

WHAT DO EDUCATION CITIES AND REGIONAL HUBS HAVE TO OFFER?

Alan Ruby

Essentially this set of presentations and subsequent discussion began to explore the "whys and hows" of different strategies that rely on the creation of international programs or campuses in a host nation or region. These strategies all seek to enhance higher education capacity and quality in a nation or region by creating a local infrastructure, a physical space where learning opportunities are delivered directly to students. This distinguishes them from transnational programs that are delivered solely or largely by online or some other form of information technology. In terms of Sauve's (2002) four-fold taxonomy of trade in educational services education cities and branch campuses are examples of Mode 3, a physical presence in another nation.

While our discussions and presentations centered on the benefits of these cross border modes of delivery to the host nations and explored some of the different models that were in operation around the world there was also a keen interest in the motivations of leading institutions to engage in the development of education hubs and branch campuses.

We began our discussion by looking at the phenomena of branch campuses from three perspectives: the host nations; the academic institutions and the student consumer. We debated what branch campuses or hubs or education cities can and cannot do for the host nation. And we explored the following questions.

1. Can they diversify provision by offering academic programs that are not available in the region, especially in areas of specialization or where cost structures justify centralization of infrastructure, like medicine or robotics?
2. Do they internationalize higher education by linking the local academic community to the global community of scholars and educators?
3. Is there evidence, or at least an aspiration, that knowledge transfer will take place and that expertise about teaching, learning and research, and the design and operation of modern world class universities will be shared with national universities?
4. Will they attract and retain talent in the student, faculty and research communities?
5. Are they able to, or expected to model new and innovative policies and practices in the operation of universities and of modern corporations, from boards of trustees to procurement procedures?
6. And are they to exemplify values like free speech, democratic practice, tolerance and equality?

The essence of the discussion and commentary was that the current phase of globalization of higher education which had stimulated the proliferation of branch campuses was still "maturing." The effects and impact of diversification of provision in regions like the Middle East and South Asia had yet to be realized. A lot would depend on the employment outcomes for graduates and the articulation of first degree holders into post graduate studies and research. The destinations of the first cohorts of graduates from some of the more prominent and well-resourced institutions like KAUST are still developing their careers. KAUST's first graduates were in 2010 while NYU's Abu Dhabi campus is yet to have a graduating class.

Similarly the research output from these and other places is, understandably given the time scale, still emerging.

In the time available we were unable to even begin to address other questions facing nations as they consider investing in this form of higher education. We did not look at the contribution of research and development that flows from the presence of scholars and the creation of laboratory and other experimental facilities that come with the setting of branch campuses or regional education hubs or learning cities.

We also explored the issues facing universities who are, or are considering being, part of a regional hub or opening a branch in an education city. There is a growing array of transnational higher education arrangements and all are referred to as 'branch campuses' even though they differ in breadth of academic programming, in governance and in financing. The main distinguishing feature among branch campuses is the extent of operational control over academic programs, standards and faculty that is held and exercised by the home institution. It seems that the tighter the control of student admissions and faculty recruitment, and the closer the alignment of standards for selection, the stronger the role of the home campus and the less opportunity for local variation.

We briefly debated the strengths and weaknesses of the different models. One issue of particular relevance was the place of local languages, literature and history in institutions where the language of instruction was English, or French. There was concern that local students may graduate from their first degree without a solid grounding in or appreciation of the elements of national identity or a working command of the national official language. This issue is particularly acute in nations where the national language is being re-established after independence.

And finally we looked briefly at the student consumer. There concerns were seen to be primarily vested in issues of reputation and standards. They were perceived to be interested in the nature of the academic experience. Would a branch campus offer programs and learning styles and assessment regimes identical to that of the home campus? Will the entrance and graduation requirements be the same? Will the faculty be held to the same standards for recruitment, retention and promotion? Will the faculty be resident for the academic year or will they come in two-week blocks? Will the degree have the home brand or carry some geographic endorsement? What can they expect in terms of academic articulation between a branch campus and the "home" institution? The last was particularly salient for those models which envisage or encourage student movement between campuses.

Following the discussion of these themes we also explored the different modes of branch campuses. In particular we looked at the strengths and limits of the "franchise" model of branch campuses. Some equate the franchise model with the high control, high fidelity, tight specification of inputs and processes and standardization of product that is associated with the fast food industry. The critiques of this model include concerns that it does not allow for differences in student needs and learning style preferences. It tends to deliver material in a fixed sequence at a pre-determined rate limiting opportunities for faster progress or for needed revision as perceived by faculty members interacting with students. It is inherently a low trust model of deliver which favors specification to attain and maintain standards and consistency. Its defenders refer to the quality assurance processes embedded in the franchise model and the confidence the consumer can have that the learning opportunities are equivalent to those in other settings carrying the same name or brand.

Finally we touched briefly upon the due diligence procedures a national ministry of education or a higher education coordinating agency might apply when considering proposals for the establishment of a branch campus or an education zone. Some of those procedures are similar to those associated with the analyses a government might commission for any significant foreign direct investment. What are the costs and benefits to the nation? What risks are involved and whose interests are paramount, the investors or the host nation? Other considerations will be specific to education: will professional programs like engineering be internationally accredited? There is a need for further research and reflection in these areas especially as there have been recent instances of failed or unsuccessful branch campuses in the Middle East and in Singapore that have echoed the poor track record of branch campuses in Japan in the 1980s.

Overall the conference session produced some robust exchanges between the panel members and engaged many in the audience. There is more analytical work to be done on the ways the physical presence of an international institution of higher education influences the economy, the quality of education domestically and the choices and careers of young people in the region. As cohorts of graduates leave these institutions and go to work or further study there will be rich opportunities for scholarship and debate.

References

Sauve, P., (2002) *"Trade, Education and the GATS: What's in, What's out, What's Ait the Fuss About?"* OECD, Paris. Retrieved from: www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-schoolArr10.23.2013