

Transnational Higher Education and International Branch Campuses in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: The Case of the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to examine the emergence of transnational higher education (TNHE) and international branch campuses (IBCs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The findings demonstrate that the emergence of TNHE and IBCs has been the result of interrelated political, economic, social, and academic factors. First, the formation of the GCC was a key moment during which member states sought to stimulate scientific progress through the development of higher education as part of a strategy to meet labor demands and economic development. Second, the commodification of education and the drive to increasing profits in educational institutions combined with decreases in government funding to Western universities during the neo-liberal era of capitalism have been an impetus for Western universities to seek 'new markets' beyond their borders. Third, the liberating of regional trade policies in services, including education, combined with the internationalization of education has enabled the cross-border movement of students, educators, and institutions. Fourth, the UAE's unique demographic group mix, which consists of a majority of international expatriates, combined with significant government funding in the education sector and international partnerships has resulted in the rapid expansion of TNHE and IBCs.

Keywords: *Transnational Higher Education; International Branch Campus; Gulf Cooperation Council; United Arab Emirates.*

1. Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) has had a long history in the Middle East in general and the Arabian Gulf in particular. The American model of education was introduced in the 19th century into some countries in the Middle East; however, the more recent proliferation of Western higher education institutions has been most prominent in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). The GCC countries have made significant attempts at establishing themselves as a new emerging higher education hub by promoting and designing policies to attract more international students (Wilkins et al., 2012). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, in particular, have become the TNHE centers of the Middle East region with more than 400 undergraduate and graduate programs from universities in the US, UK, and France (Alam et al., 2013). As of 2015, the UAE hosted 31 international branch campuses (IBCs) and was second in the world compared to China which hosted 32 IBCs. Qatar and Singapore were fourth with 11 IBCs each following Malaysia which had 12 IBCs (Mackie, 2019). The purpose of the paper is to examine the emergence of TNHE and IBCs in the GCC countries more generally and the UAE more specifically. This has occurred as a result of several interrelated political, economic, social, and academic factors. First, the formation of the GCC in 1981 was a key moment during which member states sought to stimulate scientific and technological progress through the development of programs and curricula for higher education as part of an overall strategy to meet labor market demands and economic development. Second, the commodification of education and the drive to increasing profits in educational institutions combined with significant decreases in government funding to Western universities during the neo-liberal era of capitalism have been an impetus for Western universities to seek 'new markets' beyond their borders. Third, the liberating of regional trade policies in services, including education, combined with the internationalization of education amidst an era of globalization has enabled the cross-border movement of students, educators, and institutions. Fourth, the UAE's unique demographic group mix, which consists of an overwhelming majority of international expatriates, combined with significant government funding in the education sector and international partnerships has resulted in the rapid expansion of TNHE programs and IBCs. The paper is organized in the following way. The first section defines the terms TNHE and IBCs and provides an overview of their rapid global expansion. The second section develops the context by examining the TNHE programs in the Middle East region, GCC countries, and the UAE. Several factors are discussed including colonialization and the role of education, the formation of the GCC and the development of education, and the emergence of TNHE programs in the GCC countries. In addition, issues such as the educational sector, unique demographic group mix, and the internationalization of education in the UAE are discussed. The third section is a concluding summary and discussion of the findings.

2. TNHE and IBCs

According to the Council of Europe, TNHE refers to “All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based” (Council of Europe, 2001). TNHE involves the internationalization of education in an era of globalization. According to Knight (2003, p. 2), “Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education”. This is affected by processes associated with globalization. Globalization incorporates “the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, and ideas ... across borders” (Knight, 2003, p. 3). Knight (2003, p. 3) claimed, “internationalization is changing the world of education and globalization is changing the world of internationalization” (see also Knight, 2006).

TNHE incorporates a broad range of activities such as providing higher education in places that cannot meet demand, upgrading the international perspective and skills of students, and cross-cultural communication (Altbach & Knight, 2007). It employs several delivery modes: IBCs, franchising or partnership, articulation or twinning, distance or virtual education, and study abroad programs (Alam et al., 2013). IBCs refer to higher education institutions that have a physical presence in a foreign country. They provide students undergraduate and/or graduate programs solely or jointly with a foreign institution. The foreign institution grants the degree and the students are expected to follow similar programs to the ones offered at the home campus. IBCs have rooms for teaching and may have other facilities such as libraries, student accommodations, and so on (Wilkins, 2010). Since the mid-1980s, global student enrollment in TNHE programs has proliferated from an estimated 50,000 to 404,000 in 2016/2017 (Bennell, 2019). According to Bohm et al. (2002), TNHE will account for 44% of total demand for international education by 2025. In addition, as of January 2017, universities have established 249 IBCs across 33 countries with 26% growth in the last five years (Escriva-Beltran, 2019).

2.1. TNHE in the Middle East Region

The introduction of higher education from Western to non-Western regions is not new. Non-Western regions have had European university models imposed on them through colonization. Colonial education served to consolidate foreign rule through ideological subjugation. This was accomplished by diminishing the validity and legitimacy of indigenous knowledge and replacing it with that of the metropole (Kelly & Altbach, 1984). The original colonial educational model was imported from England and combined with the German research university to produce the 19th century modern American university. The American educational model has been used to establish universities in the Middle East region

including places such as Egypt, Turkey, and Lebanon (Altbach, 2004). A case in point is the American University of Beirut (AUB), which was founded in 1866 under the name Syrian Protestant College by the American missionary Dr. Daniel Bliss. AUB was established by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions as “a college of higher learning” with “an American educational character” (American University of Beirut, n. d.). Moreover, Western colonizers have had different purposes for establishing and operating branch campuses including educating and training natives for administrative and civil service jobs, providing education to natives of developing countries, and serving military and civilian personnel (Bhuiyan, 2016).

The formation of the GCC in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 4 February 1981 was in part “To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields” (International Relations and Security Network, 1981, p. 2) including economic, customs, communication, education, and culture. More specifically, among the stated objectives were “To stimulate scientific and technological progress in the fields of industry, mining, agriculture, water and animal resources; to establish scientific research; to establish joint ventures and encourage cooperation by the private sector for the good of their peoples” (International Relations and Security Network, 1981, p. 2). As part of this commitment, the GCC countries have made several efforts to develop educational plans through a number of resolutions. For example, the Economic Agreement between the GCC States adopted by the GCC Supreme Council during the 22nd Session on 31 December 2001 stated, “Member States shall cooperate to develop programs and curricula of public, higher, and technical education, to ensure high levels of scientific content” and “Member States shall adopt appropriate policies and mechanisms to ensure compatibility between the outputs of higher education and scientific and technical research on the one hand, and the needs of the labor market and economic development, on the other” (The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), 2001, p. 10). The response by the GCC countries to the challenge of extending higher education to all segments of society has been met by different concrete measures including establishing universities, the development of a variety of higher education programs, collaborating with higher education institutions, and the assessment of such efforts (Mukerji & Jammel, 2008).

Part of this process has been the introduction of TNHE programs. TNHE programs in the GCC countries have proliferated in volume, scope, and complexity in the past two decades. For example, the UAE and Qatar governments have established education cities for hosting IBCs that are either fully subsidized or rented to Western universities. Such efforts have been part of a variety of strategies aimed at attracting world-class intuitions to the region (Becker, 2010). Establishing TNHE programs has been due to a combination of political, economic, socio-cultural, and academic factors (Childress, 2009). Political factors, particularly after the events of September 11, have emphasized the importance of making

students more aware of world cultures, and providing students with the skills to address issues related to national security and foreign policy. Economic factors have included preparing students for careers in their respective countries or internationally, increasing income for Western universities, and contributing toward domestic economic development and international competitiveness. Socio-cultural factors have emphasized the need to develop students' inter-cultural communication skills. This addresses communication processes and problems that are the result of integrating people from different religious, social, ethical, and educational backgrounds. Students are expected to know how people from different countries and cultures behave, communicate, and perceive the world around them. Academic factors have highlighted the importance of strengthening liberal education. This includes developing a broad knowledge base and transferable skills, instilling a sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement, and developing critical thinking (Childress, 2009).

Some authors have been critical about the introduction of TNHE programs into the GCC region. For example, Knight (2002) argued that regional trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Trades in Service under the auspices of the World Trade Organization focus exclusively on removing barriers to trade in services such as education as opposed to products. This has increasingly threatened the role of government in education, diminished the importance of education as a 'public good', and reduced the quality of education. This has occurred amidst significant reduction of government subsidies to Western universities and a greater drive toward profitability in education that has become endemic during the neo-liberal era of capitalism (Girdzijauskaitė et al., 2019).

The commodification of education has been an impetus for Western universities to setup IBCs largely as profit-making enterprises. Altbach (2015, p. 2) poignantly stated that education has been "increasingly seen as a commodity to be purchased by a consumer in order to build a "skill set" to be used in the marketplace or a product to be bought and sold by multinational corporations, academic institutions that have transmogrified themselves into businesses, and other providers". Moreover, Ellili-Cherif et al. (2012) found specific procedural and socio-cultural issues problematic. The authors point to ambiguous terminology and procedures, sidelining the input of local educators, and imposing unrealistic expectations. Also, they claim that many of the educational services have been imported without taking into account local socio-cultural dynamics. Knight (2002) refers to such processes as a form of acculturation. Cross-border supplies of educational services produce a homogenized culture where diverse customs, ideas, and values are reduced into a single culture.

2.2. TNHE in the United Arab Emirates

The outcomes of TNHE programs have been uneven and evolving when comparing regions, different countries in one region, or even different institutions in one country (Knight, 2008).

The UAE provides an interesting case. Its education sector is divided into public schools, private schools, and higher education. Significant expansion of the UAE's education market is expected over the next few years from \$4.4 billion in 2017 to \$7.1 billion by 2023. The 2018 federal budget allocated \$2.8 billion (20% of the total budget) for general, higher, and university education programs. The UAE's unique demographic group mix, which consists of approximately 89% international expatriates and 11% Emirati citizens (7.64% of the population is in the 15 to 24 years age bracket) has led to greater demand for international schools with enrollments expected to increase from approximately 56% to 66% over the next five years (U.S. Commercial Service, 2019).

Part of the effort to develop the education sector in the UAE has been a series of reforms that resulted in the growth of international partnerships and setting up private universities. The American University of Dubai was the first in 1995 followed by the University of Sharjah in 1997 which was a branch campus for the American University in Washington D. C. Other notable examples are Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, New York University Abu Dhabi, and Michigan State Dubai. TNHE programs and IBCs have been very visible and a resource intensive aspect of the educational sector of the UAE. The rationale behind this growth has been the "belief that the recognition and achievements these institutions attained over decades in their native land would be transferable in the implementation of international branch campuses" (Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014, p. 121). Moreover, the UAE has made an effort to enter the international market in higher education and compete with countries like China, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia by investing in the establishment of top-tier research universities. Accordingly, higher education has increasingly shifted in the UAE to private universities and IBCs. Currently, 70% of the 120,000 students are in private universities. TNHE programs are accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education's Center for Academic Accreditation. Many of the institutions operate in the free zones of the country such as the Dubai International Academic City and the Knowledge Village in Dubai (Datta & Vardhan, 2017).

The development of TNHE programs in the UAE has been met with mixed reviews. Some studies focused on a variety of economic factors that condition market demand for higher educational services in the UAE. For example, commercial-based studies claim that enrolments in Dubai rose from 33,500 in 2011/2012 to 46,000 in 2015/2016 (U.S. Commercial Service, 2019) and point to investment opportunities in the educational sector. The increase in enrollment in the UAE in general and Dubai in particular may be attributed to several factors. First, is the increasing UAE population (currently 9.6 million with a projected increase to 10.4 million by 2025) (World Bank, 2019; PopulationPyramid.net, 2019) of mostly expatriates that are drawn to Western institutions in the UAE. As a result, Dubai is expected to require an estimated 68,000 student places by 2025, of which 50,000 are expected to be in the private sector. This supports Dubai's initiative to become a leading

player in the TNHE market regionally and internationally as over 33% of students come from abroad with 56% from Asian countries and 30% from the MENA region. Second, the growing attraction to Dubai as a center for international higher education and the increasing number of IBCs given the economic incentives for Western universities to locate in the UAE. Third, growing preference for TNHE programs among Emirati parents seeking higher standards of education for their children as well as Emirati professionals seeking to complete higher education while pursuing a career (Colliers International, 2018). These factors have resulted in an increase in demand for TNHE programs as indicated by the number of IBCs in the UAE.

The decision-making process to enrolling in a TNHE program in the UAE has been an important criterion for attracting students. According to Ahmad and Hussain's (2017) study on factors that determine student choice for higher education in the UAE, the decision-making process to study abroad is influenced by: (1) the learning environment (e.g., safety, security, diversity, multicultural student population, and career prospects upon graduation); (2) cost (e.g., cost of living, tuition, and travel); and (3) institutional reputation (e.g., the quality of education, the university reputation, and the recognition of the degree). The authors' findings are corroborated by other studies in a similar vein. For example, Wilkins et al., (2012) found that improved regional career prospects, cultural and lifestyle orientation, convenience, and country-specific advantages play a significant role in terms of student choice. Lane-Toomey and Lane (2011) sight several reasons that motivate students to choose the Middle East region including: (1) cultural issues such as language development, international cooperation and interaction, and religion; (2) economic issues such as the availability of scholarships; and (3) political issues such as national security following the events of September 11 and exposure to international issues.

While attracting students is of great importance for any educational institution, retaining them is perhaps even more important. Some studies in the UAE focused on student experience in TNHE programs to determine student satisfaction at IBCs. According to Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013), achieving student satisfaction brings several benefits: (1) higher student retention; (2) higher grades; (3) positive word-of-mouth and on-line support of the institution; and (4) more likely to collaborate with the institution following graduation. The authors found that the quality of lectures, the quality and availability of resources, and the effective use of technology were the most important factors affecting student satisfaction. Other studies concerning student satisfaction in different contexts made similar findings (see, for example, DeShields and Kaynak, 2005; Alves and Raposo, 2007; Gruber et al., 2010). Data and Vardhan (2017) identify factors that play a significant role in improving the service quality for students in the management program. The authors assess service quality using five dimensions: responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and reliability. The results of this study contrast those in the UAE with more positive outcomes. The authors found that

students in the management program of seven international universities in the UAE held a negative perception of their education as their expectations were not met. The key contributors include a low credibility of the degree provided by the institutions, the lack of placement and career opportunities, and the low quality of educational services compared to well-established Western universities. The authors claim that there needs to be an accrediting body and a national framework to regulate the quality of private institutions with measurable and transferable international standards.

While studies that examine student satisfaction are an important indicator of how effective educational institutions have been at providing core services, some authors have focused on the socio-cultural factors that undergird higher education institutions. For example, Franklin and Alzouebi (2014), question the effectiveness of TNHE programs and IBCs that have been 'imported' from abroad and simply imposed on countries such as the UAE. In particular, the authors are concerned with differences between the home country and adopting country that relate to culture, values, local and regional expectations, and strategic plans. This perspective resonates with some of the findings from Mahani and Molki (2011). The authors claim that the success of TNHE programs and IBCs in the UAE is ultimately determined by their effectiveness in addressing cultural difference including differences in laws and regulations. Clearly, such studies raise important aspects about TNHE programs and IBCs that go beyond simply the classroom setting.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The introduction of TNHE programs and IBCs in the GCC countries more generally and the UAE more specifically has occurred as a result of several interrelated political, economic, social, and academic factors. First, the formation of the GCC in 1981 was a key moment during which member states sought to stimulate scientific and technological progress through the development of programs and curricula for higher education as part of an overall strategy to meet labor market demands and economic development. This was followed by a proliferation of TNHE programs and IBCs in the GCC countries in the past two decades. The UAE and Qatar, in particular, have become the TNHE centers of the Middle East region with 31 and 11 IBCs respectively representing more than 400 undergraduate and graduate programs from universities in the US, UK, and France (Alam et al., 2013; Mackie, 2019).

Second, the commodification of education and the drive to increasing profits in educational institutions combined with significant decreases in government funding to Western universities during the neo-liberal era of capitalism have been an impetus for Western universities to seek 'new markets' beyond their borders. TNHE programs are increasingly regarded as a top priority in many institutions, not only in terms of providing high quality educational services, but also expanding the geographical scope of such services. IBCs have

been an important but risky profit-making enterprise in this regard that position institutions internationally as well as diversify their income. Approximately 85% of the 249 IBCs globally are administered by institutions based in Western countries. Primary IBCs sending countries are the US (77 IBCs globally), UK (39 IBCs globally), France (28 IBCs globally), and Russia (21 IBCs globally) (Escriva-Beltran, 2019; Mackie, 2019).

Third, the liberating of regional trade policies in services, including education, combined with the internationalization of education amidst an era of globalization has enabled the cross-border movement of students, educators, and institutions. This has been facilitated by the ‘blurring’ of the “conceptual, disciplinary, and geographic borders traditionally inherent to higher education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). The introduction on TNHE programs has opened up spaces, particularly after the events of September 11, that emphasize the importance of making students aware of world cultures, providing students with the skills to address issues related to national security and foreign policy, developing students’ inter-cultural communication skills, and instilling a sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement.

Fourth, the UAE’s unique demographic group mix, which consists of an overwhelming majority of international expatriates, combined with significant government funding in the education sector and international partnerships has resulted in the rapid expansion of TNHE programs and IBCs. This has not only been an academic exercise, but an economic one as the UAE has poised itself to compete in the education market with the likes of China, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia with the goal of attracting and retaining higher education seeking clients. While the strategy has been, for the most part, a success given the exponential increase in enrollments some challenges remain as the UAE continues to make adjustments that meet evolving political, economic, social, and academic factors.

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