

Research Productivity of International Branch Campuses

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Abstract

Using scientometric data, this article explores the research productivity of international branch campuses. The data reveals that one-third of IBCs engage in at least minimum levels of research productivity, with the most productive exceeding 400 publications annually. While research production is minimal across the majority of IBCs, the data evidences how some IBCs are significant contributors to the internationalization of research and to the overall research productivity of their host nations.

International branch campuses (IBCs) have often been viewed as primarily teaching institutions and criticized for only being shallow replications of their home campuses. It is true that IBCs have largely focused on teaching, with varying levels of quality, in part because, as start-up organizations, they have had to develop and deliver their academic curriculum as well as recruit faculty and students in order to develop revenue streams. Similar to private higher education, a vast majority overall will likely continue to focus on teaching.

That said, now that we are more than 20 years into the global scale-up of IBCs, our data suggests that a third of such institutions have begun to engage in some research, and a subset thereof are beginning to develop their own research culture. While there remain large differences between IBCs in terms of educational quality and research productivity, we examine trends of the approximately one-third engaged in research, as measured by scholarly publications in Scopus.

To conduct this analysis, we searched for publication records between 1996 and 2016 for the 250 IBCs identified by the Cross-Border Education Team at the time. Of those, 149 had at least one publication during that period of time; and approximately one-third (N=93) produced 10 or more articles during the same time frame.

While we have documented IBCs to be in existence for nearly a century, it was the mid- to late-1990s when IBCs began to proliferate globally. In 1996, the first year in our study, there was no record of IBC-based scholarly publications. In 2000, when there were 82 IBCs, many of which had recently been established, data shows that the worldwide research productivity of IBCs was fewer than 50 publications that year. By 2009, the number of annual IBC research publications topped 500, before increasing rapidly to more than 3,500 IBC publications annually in 2016. In that year, the total accumulated publications of IBCs reached nearly 20,000.

Global Trends

IBCs are scattered across 82 countries. Some countries may have only one IBC, while others host dozens. Four countries were home to at least 10 IBCs producing 10 or more publications: China (14), United Arab Emirates (13), Malaysia (10), and Qatar (10). These numbers, though, mask important national differences. While Malaysia and Qatar have the lowest number in this group, they represent nearly all of the IBCs within those nations. In the case of Qatar, IBCs contributed between 25 percent and 40 percent of the nation's overall annual publication productivity between 2006 and 2016. China, which hosts the largest number of IBCs and produces the largest count of IBC-based publications, looks very different. IBCs in China have produced 5,000 publications during the period under review. However, these publications represent approximately 1 percent of China's overall research productivity.

When we examine the citation impact of the publications, the contributions of IBCs become more clear. For each of the four countries mentioned above, their field-weighted citation impact (FWCI) fluctuates, but has generally been increasing over the past decade. When we break down the FWCI based on IBC publications and native publications, we see that the citation impact of IBC-based publications exceeds that of the native institutions, often at significant levels, though whether this is a function of publication quality or the spillover effect of academic capital from the home country needs further exploration.

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Institutional Productivity

Publication counts per IBC vary markedly. As we noted, two-thirds of IBCs have fewer than 10 publications across their entire existence. On the other hand, the top five producing IBCs all have more than 1,000 cumulative publications, and the top three have more than 2,500 publications each. Those five, starting from the top, are Monash University (Malaysia); Texas A&M Qatar; The University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus; Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University (China); and Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Those numbers are likely to continue to increase as annual output for each of the top 10 IBCs exceeds 100 publications—with the top three exceeding 400 publications annually as of 2016.

Internationalizing Research

One of the findings of our study is that IBCs can be useful mechanisms for internationalizing research, for both the importing country as well as the home institution.

When we looked at the four countries mentioned above, the percentage of IBC publications that included an international coauthor exceeds that of the publications from native institutions. In Qatar, approximately 85 percent of IBC publications in 2016 included an international coauthor. The number was lower for native institutions in Qatar, though only slightly. In China, however, the proportion of IBC publications with international coauthors drops to about 68 percent; but that is nearly 40 points higher than those from Chinese institutions.

When we shift to looking at data for the top five most research-productive IBCs, we find a similar trend. The percentage of IBC publications coauthored with an international collaborator exceeded that of the IBC's home campus in each dyad examined. Texas A&M in Qatar led the pack with upward of 90 percent of the publications being part of international collaborations, while the home campus was only about 40 percent.

When we conducted a network analysis of collaboration, two interesting findings emerged. First, the most common set of international collaborations was between the branch campus and the home campus, indicating that IBCs have a direct effect on the internationalization of the research efforts of the home campuses. Second, there was little overlap between the set of institutional collaborations used by IBCs versus the home campus. This suggests that IBCs are opening new collaborations, often including more institutions that are in regional proximity.

Moving Forward

The data suggests that the population of IBCs may be moving toward differentiation, similar to what we see in private higher education overall. While a vast majority of institutions remain focused on providing alternative educational experiences from native institutions or absorbing growing demand for higher education, a proportion do seem focused on advancing a strong research culture more in line with semi-elite institutions.

The reason for such growth in research is likely multifold and somewhat idiosyncratic between institutions and host countries. Reasons may include maturation of the academic culture, hiring of more highly qualified academics, and better reporting of the data (e.g., author identification being associated with the IBC). Additional study is needed to determine what is contributing to the growth of research in the one-third of IBCs, and what is inhibiting such in the remaining two-thirds. Moreover, more needs to be known about the impact of the research culture at an IBC on the curriculum, students, and overall academic culture, particularly in relation to those without it.

What is clear, though, is that some IBCs are both capable of, and actively engaged in, producing scholarly publications. Whether this is broadly a function of individual entrepreneurship or strategic foci of institutions remains unclear. ▲

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