

Analysis of International Branch Campuses in Korea and Japan: Exploring Success Factors

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Abstract

This study presents an analysis of the evolution of International Branch Campuses (IBCs) in South Korea and Japan, utilizing the conceptual framework proposed by Hickey and Davies (2022). The methodology includes the modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA) and interviews with over twenty leaders and executives working at IBCs in both countries. Preliminary findings highlight the importance of persistent collaboration among stakeholders, a strong commitment from the home campus, effective communication, trust-building, diversified enrollment pipelines, and strategies to mitigate regulatory challenges for the success of IBCs. We found that entrepreneurial leadership, international education prioritization, cross-cultural understanding, tailored programs, and diverse hires are crucial for maintaining academic standards and building institutional capacity. This research contributes to comparative and international higher education by sharing factors which influence the success and sustainability of IBCs in the context of an evolving higher education landscape in South Korea and Japan.

Keywords: comparative analysis, grounded theory, international branch campus, success factors, transnational higher education

Internationalization is arguably the strongest force impacting and reshaping the landscape of global higher education in the twenty-first century with complexity, diversity, and differentiation (Knight, 2013). The global trend of internationalization has led to the emergence of transnational higher education, which refers to educational programs offered by foreign institutions in offshore locations. Within this context, international branch campuses (IBCs) have gained prominence as a specific form of transnational higher education (Clarke, 2021). IBCs are seen as appealing ventures for various reasons, including generating additional revenue, promoting campus internationalization, building reputation, and demonstrating altruism (Kim & Zhu, 2010).

South Korea has strategically been using the IBC as a means to boost economic development and national competitiveness in the globalized arena (Hou et al., 2018). Amongst many ambitious plans to stand out as a major player in the globalizing higher education sectors (Byun & Kim, 2011), Korea's decision to establish a global educational hub was ambitious. It wanted to recruit international students to make it an authentic place for quality higher learning opportunities and economic gains. Accordingly, the Incheon Global Campus (IGC) was established in Songdo International City, and the State University of New York, Korea (SUNY Korea) was the sole founding institution in 2012. Currently, there are three U.S. and one Belgian IBCs in operation to educate nearly 4,000 students. The IBC phenomenon in Korea is reminiscent of what happened in Japan more than 30 years ago. With the economic boom in Japan in the late 1990s, more than a hundred U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) sent teams to Japan to explore the establishment of campuses, and a number of institutions began operations in Japan (Chambers & Cummings, 1990). However, since the mid-1990s, the number of Japan-U.S. joint ventures declined sharply (Huang, 2011). However, Temple University Japan (TUJ) has wintered the period with challenges and glories for the last 40 years. The IBCs in Korea and Japan have rarely been highlighted as the significant base for transnational higher education compared to the traditional receiver countries in North America and Europe. Therefore, this research aims to conduct an analysis on the development of IBCs in these two East Asian countries and identify the shared success factors.

Literature Review

Successes and Failures of IBCs

IBCs have become less remarkable since the mid-2010s, possibly because the most popular IBC target regions became saturated, and home HEIs found it increasingly difficult to satisfy the goals, including successful enrollments (Cao, 2019; Wilkins, 2020). The notable expansion of IBC all around the world leads to increased global competition, and therefore, consequently produces an array of success and failure cases (Becker, 2010; Kohler, 2019). The direction of the earliest phase of blooming IBC was generally from the global north, Western or Anglophone countries, to the global south, or developing nations in Asia and the Middle East (Wilkins, 2020). By 2017, HEIs from 33 countries had chartered 249 IBCs in 76 host countries, and over the last five years, the number of IBCs has increased by 26 percent (Paniagua et al., 2022). Therefore, the importance of shared decision-making criteria for research purposes in higher education facilitates the construction of better models and more informed decisions for the success of IBC operation, while learning from branch campus failures aids future planning and implementation (Streitwieser & Beecher, 2017).

IBCs may be unsustainable because much is unclear, such as the crisis of faculty hiring and staffing, limited curricular offerings and experiential programs, difficulties in recruitment and quality control, and volatile conditions in host countries and surrounding areas (Altbach, 2010). Therefore, HEIs have become more cautious of the long-term costs and potential risks involved in crossing the border for offshore campuses (Becker, 2010). IBC closures also attract public attention and can call the effectiveness of the host country government and home university leadership into question (Weinman, 2014), thereby posing significant challenges for both parties. Lane (2011) emphasized the significance of understanding local conditions, indicating that the IBC leaders can only to be successful by overcoming three challenges to overcome boundaries around them; campus boundaries (between home campus and the branch campus), vertical boundaries (extending the vertical administrative silos from the home campus to the IBC), and temporal boundaries (geographical separation of IBCs from the home campus in different time zones). Garrett (2018) argued that little research has been done on the key factors that have contributed to the long-term success and sustainability of IBC.

Contextual Similarities and Differences between Korea and Japan

In the past, U.S. occupational forces wielded the power to transform two countries' higher education system by incorporating U.S. ideas (Lattuca, 2007). Ever since, they have accepted American components. Altbach (2015) also aptly pointed out that, historically, Japan and South Korea tightly controlled private institutions by regulating academic staff

salaries, student enrollment numbers, department or program establishment, and trustee appointments, but in recent years, both countries have shifted towards granting private institutions more autonomy and freedom.

Higher education has played a central role in the social and economic development of Japan, and the most important element was the massification of higher education; 76.2 percent of 18-year-olds were enrolled in HEIs in 2005 (Yonezawa, 2007). The rate of population with higher education in Japan is the third highest in the world (64.8 percent). To enhance national competitiveness, Japan strived to add an international dimension to its higher education system, and economic growth and increased demand for education led to an increase in foreign higher education imports (Huang, 2011). Japan is known as the country that has the most private-dominant higher education system (Huang et al., 2022). The pressing demographic change, triggered by the decreased fertility rate (from 2.13 in 1970 to 1.33 in 2020), caused a remarkable impact on enrollments at HEIs in Japan (Altbach, 2002). When it comes to the college admission process, applicants are usually assessed by the standardized national test and/or examinations administered by each institution. In addition, Japanese higher education is characterized by the hierarchical meritocracy associated with Confucian tradition, and cosmopolitanism as class-distinguished capital, such as English (Smith & Colpitts, 2022). Temple University opened a branch campus in Japan in 1982, and it served as a successful demonstration of founding a U.S. college in Japan.

For its part, Korea used higher education as an engine to produce a skilled workforce and tied it to its long-term national economic development plan (Park, 2007). Moreover, Korean policymakers began to encourage the rapid growth of higher education by adopting U.S. ideas (Shin, 2012). As the domestic demand for higher learning opportunities increased, Korea relaxed the requirement to encourage the establishment of private HEIs in 1980-1990. It resulted in the dominance of private HEIs in Korea. Furthermore, Korea has the world's lowest fertility rate, which is below 1.0, and worse than that of Japan. Some other features of Korean higher education are Confucian tradition, which leads to education enthusiasm, intense competition for admission to prestigious HEIs for upward social mobility, test-based admission filtering and resource allocation, the hierarchy of university prestige, and aspiration for global cultural capital (Jarvis et al., 2020; Kim, 2011; Lee & Brinton, 1996; Shin, 2012). Also, the U.S. has influenced Korea to include the higher education sector in trade agreements (Shin, 2007). Therefore, some attempts were made by the government to minimize the country's educational trade deficit by encouraging students not to study overseas and inviting renowned foreign universities to open branches in Korea instead (Byun & Kim, 2011). This mindset would eventually, facilitate the Incheon Global Campus, home of foreign IBCS in Korea.

Analytical Framework

IBCs belong to a system different from the other types of educational organizations, not necessarily fitting clearly into either their host country's or their home country's organizational ecology (Lane, 2011). It suggests that any previous analytical framework used to examine the success factors of other types of educational or commercial organizations, regardless of whether they are local or international, does not provide the reference that is suitable for this study. Against this backdrop, this study draws on the conceptual framework proposed by Hickey and Davies (2022), which is the most recent, and more importantly, relevant in addressing the purpose of this research. They argue that according to their literature review, a framework comprising essential factors for success, which can aid in making informed and well-rounded decisions regarding IBCs. This framework encompasses 15 dimensions that contribute to the formation of an IBC, categorized under strategic, leadership, academic, financial, and operational themes. It considers factors from both the host country and the home institution. It is also suggested that IBC establishment requires careful consideration to achieve a harmonious balance between the local society, economy, and students' needs, while preserving the culture and values of the home institution; it involves addressing staffing, program offerings, teaching methods, student experience, governance arrangements, effective stakeholder mapping and management, and realistic expectations regarding their financial projections and the time required to achieve positive returns.

Research Methods

This research study employs the modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA) as its chosen research methodology. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a systematic methodology used in qualitative research by social scientists which involves collecting and analyzing data to construct hypotheses and theories, employing inductive reasoning. Grounded theory researchers aim to conceptualize participant experiences, allowing hypotheses to emerge from the collected data rather than being preconceived.

Grasping the fundamental essence of the original Glaser-Strauss version, the M-GTA presents its own improvements. It establishes a unique position, deliberately distancing itself from other versions, such as the Strauss-Corbin's GTA, the Glaser's GTA, and the recent attempts made by Charmaz or Clarke. The M-GTA approach demonstrates efficacy in uncovering the fundamental essence of the data while simultaneously preserving the contextual information in which it is embedded. Unlike the conventional method of coding the data word by word or line by line, M-GTA adopts a more nuanced strategy, segmenting the data at the level of sentences or events (Kinoshita, 2017). This analytical approach acknowledges the specific situational context in which the data is derived. By employing this holistic perspective, the M-GTA methodology ensures a comprehensive examination of the data, thereby fortifying the research process's integrity and dependability by circumventing reliance on fragmented information. The coding process within the M-GTA framework entails the creation of novel conceptualizations through iterative comparisons encompassing data and code/concept, code/concept and code/concept, code and category, and category and category (Byun, 2020). In addition to the extensive literature review, a total of twenty-six leaders and executives who have worked or are currently working at IBCs in Korea and Japan were interviewed with the semi-structured questionnaire to collect verbatim data.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of this study highlight the importance of persistent sense-making and collaboration among stakeholders for the success of IBCs. Collaboration involves the host country, the IBC, and the home campus, but it faces challenges due to conflicting opinions and agendas. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for IBCs to evolve into international centers of higher education. The exploration of IBCs in Korea and Japan has revealed a myriad of success factors that play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of these institutions.

Foremost among these is the undying support and advocacy from the home campus, which serves as the bedrock of the IBC's operations and vision. It becomes apparent that while inevitable personnel changes—from presidents to deans—may introduce challenges, the unwavering commitment to maintaining open channels of communication, cultivating mutual trust, and fostering transparent collaborative decision-making processes remains non-negotiable for sustained success. Moreover, navigating the intricacies of governmental dynamics, particularly with the Ministry of Education in both countries, is of paramount importance. It's observed that these ministries often harbor reservations, if not outright skepticism, toward IBCs. Despite this, some institutions, like TUJ, have managed to garner robust support by forging strategic alliances, such as with the U.S. Embassy, underscoring the significance of nurturing relationships beyond the traditional educational sphere.

Additionally, the demographic shifts occurring in Korea and Japan make it imperative for IBCs to diversify their student enrollment strategies. In an era where local enrollment prospects might be dwindling, casting a wider net to attract a global student body not only ensures financial stability but also enriches the academic milieu, reminiscent of U.S.-style pedagogy. TUJ has successfully pivoted to an international campus by taking in more diversified students from different parts of the world, notably from the U.S., to raise it up to 40 percent of its total enrollment. In contrast, it has been found that the most pressing challenge for the IBCs in South Korea is to establish additional recruitment pipelines across the different regions relying on limited resources.

Furthermore, beyond the pragmatic goals of revenue generation and global expansion, a genuine commitment to international education and diversity is a cornerstone for IBCs. It becomes a balancing act in which IBCs have to remain attuned to local cultural sensitivities while upholding the rigorous academic benchmarks set by their parent institutions. In terms of curricula, it is crucial for IBCs to judiciously select program offerings. As the market is saturated with educational institutions, a thorough and insightful analysis is vital to pinpoint programs that resonate with local and regional interests.

Such strategic planning can prevent setbacks, akin to the one faced by an IBC in Korea which had to prematurely discontinue two undergraduate programs due to lack of demand.

From an administrative perspective, the management structures of IBCs in these regions are unique. They lean heavily toward an entrepreneurial model, functioning more like independent enterprises than mere academic extensions of their parent campuses. This is exemplified by leadership roles such as the Chief Business Officer at George Mason Korea or the CEO designation at TUJ. These roles emphasize the importance of balancing academic priorities with business acumen, highlighting the dual responsibilities these leader's shoulder. Lastly, operational efficiency in IBCs is significantly enhanced by meticulous staffing. But beyond mere recruitment, there is a pressing need for continuous professional development. By ensuring a harmonious blend of both dispatched and locally hired staff, IBCs can create a rich tapestry of diverse perspectives. This diversity, coupled with training initiatives and collaborative opportunities with home campus experts, ensures that the IBCs' academic rigor mirrors that of their parent institution.

Discussion

The literature on IBCs presents a complex picture of successes and failures that extends across varying regional, social, and economic contexts. The case of IBCs in Korea and Japan stands as a particularly intriguing example, given the unique historical, cultural, and demographic factors at play in both countries. One key insight gleaned from the literature review is the growing realization of the need for shared decision-making criteria and a careful balancing act between local societal needs and the home institution's culture and values. The analytical framework provided by Hickey and Davies (2022) proves to be instrumental in understanding the strategic, leadership, academic, financial, and operational themes that encompass the complex ecosystem of IBCs.

The preliminary findings of this study add nuance to this framework, highlighting how both internal and external factors, ranging from governmental dynamics to demographic shifts, interplay to shape the trajectory of IBCs in Korea and Japan. The distinct administrative structures, entrepreneurial models, and emphasis on meticulous staffing and professional development illustrate that the challenges and opportunities for IBCs are far from monolithic. Recognizing and navigating these multifaceted dimensions is not just a strategic necessity but also a moral imperative, especially as IBCs strive to uphold international education standards, diversity, and inclusivity.

Conclusion

The exploration of IBCs in Korea and Japan offers invaluable insights into the complex interplay of factors that contribute to their success or failure. The analysis of the literature review, analytical framework, and preliminary findings paints a picture of a nuanced and multifaceted landscape. It highlights the crucial role of collaboration, strategic planning, and an understanding of local conditions, all underpinned by a commitment to international education and diversity.

In a world where IBCs are becoming less remarkable and the challenges of sustainability are ever more pressing, the lessons from Korea and Japan serve as a pertinent reminder of the delicate equilibrium that must be maintained. The balance between the culture and values of the home institution and the societal, economic, and students' needs of the host country is at the heart of what makes IBCs a vibrant and vital part of the global higher education landscape.

Moreover, the growth and evolution of IBCs in Korea and Japan underscore the need for ongoing research, informed decision-making, and careful consideration of long-term costs, risks, and opportunities. It calls for a shift from mere revenue generation and global expansion to a more holistic, ethically grounded, and community-centered approach. Such a perspective not only recognizes the unique historical and cultural contexts in which IBCs operate but also repositions them as catalysts for innovation, inclusivity, and global understanding in higher education.

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