

What Is an International Branch Campus?

Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit

International branch campuses are expanding rapidly around the world, now numbering 384. While most are sponsored by universities in the Global North and located in the South, there is a trend toward globalization with branches sponsored by India, Egypt, and other countries. Yet there are no clear definitions of what branch campuses are; most seem to be limited professional programs rather than full campuses. This article analyzes the scope and nature of branch campuses globally.

International branch campuses (IBCs) are the flavor of the year, a key part of an expanding range of transnational education (TNE) activities. They are appearing in many countries, mainly but not only in the Global South. There is no commonly accepted definition, but [C-BERT](#) uses the following: “An entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider.” [C-BERT reports that there are 384 IBCs worldwide in 2026](#), up from 333 in 2023. There are 40 home countries, and branches operate in 85 countries. Their fragility is clear from the fact that 74 campuses over the years have been closed. While branch campuses have a long history, most have been established in the past several decades.

Motivations for Branch Campuses in the Mid-21st Century

IBCs reflect a huge diversity of realities. Sponsoring (home) institutions have many motivations, a topic worth careful research. A key motivator is to earn money from their branches, especially at times when universities in Anglophone countries are faced with both budgetary and demographic challenges at home. A number of the main host countries for international students, including Australia, Britain, Canada, and the US—in part because of populist anti-immigrant pressure, but also due to housing shortages and other factors—have made it much more difficult for international students to come to the home campus. In this context, branches and other TNE activities can offer a way of educating (and collecting fees) from international students without worrying about visa delays, government-imposed fees, restrictions on bringing family members, and a variety of other impediments to global mobility imposed by rich country governments.

But there are other rationales for developing IBCs and other TNE operations. Countries like Germany and France support them as part of their foreign policy and talent recruitment policies. Other countries—Iran and Russia are clear examples, and increasingly, China—are very active in developing IBCs because they see these institutions as part of their political influence and broader global economic and cultural presence.

Most IBCs Are Not Really Campuses

Unfortunately, there are not yet fully complete or accurate data concerning the diverse nature of IBCs worldwide. Further, it is not always clear if an IBC is really a branch or one of the many different types of TNE, as noted in a [recent IHE article](#) by Wilkins and Huisman.

However, it seems clear that the very large majority of IBCs are not full-fledged academic institutions of a home university located in another country. Rather, most branch campuses are limited institutions offering a few specialized degree programs, largely at the postgraduate (graduate) level and in professional fields. Often, these “campuses” are rented premises in office buildings with classrooms set up for lectures from faculty members at the home universities who are not “on site.” Sponsoring institutions or businesses often provide facilities for the branch operations. Some of the new branch campuses in GIFT City in Gujarat, India, are examples of such limited specialized postgraduate degree programs located in office buildings; there are many others. In most cases, IBCs might better be called “branch programs” rather than branch campuses.

Few branch campuses have full-time professors from the home university. More often, home campus faculty make occasional visits to the branch to offer condensed courses or teach remotely. Full-time faculty may be hired from the local or international market and provided with appointments from the home university. There are ample examples of students criticizing the quality of the teachers in such operations.

Some Branches Are Real Institutions

Some branches have facilities on a partner institution’s campus. An example is the well-established branch of Australia’s Monash University at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, founded in 2008. The branch occupies its own building on the IIT campus and offers joint doctoral degrees with supervision by faculty at both institutions.

A small number of branch campuses have fully operational campuses offering a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. In almost all cases, the campus buildings and other

facilities have been provided by local governments, philanthropic organizations, or sometimes property developers. Among the more impressive examples are Education City in Qatar, which provides facilities for six (mainly American) universities offering a range of specialized degrees in such fields as medicine, business, journalism, and others. Funding and supervision are provided by the Qatar Foundation. Several full-campus branch institutions are located in China, where often quite impressive facilities have been provided by various Chinese government entities. These include Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, and several others. Interestingly, Liverpool University has been pressured by its Chinese partner (all Chinese branch campuses are required to partner with a Chinese institution) to improve its research output. These full branches typically have at least some full-time faculty and staff from the home institution.

Dramatic Expansion by Global South Universities

A recent trend in the world of branch campuses is the expansion of Global South universities into the branch campus business. India's 2020 National Education Policy for the first time opened the door to foreign branch campuses coming to India. A half-dozen are now operating, several in Gujarat's GIFT City and mostly from the UK and Australia. Most offer limited professional programs, although at least one Indian conglomerate is planning to build a full campus for a foreign university. At least 15 Indian universities have set up branches outside of India, primarily in the Gulf countries, again with limited professional programs. Two of India's prestigious IITs have established foreign branches—in Zanzibar and Abu Dhabi—despite the fact that many of the home IIT campuses have staff shortages. Egypt has announced one of the largest expansions of branch campuses to expand its “soft power” and for other purposes. The government has approved branch

campuses in Eritrea, Malaysia, Niger, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, and others. Some of these campuses are operational; others are in the planning stage.

Within-Country Branches

While clearly not IBCs, there is a recent trend of universities within a country establishing branches in other locations in the country. A pioneer in this area is Northeastern University, with its main campus in Boston and now with branches in Oakland, California (where it purchased an existing institution, Mills College); Charlotte, North Carolina; Miami, Florida; Toronto, Canada; and London, England, the latter two being international. A number of British provincial universities, including Coventry, Portsmouth, Warwick Business School, and others, have established outposts in London to attract international students and local students from the London region. Several provincial Japanese universities have branches in Tokyo. With a few exceptions, these branches offer specialized subjects deemed to be attractive to students and not the full curriculum, and many provide master or other professional degrees exclusively.

Conclusion

It is clear from this discussion that the number of IBCs is increasing and that there is a trend from a North-to-South movement in IBCs toward a global phenomenon. Similar to other TNE operations, the rapid global development of IBCs results in a greater variety of rationales, meanings, and activities. It is not always clear if it is a campus or a program, if it is a branch or another activity, or a combination. Understanding and analyzing TNE and IBCs is even more important now that these operations are on the rise. And with many aspects of TNE, *caveat emptor*. Let the buyer beware—both the receiving countries and students.

Philip G. Altbach is research professor emeritus and founding director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. Email: altbach@bc.edu.

Hans de Wit is professor emeritus and distinguished former director of the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College. Email: dewitj@bc.edu.