

Branch Campuses in Asia and the Pacific: Definitions, Challenges and Strategies

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The Asia-Pacific Region stands at the forefront of cross-border education. Many new developments have emerged not only in countries which are traditionally identified as education service-receiving or importing countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, China, Thailand, India and Vietnam, but also in exporting countries such as Australia and New Zealand (Knight 2007). As transnational education becomes increasingly popular, the line between importing and exporting countries blurs. For example, Singapore is also actively engaged in exporting education services to Australia, China, Malaysia, Thailand, UK, and Canada. China has increased cross-border education to Thailand. India's higher education sector has been aggressively involved in both importing and exporting programs and services (Altbach and Knight 2006). New Zealand is both a receiving and sending country of cross-border education.

There are three forms of cross-border education activities: (1) student/academic mobility; (2) program mobility; and (3) institution mobility (Naidoo 2006). While the international mobility of students and scholars has traditionally been the primary form of academic mobility, the movement of transnational campuses/institutions has drawn greater attention over the past two decades (Knight 2007). As a matter of fact, Asia is a significant destination for hosting branch campuses. A survey collecting the information on 20 US institutions operating a total of 40 branch campuses abroad indicates that 40 percent of the campuses were in Asia (American Council on Education 2008). China and Singapore were ranked as the world's second and third hosts of international branch campus in 2009 (Becker

2009). These two countries alone make up 16 percent of the total number of branch campus in the world.

Focusing on offshore institutions or campuses, this article discusses its definitions, challenges of institutional sustainability, as well as strategies for sustaining offshore operations.

According to the American Council on Education (2009), a branch campus (a) rents or owns educational facilities in a country outside of the home institution; (b) offers degree courses in more than one field of study and is where students take most of their courses and finish their degree; (c) provides degrees that bear the parent institution's name alone or jointly with a partner institution; (d) primarily provides face-to-face instruction; (e) has permanent administrative staff. The Observatory provides a less stringent definition. A branch campus is described as an "off-shore operation of a higher education institution which is operated by the institution or through a joint-venture in which the institution is a partner and is in the name of the foreign institution. Upon successful completion of the study programme, students are awarded a degree from the foreign institution" (Observatory on Borderless Higher Education [OBHE] 2006). Knight (2005) offers a similar definition as OBHE. Regardless of the differences, these definitions share a common criterion in determining a branch campus. In order to be considered as a branch campus, it has to grant a degree to its graduates bearing the name of the parent institution. This delimiter is a new development of differentiating a branch campus from other transnational education undertakings. Two decades ago, Wagner and Schnitzer (1991) included those off-shore institutions which were non-degree bearing or provided short-term professional development and continuing education courses. Based on a number of refined definitions that have been common-

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ly used in recent years, these campuses that used to be considered branch campuses would not be called such nowadays.

It is predicted that the demand for branch campuses will increase in many countries except Singapore and Hong Kong, where a saturation point might be reached (OBHE 2006). Yet, the prospect for its future development and sustainability is not as predictable. Since 2004, at least 11 international branch campuses have closed. The main reasons for the closures are likely insufficient market research, erroneous estimation of enrollment numbers and operating costs (Becker 2009).

Philip G. Altbach (2010) specifies a number of unpredictable factors that prevent a branch campus from sustaining. First, he argues that branch campuses are a misnomer for the majority of institutions. They are not really campuses, but rather small and specialized academic programs, such as business management and information technology which require low set-up cost and have great worldwide demand.

Second, Altbach indicates that the lack of commitment of professors from the home institution to teach in host countries may pose the biggest challenge to sustainability.

Third, because branches often offer a limited range of academic programs, it is difficult for students to gain real educational experience that replicates that of home campuses. For example, the Michigan State Dubai Campus' failure to operate after two years was partly due to its limited capacity to provide an array of academic programs and student services. Although high tuition and Dubai's economic crisis were direct factors contributing to the close of the Dubai Campus, the situation was exacerbated by the campus not being able to compete with several full branch campuses in the country (Mills 2010). University of Liverpool's joint-venture campus with Xi'an Jiao Tong University in China is another interesting case to review. Rather than being research-oriented and replicating its home institution in the UK, the China-based campus is teaching-intensive because research requires a more long-term investment.

Fourth, in a host country where an increasing number of branch campuses and local universities compete with each other, it may be difficult to sustain the con-

ventional model of only accepting host country students who meet stringent selection criteria set by home institutions, particularly for prestigious institutions which have high enrollment standards (Altbach 2010). For example, the branch campus of the University of South Wales in Singapore demised only after two months of operation (Wilkins and Huisman 2010). The close of the short-lived campus was largely due to two strong local competitors in Singapore: National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. Most Singaporean students prefer these two prestigious universities over any other education providers.

Fifth, the local conditions make the long-term outcomes of branch campuses unpredictable. Branch campuses may be less attractive in China in the near future given the expanding local capacity at all levels. Likewise, a significant expansion of India's domestic institutions is underway. The plan is to open these institutions to international students for the first time (Altbach 2010). It is difficult to predict the future market for branch campuses as domestic institutions have become increasingly competitive and strategic in luring students. In addition, Wilkins and Huisman (2010) found that for Chinese and Indian students, a university's reputation was more important than the quality of its program.

In studying the cycle of business education in Malaysia, Quraeshi and Luqmani (2008) proposed several business strategies for transnational education providers to enhance their branches' competitiveness. Firstly, home institutions need to make affordability a priority before branch campuses are launched. Tuition, housing subsidies and scholarships are areas that can potentially reduce cost. Secondly, home institutions need to tailor courses to local demand in host countries. For foreign partners, accreditation, clear benchmarks and regular monitoring need to be established for ongoing improvement and enhancing classroom activities. Thirdly, branches need to place emphasis on screening faculty credentials, offering better pay and more manageable teaching loads to ensure faculty long-term teaching commitment in a host country. Well-planned faculty training rather than ad hoc training is desired. Training can focus on cultural differences and the academic

backgrounds of students that may affect classroom performance. Lastly, online tools, alumni networks and employer inputs are all possible approaches to advertise branches. Online outlets, such as blogs and chat sites become influential discussion forums for students in deciding the branch they choose. Therefore, institutions are advised to monitor these sites to obtain first-hand feedback from the students. It is also important to get alumni and employers more actively involved in the recruiting, curriculum design and career development process.

With an increasing demand for cross-border education, branch campuses have become an important form of delivery in the Asia and Pacific region. In spite of the demand, it is a challenging task to sustain branch campuses. In view of the fact that most recent branch campuses were built to generate revenue, much of the research on branch campuses focuses on business strategies. Future research also needs to be done to explore strategies above and beyond a business model to reflect the intrinsic value of higher education serving the public good.

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