

The development of international campuses

Some reflections on the Nottingham experience

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Introduction

Students have always travelled in search of the best study opportunities, and researchers have always collaborated across national borders. But until fairly recently, higher education institutions have remained stubbornly national – whether limited by the demands of domestic regulation or by protectionist approaches in potential destinations. For a small number of private, ‘for-profit’ universities, the idea of operating campuses in different geographic locations has always been an integral part of the underlying business model – a process of growing by getting closer to new and attractive markets. And for some public and not-for-profit institutions, there has always been a logic in establishing a physical presence overseas as a base to support outward student mobility. These initiatives aside, universities have for the most part remained fundamentally geographically bound. But, the past 20 years or so have seen almost seismic shifts in context, in policy and regulation, and in attitudes and behaviour. Now the idea of institutional mobility is no longer seen as a being a bold, abnormal, risky or threatening choice but has become a realistic strategic option for a range of higher education providers.

The late 1990s saw a change in the nature and scale of institutional mobility as a growing number of mainstream private and public (or publicly funded) universities sought to establish teaching and research activity outside of their home country in response to both an identified opportunity and active encouragement from host countries. The following decade saw this sort of approach becoming increasingly common, and by 2012 the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education was able to report over 200 branch campuses were in operation and a further 37 expected to start in 2012 and 2013.

The University of Nottingham in Malaysia and China

My own institution – the University of Nottingham – was one of the pioneers in this higher education revolution. We were driven by a range of different influences – what I would typically describe as ‘pull’ factors, ‘push’ factors and ‘enablers’. There were clear pull factors that made the idea of an international campus particularly attractive to the university. Nottingham has a long tradition of welcoming highly qualified international students, but there were and are only so many outwardly mobile students (OECD figures would suggest that fewer than five per cent of students are able to travel overseas for their education, and forecasts suggest that this percentage is unlikely to increase dramatically). The implication was that there existed a large pool



The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC)

of talented students who could not come to Nottingham, so perhaps Nottingham should seek to get closer to them?

A primary consideration for the university was the awareness that having an international campus would allow us to work with a larger pool of talented students and, indeed, talented staff. If a university's ability to deliver its mission and vision is dependent on the quality of its staff and its students (and, ultimately, its alumni), then operating internationally and working with a wider talent pool would help Nottingham to enhance its performance in relation to both teaching and research. In addition, an international campus would also provide some unique and valuable learning opportunities for UK-based students and staff, whether through mobility opportunities or simply through exposure to, and the opportunity to learn from, new and different perspectives. And, although it was probably never explicitly stated, I think we always recognised that an innovative development such as an international campus could have a really positive impact on the University's reputation, globally.

Alongside these pull factors, there were also diverse influences that helped to ‘push’ the university towards the establishment of an international base. Within the UK, the opportunities for growth in student numbers were becoming more limited – partly because of changes in the funding environment and partly because of changing demographics. And in terms of competition, as other countries became more active in international student recruitment (including starting to deliver teaching in the English language), it became increasingly clear that UK institutions would need to be innovative if they wished to continue to attract high quality students and staff.

These pull and push factors directed the university to look at the option of developing an international campus, but the existence of

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an attractive opportunity does not guarantee success. Other institutions had already attempted to establish overseas ventures – most notably the ill-fated venture of some 20 US universities to Japan in the late 1980s. A third ingredient was needed and that was what I would describe as a series of ‘enablers’. These were crucial in terms of implementation. Internally, strong leadership and clear vision played a key role; governance was robust but supportive, and the university was financially sound. Externally, a range of factors directed Nottingham to focus its interest on Malaysia. Different countries were looking to position themselves as educational hubs (including UAE, Qatar and Singapore). Malaysia had formulated a bold ambition to be a major higher education destination by 2020 and saw international university campuses as the key to delivery. Malaysian students had been coming to study at Nottingham since the late 1940s and there were many alumni in prominent positions in public and corporate life; their support, advice and encouragement were to play a central role in convincing Nottingham that Malaysia was the right destination and in convincing Malaysia that Nottingham was the right sort of institution to attract.

Implementation

As with so many new strategic developments, making the decision is only half of the battle; implementation remains a major challenge. The Nottingham approach was to ensure that the international campus was consistent with the home one – equivalent in function as well as in standards and quality. What this meant in practice was that the Malaysian campus (and subsequently the campus in China) had to be full and integral parts of the University of Nottingham – alongside the quality and standards associated with the teaching, priority was also accorded to the development of the broader student experience and to the creation of a culture and environment to support research excellence. In short, the campuses that Nottingham was to develop in Malaysia and China were not just teaching outposts (they were not just ‘branches’) but functionally equivalent campuses.

To deliver this vision required that the university work in partnership – its international campuses were in effect private universities in their particular jurisdictions, and the regulations at the time of establishment required that the university had a joint venture partner. In Malaysia, the university started out with two partners – Boustead Holdings Berhad and YTL Corporation (although Boustead subsequently became the majority partner in the joint venture). As business partners, these two entities undertook the operational side of developing the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC), but the Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) was very clear that academic responsibility resided solely with Nottingham.

The operational challenge for the university related to delivery – and specifically how to deliver the University of Nottingham’s educational and student experience at arm’s length from its UK base. In structural terms, the university chose to operate a ‘one university’ model and this meant that academic schools had a multi-campus structure: for example, there is only one Business School at Nottingham – it just happens to have a base in three different countries. This approach ensured that there was clear

academic ownership of the degree programmes and the associated quality assurance processes. Similarly close relationships were developed for professional services to ensure that policies and processes were shared across locations. And from a human resources perspective, both of Nottingham’s international campuses relied on the leadership of senior academics seconded from the UK campus working alongside locally recruited staff. These secondees had (and have) a key role in linking the international campuses to each other and linking back to the UK campus.

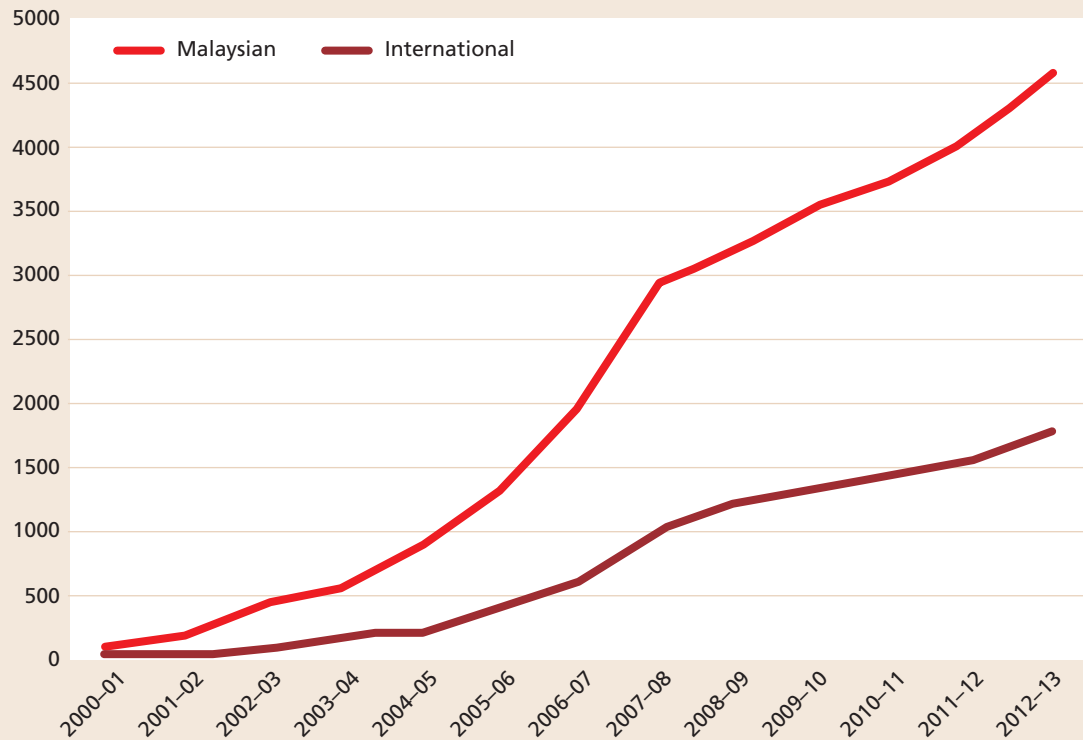
How much to standardise and how much to adapt?

A major issue in taking this approach relates to the balance between standardisation and adaptation. How much should be identical across campuses and how much should be adapted to local context? Nottingham had to remain true to its core educational values (perhaps what marketers might call its ‘brand values’) and ensure that resources and systems were in place to deliver. These values are not just restricted to the content of what is taught but also to the style of teaching and the broader experience and facilities that surround that teaching. This matters for two reasons:

1. Pragmatically, an international campus can only really work if students (and their parents and other key stakeholders) can be confident that they are receiving an education and a qualification that is comparable in quality and standards to that delivered in the institution’s home country
2. Morally, education is of such importance to individuals and to societies that those institutions that provide it must accept a responsibility to ensure that what they offer is right in terms of quality and standards

But, it would also be wrong to ignore the need to adapt to local legal and cultural contexts. The social side of life on campus, the ways in which programmes are marketed and engagement with society are all susceptible to, and indeed require adaption to fit with, the country in which the campus is located.

In getting the right balance between standardisation and adaptation, seconded staff play a key role as the institution’s ‘culture carriers’. They bring with them an understanding of the Nottingham way of doing things, an understanding of policy and practice at the home institution. And in turn, they have to develop an understanding of the local context and transmit that to the home institution. Initially, cross-campus links depended heavily on these individuals and the senior managers at the UK campuses. It soon became apparent that this two-way flow of knowledge had to be augmented by the development of high levels of engagement and interaction between staff across campuses at all levels. Regular staff visits in both directions increasingly became the norm, as did frequent interactions through technology-based communication channels. The development of relationships between key individuals at each campus was further embedded through the implementation of a committee structure in which all relevant university decision-making bodies functioned on a multi-campus basis with meetings held through video-conferencing.

Figure 1**Student numbers at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC), 2000–13**

With commitment comes success

The vision to create functionally equivalent campuses has depended on clear commitment at senior levels within the university and active engagement at all levels within the institution. It is a vision that we continue to work towards. But in both Malaysia and China, progress has been substantial. UNMC is now home to some 5,000 students across 17 academic schools and departments, studying on over 100 programmes from Foundation level through to PhDs. Research income over the past three years has exceeded RM20 million, and the university, in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, has recently established a major centre for research on under-utilised crops, with funding of over RM10 million.

Acknowledgement

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