

## **AC 2009-198: EXPORTING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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# EXPORTING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

## Abstract

A variety of circumstances has led to a decrease in the number of foreign students enrolling in American universities, leading to disruption of previous benefits to US universities and to US influence abroad. American universities have responded by developing educational offerings in foreign countries, in a variety of formats. While there are many issues to be dealt with in such foreign offerings, there are significant benefits to both the US universities involved and to the foreign countries involved.

## Introduction

For many decades prior to 9/11, higher education institutions in the United States attracted large numbers of foreign students, particularly at the graduate level. These students met several needs of the institutions and of the US, particularly in the sciences and engineering where domestic students were increasingly scarce. And many returned to their own countries, either immediately or after getting valuable work experience in the US, to become leaders in government and commerce.

After 9/11, the flow of international students to US higher education institutions decreased dramatically, both because many of them, particularly from the Middle East, no longer felt welcome, and because visa processing delays made timely access difficult. This has had a damaging effect on financial and human resources at US universities in the short run, and perhaps a more important damaging effect on the beneficial impact of graduates of the US higher education system abroad in the long run.

Recognizing these negative impacts, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling convened a meeting of university presidents at the US State Department in April 2008 to discuss options for returning to an increased positive impact globally of graduates of US style education. Discussion focused heavily on exporting American style higher education abroad through a variety of mechanisms such as branch campuses, partnerships with foreign institutions, distance education, and quality assurance assistance.

The increased interest in having US universities enter into programs abroad has resulted in considerable discussion at conferences and in publications. The American Council on Education, for example, has recently published three books detailing the issues, processes and magnitude of US degree programs and branch campuses abroad.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## Driving forces

The global demand for post secondary education is increasing substantially as countries such as China and India develop advanced industrial bases. A study by IDP Education Australia estimates that the global demand could nearly triple over the next couple of decades to 263 million students.<sup>4</sup>

For decades, US higher education institutions reaped significant benefits from enrollment of foreign students, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. At the undergraduate level, income from out-of-state tuition payments provided important financial resources, as well as providing diversity of perspectives in the classroom and on campus. At the graduate level, foreign students typically filled teaching assistant and research assistant positions, providing necessary classroom and laboratory support for faculty members.

Graduate students from abroad have been particularly important in engineering and science, at a time when too few American students chose to enter these difficult fields of study. And the foreign graduates of master's and doctoral programs in engineering and science have provided a necessary and desirable flow of employees to American firms – particularly those in the high tech sector.

American educated graduates have returned to their home countries in large numbers in the past, providing the human capital to supply needed government officials, leaders for industry, medical professionals, etc. The residual link between such graduates and the United States has been very beneficial to international relations.

But all of these positive benefits of large numbers of foreign students at American universities have been eroded by significant drops in the number of such students. One major reason is the fallout after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Many potential students from areas such as the Arab world are fearful of how they would be received in the US, and have chosen to go to other English speaking countries such as Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom for their study. And the more rigorous and lengthy visa processes have further discouraged potential foreign students from trying to get to the US for study.

In addition, rapidly developing countries such as China and India – which have historically provided large numbers of students to US universities – have greatly increased and improved educational opportunities at home. This has significantly reduced the flow of students from those countries, particularly graduate student in fields such as engineering and science. But in other developing countries, collaborations for the offering of engineering and technology degrees are highly sought. The desire to achieve a 'knowledge economy' such as that in the US is a driving force, as is the time and expense involved in developing their own educational programs.

One bright spot in this scene is the desire of many developing countries to emulate the US model of higher education in their countries. Foreign countries in many parts of the world – particularly wealthy countries which want to develop knowledge-based economies like the US – are seeking ways to work with US universities to build or strengthen their local higher education capabilities. Elements of the “pull” from

developing countries include increased demand for higher education there, the appeal to students of receiving a foreign education while staying at home, the increase of governmental policies that attract foreign educators and the rise of English-language education internationally.<sup>5</sup>

### **Forms of US education abroad**

Many US universities have developed *branch campuses* in foreign countries, offering at least a portion of the programs there that are offered on the home campus in the US. Opening a branch campus is typically very expensive, and obtaining sufficient enrollments to make it financially viable over time is difficult to predict, and to achieve. In addition, providing faculty members from the home campus is difficult – particularly in the years after startup. Curricula and courses often need to be adapted to the local culture and needs. And accreditation issues, both at the home campus and at the branch campus, can be formidable.

A branch campus typically requires its own buildings in the foreign country, and this feature adds considerably to the startup and operating expenses. This financial commitment, and the other expenses such as relocating and maintaining an appropriate faculty pool, often leads US universities to seek financial support from the government or investors in the foreign country in which a branch campus is to be started. A recent study by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education identifies three models for branch campuses: fully funded by the institution; eternal funding; and facilities provided.<sup>6</sup> The study indicates that institutions are increasingly reluctant or unable to carry the entire risks associated with establishing a branch campus in a foreign country, leading to increasing use of the second and third models.

A branch campus of George Mason University, opened in the UAE emirate of Ras al Khaymah in 2005, became the first American educational venture to collapse. The campus suffered from low enrollments, and was beset by problems revolving around administration, academics and identity. It announced closing in 2009 when its local partner began to cut back on its financial support.<sup>10</sup>

Another typical model is a US university entering into a *partnership* relationship with a local university in a foreign country. This has the advantage of softening the financial commitment and risk to the US university, and provides the means for dealing with shaping the curriculum to meet local needs. It also considerably reduces the startup bureaucratic processes, including licensure and local accreditation. One major issue that arises in such a partnership, however, is whose degree will be awarded to graduates. In some cases, joint degrees are offered. MIT, for example, is not granting its degree at the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology in Abu Dhabi, although it is heavily involved in all aspects of the curriculum design, faculty hiring, and collaborative research.

**Distance education** is yet another model – albeit less effective in providing an immersive US-style education. With current global communication technology, a range of distance education vehicles is available – up to and including full two-way video conferencing. Time zone differences can be a problem for live delivery, and local administration typically needs to be provided.

At a less intense level, US higher education representatives often provide **consulting** advice to foreign universities or governments on how to develop educational programs in the American model. Such consulting covers the spectrum from curriculum development to quality assurance program development to government policy guidance.

As US universities get experience in the Middle East, and their experiences are reported, new potential collaborations are being examined more closely. US university leaders are now avoiding hastily done agreements, and are seeking to develop overseas partnerships that are both broad and deep.<sup>11</sup>

## **Issues**

Any development of American-style education in a foreign country runs the risk of educating students in a way or at a level that creates an elite class that is not well connected to the local culture and needs. And if too much adaptation to local conditions is made, does the education retain the fundamental elements which make it an American education?

As noted above, staffing foreign programs with faculty members from the home US campus is often a problem, particularly after startup. One solution to this problem is to have new faculty members who are hired to work in foreign programs spend a significant period of time on the home campus, involved in the courses that they will later teach abroad and working with home campus faculty members on research.

Home campuses in the US can be positively affected as faculty members have the opportunity to gain international experience. In the current economic climate, assignment or transfer of faculty members to foreign campuses can relieve home campus budgets, and perhaps avoid layoffs.

Developing necessary enrollments to justify the offering of foreign programs, and provide sufficient income to maintain them, is a major issue. In many developing countries, the majority of secondary school leavers are poorly prepared to handle American-style university level programs. Lack of adequate preparation in math and science is typical, and the ability to study advanced material in English is often lacking.

Maintaining home campus quality standards over time, as curricula are adapted to local needs and faculty members are recruited specifically for the foreign program, can be difficult. And maintaining accreditation, both US and local, thus becomes an issue. Care

must be taken to assure that home campus accreditation, both regional and specialty (such as ABET) is not jeopardized by branch campus operations.

### **Benefits and concerns**

Having US universities heavily involved in higher education offerings in foreign countries has many benefits to such universities and to the United States. For the universities it provides a way to regain the financial resources diminished by having fewer foreign students enroll at their US campuses. It also provides faculty, administrators – and perhaps US students – with opportunities to work in and learn about foreign cultures. And it addresses the concern of US government officials about reduced US influence abroad due to fewer foreign students exposed to US higher education programs.

For foreign countries, the presence of US university education on their own soil can result in desirable experiences no longer easily obtained by sending students to the US. And in some cases – such as Muslim women who are often unable to travel abroad for higher education -- it can expand the pool and impact of having nationals obtain a US-style education. In addition, the presence of US higher education programs benefits the host country by building local capacity and education infrastructure; reducing the outflow of domestic students, with the associated financial and brain drain; attracting foreign students who can contribute to intellectual richness and may stay on as skilled immigrants; and transferring of foreign models of research, teaching and administration.<sup>7</sup>

For host country students there is the opportunity to earn a foreign degree at home: expenses are lower due to not having to pay living expenses in a foreign country, there is little disruption of family and work life; and tuition charges are generally lower or paid by the host country.<sup>7</sup>

One concern raised is that the rapid expansion of foreign campuses in regions such as the Persian Gulf will lead to growing competition for students, creating a pressure to lower standards for admission.<sup>8</sup>

Another concern is that most agreements to construct and operate a foreign campus are reached at the highest levels of the offering university, often involving the president. But success requires the active involvement of faculty members who will design and deliver curricula, collaborate on research projects, and vote degrees. Without faculty support, a university will not be able to deliver on its promises of an American style educational experience.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, other countries frequently embrace cultures and business practices that would never be tolerated in the US. Americans take for granted religious freedom, a commitment to diversity, freedom of expression, and guaranteed academic freedom. While countries that seek American partners may declare their intent to honor such

freedoms, they may not deliver on that intent – thus putting the program and the US institution’s name at risk.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The circumstances that have made it difficult for many foreign students to travel to the United States for university education have led to alternative modes of providing such American-style education in foreign countries. Such alternatives include branch campuses, educational partnerships, and distance education. The moving of American-style education to foreign venues involves several complex issues, including finances, appropriate enrollments, preparation of incoming students, and quality assurance of programs. But appropriately managed foreign programs can have substantial benefits for both US universities and foreign countries.

## References

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