Chapter 13

Aren’t We All International Students?
Supporting Diverse Populations at University Branch–Campuses

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ABSTRACT

International university branch-campuses (IBCs) host a diverse body of students whose identities cannot be captured through the binary definitions of international or local. Of significant interest are regions where IBCs cater mainly to minority, expatriate and mobile students. For Western universities, many of which have long-standing traditions and approaches to student support, understanding the nuances of these groups is essential to facilitate their success. This chapter describes and contextualizes the changing population of students that Western universities are servicing at IBCs. Using the case studies of Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, IBCs in these regions are shown to host a variety of students, most of which face significant degrees of social marginalization within the broader society. These new contexts, and their current programs, are contrasted with the traditional literature on international student supports to establish a new model with which to conceptualize and nurture diverse students in global contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, international or foreign students have been identified as a distinct group on fairly homogenous Western campuses (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, with significant advances in travel and communication technologies, most often associated with the phenomenon of globalization, four million students are traveling around the world for higher education and their destinations are many. Moreover, increasing immigration at the nation-state level has added to the diversity of university home
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campuses, making recently mobile students less distinct from their classroom peers. The long-standing term international student no longer represents a distinct set of students, but rather just one of many diverse groups on campus.

Adding to this complexity is the cross-border movement of higher education programs. Since the 1980’s more than 230 international branch-campuses (IBCs) have been established as universities begin to offer programs outside their home country (Kinser & Lane, 2015). Other arrangements include twinning programs and franchising which bring foreign programs to local spaces (Knight 2011). Anglo-Western universities in particular have made significant investments – both in finance and reputation – setting up IBCs. Attempts are made to reproduce the home campus experience, offering a full range of university programs and systems.

Too often, however, as IBCs export their highly ranked programs, few of their services for diverse students are exported as well. At many branch-campuses this omission is only too evident. The student populations can be very diverse with a mix of local, expatriate or recently mobile students enrolled. While the daily experiences, interactions and diverse backgrounds of these students may differ from those at the home campus, contextualized student supports and institutional policies must be developed to support their education.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter describes and contextualizes the changing population of students that Western universities are servicing through their overseas operations. Using the findings of field research in Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, branch-campuses in these regions are shown to host a variety of students, mainly from the immediate country or region. Many of these students face significant degrees of social marginalization within the broader society. These new contexts, and their current programs, are contrasted with the traditional literature on student services to establish a new model with which to conceptualize and nurture diverse students in global contexts. This chapter extends our knowledge of international students at Western campuses to suggest strategies for support at international branch-campuses.

In the first section of this chapter, the scholarly literature on international students’ support services in the American context is synthesized and the main paradigmatic themes are modeled into an ideal type. The second section presents the contexts of Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, their governments’ motives to develop an education hub and the ongoing response of Western universities by establishing branch-campuses. The third section describes the challenges that face the diverse students who attend these institutions including pedagogy, language and gender. The fourth section nuances the discussion of these challenges to consider mitigating factors and supports that help students through their IBC experience. In the final analysis, the specific concerns of these students are layered against the American literature on international students’ support, presenting a new model for approaching student services at international branch-campuses.

BACKGROUND

Since the late 1990’s universities around the world have been actively engage in internationalizing their students, programs and campuses to remain relevant in a global world. Though the much debated process