

The management of transnational higher education

Since the late 1990s, transnational education has become a key part of the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions. Knight (2016) defines transnational higher education as the mobility of programmes (e.g. franchised degrees, joint/double degrees and distance learning) and providers (e.g. international branch campuses and joint universities) across national borders. Thus, transnational higher education generally involves programmes and institutions moving to where the students are located rather than the students going to foreign countries as international students.

In the scholarly literature, transnational higher education is also known as cross-border, offshore and borderless higher education. A recent systematic review of the literature on transnational higher education found that the most popular topics of research have been quality assurance; educational policies and trends; cultural differences; programme design; student experience, attitudes and adjustment; and academic staff attitudes and development (Kosmützky and Putty, 2016). However, it should be noted that much of the literature on transnational higher education is hypothetical and based on the assumptions rather than on the recent empirical investigation (Healey, 2015).

Overseas expansion involves a large number of uncertainties and risks (e.g. financial loss and damage to institutional reputation), which may be associated with environmental, industry or organisational factors (Wilkins, 2016). Transnational higher education operates in unique contexts and institutional managers are often ill-prepared to deal with the many differences they face in their everyday jobs. Local regulations (e.g. host country quality assurance) and cultures (e.g. influencing student attitudes and behaviours) may present both constraints and opportunities.

The management of transnational higher education can be a challenging and daunting task for institutional leaders, who typically have to deal with many new situations and work contexts, and often without having relevant previous experience or training. Institutions generally expect managers responsible for transnational education to deliver the same quality and results achieved at home campuses, but with much fewer resources and different student and staff profiles. For example, international branch campuses often rely on visiting and adjunct faculty more than “home” campuses.

This special issue comprises eight articles. Each article focusses on a specific issue of management in transnational higher education. Collectively, the articles are concerned with diverse topics and ideas, which may help institutional decision-makers and managers to improve employee and institutional performance, as well as the student experience. The findings, discussions and recommendations contained in these articles may be of interest to both practitioners and researchers.

One of the major decisions that has to be made by home institutions that want to engage in transnational higher education is the choice of host country(s) in which to operate. Various models and techniques can be used by institutions to evaluate potential host countries. The first paper in this special issue, by Tsiligiris, proposes the use of an adapted Porter Diamond Model. Applying the model to China and Malaysia, it is confirmed that these two countries are attractive for the development of new transnational ventures, or expanding existing ones. The author claims that the model can be further used by institutions to evaluate other possible host countries or by the host countries themselves, in order to develop strategies that increase the attractiveness of the country as a host for transnational education.



The vast majority of transnational higher education programmes – where the curriculum of the home institution is somehow transferred to the host institution – depend on some form of partnership. Thus, the success of these transnational ventures is to a large extent dependent on the performance of the host institution and how effectively the two institutions work together. The next two articles each look at different aspects of partnership management. The first, by Heffernan, Wilkins and Butt, adopts a student perspective to evaluate the importance of institutional reputation, student trust and student-university identification in international partnerships. The authors conclude that when evaluating potential partners, decision-makers should consider the potential partner's reputation and the extent to which students trust and identify with it.

The second article on partnerships, by Healey, examines the challenges of managing transnational education partnerships. Adopting an insider research methodology, the data came from senior managers involved with transnational partnerships. These managers were employed at home campuses in the UK or as “in-country” managers in China, Malaysia or the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The findings suggest that universities need to do more to increase awareness and commitment to their partnerships among staff at home campuses, while providing improved professional development and more frequent rotations for in-country managers.

The markets in which transnational higher education operate have become increasingly competitive, particularly in places such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the UAE, which are widely recognised as higher education hubs. For example, the UAE, with a population of 9.4 million, hosts over 100 universities and institutions of higher education (Center for Higher Education Data and Statistics, 2012). Institutions need to implement effective marketing strategies in order to gain a competitive advantage in such competitive markets.

The fourth contribution in this special issue, by Juusola and Rensimer, investigates how the branding practices of franchisees in the UAE employ discursive and symbolic strategies to build legitimacy. The authors conclude that the practices implemented by franchisees often decrease the institution's legitimacy, rather than increasing it, and that “borrowing” legitimacy from franchised programmes can prevent the franchisee from becoming a fully fledged higher education institution. The findings suggest that in order to satisfy the expectations of their diverse stakeholders, franchisees need to go beyond symbolic assurances in their legitimacy-building and commit resources to making substantive changes to the institution's goals, structures and processes.

The next two articles focus on the different aspects of cultural influences and differences between home and host countries. The first of these two contributions, by He and Liu, examines how cross-country cultural differences influence the design and management of two franchise and one joint degree programme in Chinese-British/French partnerships. It was found that partners from different countries may prefer different approaches to collaboration, and that these approaches may also vary for different types of programme. The authors argue that the needs and requirements of both parties should be considered when making decisions about the design and management of transnational programmes, which typically requires a degree of compromise from each side.

Annabi, McStay, Noble and Sidahmed authored the second article that has a cultural focus. Their article investigates the attitudes of male postgraduate students to assisted or arranged marriages and the impacts of matrimonial practices on participation in transnational higher education. It was found that rather than education shifting attitudes away from assisted and arranged marriages, many students saw their study as an opportunity to advance their career and have a better chance of securing a wife through an arranged marriage. The authors call on managers in transnational education to show greater cultural sensitivity with regard to the ritual formalities – in this case, associated with

marriage – that need to be observed by students in their own cultures, which may, at times, result in absenteeism from classes or examinations.

The final two contributions of the special issue are concerned with the specific aspects of review and evaluation in transnational higher education. The first of these articles, by Maxwell-Stuart and Huisman, examines student perceptions and experiences of student engagement. In this study, student engagement is defined as the process of interaction between students, staff and the institution for the benefit of quality improvement. The data for the study came from students taking Scottish higher education programmes in India, Singapore and the UAE. The findings were quite negative. Many students perceived themselves more as customers than partners, and few felt a sense of belonging with their institution, which led to a general sense of apathy towards student engagement. Interestingly, the majority of students believed that it was the responsibility of teachers and the university to encourage student participation and involvement. The authors recommend that institutions involved with transnational learners focus more on engagement and implement strategies that tackle the apathy which currently exists among both students and staff.

The special issue concludes with an article by Hill and Thabet, which presents a critical evaluation of the evolution of one international branch campus over an eight-year period. As a piece of ethnographic research with a longitudinal research design, this study offers a unique insider's view of the development of a branch campus. The authors found that the key areas of focus for managers clearly changed in the different stages of the campus' evolution. In the first five years, the institution had to manage stakeholder expectations and set clear agendas. After five years, managers could focus more on developing systems and processes to achieve quality assurance, and, after eight years, the institution was able to develop further its research and knowledge exchange agenda. The authors argue that institutions need to have clear goals and objectives, and that positive relationships between home and branch campuses must be developed. However, the authors warn against branch campuses attempting to fully replicate the home campus model, because contexts and regulations are different; expertise and capacity differ; and the opportunities available are different.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue provide some unique and interesting insights into the management of transnational higher education. They make valuable contributions to the scholarly literature upon which other researchers may build. Some of the articles deliver ideas and insights that may help managers and institutions to do things better: better host country and partner selection; better relationships with partners; better marketing; better programme design and management; better relationships with students; and better performance from students. The special issue would not have been possible without the reviewers who gave up their time to provide detailed, honest and constructive feedback to authors, and to them I would like to express my sincere thanks.

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