the sending university. The Incheon city government built and maintains the infrastructure for the cluster of IBCs, as well as partially subsidizes the campuses through a mixture of outright grants and loans. Unlike Education City, the campuses in Incheon Global Campus collect their own tuition, which subsidizes their growth; these campuses are designed to eventually be completely self-sustaining.

Reputation and Reinvigoration

There are, broadly speaking, two sets of motivations for U.S. universities to mount campuses overseas. First, there are reputational goals and aspirations. An overseas branch campus enhances the global profile of a university and signifies its global value and respect. For Georgetown University's

School of Foreign Service, the rationale for an overseas campus in Qatar stemmed from the principles embodied in its global affairs curriculum and was further inspired by the traditions of global engagement embedded in a Jesuit education.

Second, international branch campuses provide U.S. institutions with staging

grounds for partnerships and research collaborations with universities in economically dynamic regions around the world. The government of Qatar has funded hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of scientific research in support of national development goals in the past decade, and the IBCs of Education City have been

recipients of a substantial portion of this investment. Many of these IBCs serve as bridges linking research expertise residents across campuses. Similarly, many of the countries in East Asia, including Singapore, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, invest massive amounts of funding into higher education and research. The large number of U.S. campuses opening in the region are well poised to take advantage of these opportunities to leverage their global reputations and support main campus research enterprises that are constrained by a contracting market for federal research funding.

But there are other benefits as well: International branch campuses provide excellent opportunities for deep cross-cultural engagement, especially since so many IBCs enjoy small classrooms and intimate settings. Faculty frequently remark that teaching students in a host country requires them to rethink their teaching style and pedagogy dramatically, thus reinvigorating their commitment to the profession. Additionally, IBCs are generally viewed as start-up organizations relatively unencumbered by the burdens of administration that are often associated with much older and larger institutions. This autonomy creates possibilities for educational innovation and collaboration that are not always possible in more established settings.

For all these reasons, the rate of growth of IBCs is likely to remain steady in the coming years. However, a better understanding of how international branch campuses operate and the kinds of institutional challenges they face ultimately makes it easier for educators to consider IBCs as an option for growth, make wiser choices about which partnerships to pursue, facilitate better collaboration between sending and host institutions, and improve the quality of education that IBCs provide. ■

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