

Twinning and Branch Campuses: The Professorial Obstacle

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Branch campuses, twinning arrangements, and other manifestations of cross-border higher education are booming. Universities in Europe, Australasia, and North America see a huge market by offering their degrees in other countries. At the same time, Singapore and several of the states in the Arabian Gulf have identified themselves as educational centers and are attracting international higher education providers. In the Gulf, there is even competition for attracting overseas universities. China has opened its doors to foreign institutions, and India is moving in this direction.

While there are no accurate numbers, more than 500 branch campuses exist worldwide—plus thousands of “twinned” programs. In addition, the phenomenon of the “American University of . . .” manifests another trend in cross-border higher education. There are a dozen or more such universities, some of which have a direct link with a US university while many simply use the name “American” and offer a US-style curriculum in English in a non-US setting. If the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) becomes part of the structure of international academic arrangements, the numbers of all kinds of cross-border institutions will increase even faster.

One significant problem exists with these arrangements. Who is teaching the students at these branch campuses? What does a degree from a university signify if the teaching staff are not from the university offering the degree? To use the McDonald's analogy – is the meal (degree) a true McDonald's hamburger if only the recipe (the curriculum) comes from McDonalds. The rest of the process – the ingredients (facilities) and the cooks (professors) – are local, rather than from the sponsoring institution. Should a university in the United Kingdom (or another country) claim to offer a degree overseas if only the curriculum is from the sponsoring school, perhaps along with an element of quality control?

With little data indicating the proportion of faculty members from the home universities teaching at branch or twinning campuses, anecdotal evidence shows that the numbers are small and most of the teaching is carried out by professors who are not faculty from the sponsoring institution. Even when they do come from the home university, faculty teaching at branch or twinned campuses are generally not the “star” research-active professors.

It is not known if some of the recent high-prestige universities that have entered the branch campus business – the University of Chicago, the Cornell University Medical School, the University of Nottingham, and others – have a different profile than the many more average institutions thus far engaged.

The Background of Teachers

Many faculty members are hired locally—some “moonlighting” from a local university. Other “local hires” are full-time staff, obtained from the local academic market or attracted away from local or regional institutions. Some faculty are natives of the country of the sponsoring university but not faculty members at that institution. For example, an American university in Singapore might hire an American working in Japan or Taiwan. PhD holders who are teaching part time or on short-term assignments in the home country may also be attracted to work overseas. The sponsoring university generally tries to ensure that these faculty have a doctoral degree from a respectable institution—insofar as possible from the country where the sponsoring university is located.

Attracting Top-Quality Faculty

At branch campuses this task may not be easy, particularly on an assignment of a year or more. Except for a few specialists in the culture where the branch is located or professors committed to learning about foreign cultures, an overseas assignment as a full-time member of the academic staff at a university in Europe, North America, or Australia may not lure prominent faculty. In addition to the challenges of uprooting families, finding schools for children, and the like, an overseas assignment disrupts the rhythm of academic life. For younger professors seeking to obtain tenure and promotion, an overseas assignment is particularly dangerous. It will inevitably disrupt a research agenda and in the

sciences may make research impossible given the lack of equivalent laboratory equipment and staff. Since branch campuses are always oriented toward teaching rather than research, teaching loads are often higher than at the home university. Libraries and other facilities are never the same either.

Many branch campuses offer faculty members from the home university additional perquisites—such as housing, transportation for families, payment of school fees, and others. In some cases, salary supplements are provided, and there is usually a tax advantage. But even these benefits may not produce a sufficient attraction.

As a result of these factors, the professors teaching at branch campuses are seldom full-time research-active faculty from the home university. If from the home institution, they are often senior staff close to retirement or those with fewer commitments at home. Most are not from the home university. Relevant academic departments at home often must approve the academic qualifications of these professors and offer them some kind of temporary appointment to legitimize their appointments.

Conclusion

Does an academic degree mean that a student has studied at the university offering the degree? Does it mean that he or she has been taught by the faculty of that institution? Does it mean that the curriculum and language of instruction of the home university have been used? Is it enough that the home institution has

approved the qualifications of the teaching staff and that the general conditions of teaching are considered to be satisfactory? Should teaching be provided by faculty members who are actually on the home institution's staff, or is it acceptable that an itinerant but qualified collection of teachers do the work? Is it acceptable that the prestigious universities whose fame in their home countries is based on excellence in research as well as teaching provide an academic environment in the branch campus almost exclusively devoid of research? Cross-border academic cooperation and transnational higher education are characteristics of the 21st century, but it is necessary to carefully examine the realities in order to assess quality and effectiveness.

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