Embedding marketing in international campus development: Lessons from UK universities

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Abstract:

This paper provides recommendations for embedding a market- and marketing-informed approach within the development process for a new international campus. It includes a brief outline of the current global profile of international campuses (as one form of transnational education) before highlighting the role of marketing at key stages of campus development from initial business case through to full operation. Recommendations for integrating marketing into campus development are derived from a series of structured interviews with eight senior staff at three UK universities, all with campuses in Malaysia. Some participants were UK-based, others Malaysia-based; all had responsibility for marketing the international campus at some level. The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence-informed marketing guidance and good practice that is relevant to institutions considering establishment of an international campus.

Keywords:

transnational education; international branch campus; cross-border education; offshore education; higher education marketing; student recruitment

Introduction

There are currently 231 international campuses (also known as international branch campuses [IBCs], offshore and overseas campuses) worldwide (C-BERT 2015a), with the first decade

of the twenty-first century representing a period of peak growth (Lane and Kinser 2011, 8-9; Redden 2015).

Although a minority pursuit within the broader category of transnational education (TNE) (BIS 2014, 33), they are the subject of considerable attention (Wilkins and Huisman 2011; Lawton and Katsomitros 2012; Wilkins 2013; Healey 2014; Redden 2014, 2015). Campus closures tend to generate significant media interest (Maslen 2015), as do any suggestions that money is being lost (Morgan 2015) or academic freedom compromised (Mangan 2015).

There are known to have been 29 closures to date (for examples see Healey and Bordogna 2014, 8). Some of these are because student number targets were over-ambitious and the reality fell short. This is an area of concern for senior managers with international campus responsibilities (Kinser and Lane 2014, 166).

Why focus on marketing?

International campuses come in different shapes and sizes (from the rented facility delivering a single programme of study, to the purpose-built, landscaped campus with dozens of programmes and several thousand students) and embrace numerous operating models. Although the primary institutional driver usually relates to enhancing global reputation, this is firmly linked to the ability to attract and offer a positive academic experience to sustainable numbers of students.

Sound marketing plays a crucial role as a foundation for strong student recruitment. This is not just marketing in the sense of promotion, but using market intelligence at the earliest stage to position the new campus effectively within its local / regional environment and determine a programme portfolio for which there is robust market demand (Lewis 2014, 15).

Emery and Worton (2014, 9-15) identify six stages in developing and assessing new TNE projects (including international campuses) – from Outline business case through to Operation. They highlight the need for formal market analysis and marketing cost projections to be undertaken at business plan stage and fed into the financial plan. The Implementation stage (which immediately precedes Operation) includes staff recruitment / deployment, development of a communications strategy and refinement of the existing marketing plan 'to ensure that target student numbers are met'.

However, the practicalities of embedding marketing into campus development have been largely unexamined. Informal feedback from staff at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) suggests that specific marketing guidance based on the actual experience of those who have developed (or are currently developing) an international campus would be valuable.

To start addressing this need, structured interviews were conducted between November 2014 and February 2015 with eight senior staff at three UK universities, all with campuses in Malaysia. Some staff were UK-based, others Malaysia-based; all had responsibility for marketing the international campus at some level. Their insights and experiences have been developed into themed recommendations designed to help HEIs considering embarking on a new international campus development.

Key factors influencing international campus marketing

National and institutional context both affect the marketing of an international campus. The nature of the marketing input required also changes according to its stage of development.

National context

Host countries vary in their support for 'foreign campus' developments. Some have established processes and a clear regulatory framework. For marketing purposes it is helpful to know how long the host country course approval process (if required) will take. Different ownership / partnership models also have an impact. It may be necessary to work with a government or private partner (see: Lane and Kinser 2013, 10), requiring a collaborative approach to marketing. There are also different cultural and business norms to consider. Some UK institutions have been surprised at the level of competition in their host country, where they suddenly become part of the private higher education (HE) sector with its different rules of engagement (see Lane 2011, 25-32).

Institutional context

If the home institution has previous experience of establishing an international campus, this helps significantly and can speed up the process from initial concept to launch. Aspirations for the future relationship between home and international campus also play a role. If the new campus is seen as an emerging partner or member of a network (see Kratochvil and Karram 2014), it tends to be given a higher profile internally and externally. Institutions whose campus is treated as a subsidiary or satellite (often characterised with reference to the parent-

child relationship (Healey 2014)) need to work harder to raise profile. The planned growth trajectory is also relevant. If the intention is to recruit a substantial first cohort of students, then increase enrolments rapidly, marketing and student recruitment infrastructure and activities need to be in place well in advance.

Malaysian context and campus profiles

This study focuses on Malaysia, which was assessed by the British Council as having one of the most favourable environments for TNE (alongside Hong Kong, Singapore and UAE) (British Council 2013, 39). It is the top country for UK TNE enrolments and third for UK branch campus enrolments (BIS 2014, 44).

The Malaysian government is positioning the country as a global education hub (Knight 2015, 5). It aims to attract 200,000 international students by 2020 and the 'establishment of branch campuses for foreign universities' is a strategic priority to support this (ETP 2014, 219). Some would argue that, with nine international campuses (five UK, three Australian, one Irish) and three more developments pending (from institutions in China, Egypt and Singapore) (C-BERT 2015a), the country has reached saturation point. However, there are many institutions from a range of countries still exploring opportunities.

The five UK HEIs (University of Nottingham, Newcastle University, University of Southampton, Heriot-Watt University and University of Reading) have campuses at different stages of development and with quite different profiles (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary profile of UK HEI campuses in Malaysia

	UNMC	NUMed	USMC	HWMC	UoRM
Date of first intake	2000	2009	2012	2013 (Jan)	2012
Date current campus building(s) opened	2005	2011	2012	2014 (Sept)	2015 (Sept)
Other international campuses	University of Nottingham Ningbo, China (est. 2005) – c.5,000 students	Newcastle University International Singapore (a partnership, alongside other overseas HEIs, with Singapore Institute of Technology)	No other international campuses. Strategic collaborative partnerships in China and Singapore	Heriot-Watt Dubai Campus (est. 2005) – c.4,000 students	Henley Business School has South Africa campus with focus on MBA / Exec Ed
Scope of portfolio	4 Foundation courses, 43 UG, 29 PGT programmes (+PhDs) advertised for 2015 entry	2 UG degree programmes in Medicine and Biomedical Sciences advertised for 2015 entry	1 Foundation course and 3 UG programmes in Engineering advertised for 2015 entry	2 Foundation courses, 9 UG, 10 PGT programmes advertised for 2015 entry	2 Foundation courses, 9 UG, 9 PGT programmes advertised for 2015 entry
Location	Semenyih, 30km south of Kuala Lumpur	EduCity @Iskandar, Johor	EduCity @Iskandar, Johor	Putrajaya, 25km south of Kuala Lumpur	EduCity @Iskandar, Johor
Additional comments	Student numbers: 4,548 in 2013/14	Current student numbers: 483 Plans to expand to 1,000 by 2020. Some PG programmes offered via distance learning from UK with optional face-to-face teaching in Malaysia	Current student numbers / future plans not publicly available	Current student numbers: c.500. Planned capacity: 4,000	Plans for c.2,000 students long-term

Source: individual university / campus websites
Notes: UNMC, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus; NUMed, Newcastle University Medicine
Malaysia; USMC, University of Southampton Malaysia Campus; HWMC, Heriot-Watt Malaysia Campus;
UoRM, University of Reading Malaysia.

Internal stakeholder perspectives: underpinning requirements for success

Based on stakeholder interviews, this paper now focuses on the practicalities of embedding marketing in international campus development from the point of view of senior staff who have been closely involved.

Although some recommendations may be transferable to other contexts, the limitations should be recognised. A single host country (Malaysia) was selected and the number of participating institutions and individuals was modest. Given the profile of the universities involved, the recommendations derived will be most relevant for institutions with the ambition to develop a campus where student numbers will eventually be measured in thousands rather than hundreds. Most interviewees highlighted 'lessons learned' and what they would do differently next time round. Key themes were remarkably consistent and, where there were differences in recommended approach, these are noted.

Participants remarked on some underpinning requirements for a successful international campus, including the need for a clearly articulated and widely shared vision which positions the campus within broader institutional strategy. They stressed the importance of clarifying the desired operating relationship between home and international campus, recognising that this can change over time. Strong, credible leadership (including willingness to take decisions which challenge the *status quo*) and the benefits of engaging with the governing body were mentioned.

Robust project management, involving the right stakeholders (including those with marketing expertise and international business development experience), was stressed, alongside transparent decision-making and governance mechanisms. Effective communication channels – and, more importantly, a culture of communicating – need to be established from the outset. Once in-country staff are in place, a common model involves monthly video-conference meetings between senior stakeholders to discuss developments, supplemented by smaller virtual team meetings to tackle operational issues and frequent Skype calls between individuals.

Internal stakeholder recommendations

Marketing-specific recommendations start at the business planning stage with market intelligence and marketing strategy (typically commencing around four years before campus opening), then cover the setting up of marketing resources and expertise (about three years ahead), before concluding with brief recommendations about marketing activity planning.

Market intelligence and marketing strategy

> Recommendation 1: Understand the market – and use this understanding to inform
> business case, proposition and portfolio.

Balance market research and market intelligence gathering

One participant observed: 'Doing market research for any new product (by definition
something that doesn't yet exist) is problematic… If doing this again… I'd pay more
attention to exploratory, qualitative work than quantitative, survey-based work.' To optimise
the chance of pitching the campus proposition and targets right, a balance should be struck
between formal market research and informal (qualitative) market intelligence. It is worth
involving in-house marketing and market research experts in the commissioning of external
research. A spin-off benefit of intelligence gathering is the building of on-the-ground
relationships and networks.

Match the campus offer to the needs of the market

It is important to understand market demand for – and perceptions of – the proposed offer
(not just subject areas, but delivery model, level of study, entry requirements). Does it fill a
demonstrable gap in the market, offer a high-demand subject area or a combination of these?
Participants stressed that the offer should be flexed in light of market feedback, and that
adapting programmes to the needs of the market need not mean compromising on the quality
of learning outcomes. If a preparatory programme (foundation course) is required to equip a
wider range of students for core programmes, interviewees recommended setting this up early
on to ensure there are students 'in the pipeline'.

Understand the whole market environment

'Understand the whole environment – including government and legal processes. This can
only come from having people on the ground. You can't do it remotely.' Developing
expertise in the local HE context, including the legal and regulatory framework and levels of
competition (which may be significantly higher than at home), was seen as critical. A number

of participants stressed that the challenges of doing business in a completely new context should not be underestimated.

> Recommendation 2: Business plan and marketing strategy must go hand in hand.

Develop a clear marketing strategy

'Try to strengthen the strategic elements of your marketing (positioning, selling points and key messages) and ensure they are embedded at an early stage.' The benefits of the campus proposition should be identified and captured in a marketing strategy. This should include all elements of the marketing mix, including pricing and pricing proxies such as entry requirements. Each target market – and strategies to reach it – should be explicitly addressed. The marketing strategy should be based on the data and intelligence previously gathered; where there are knowledge gaps, a plan should be put in place to keep building on market intelligence to inform an evolving approach.

Align business and financial plans with marketing strategy

'Take the advice of marketing professionals about the level of investment needed and do not constrain the university's ambition within an excessively tight financial straitjacket.' Business – and financial – plans and should be fully aligned with marketing strategy. It is important that all key stakeholders (in the UK and in-country) are familiar with the long-term marketing strategy and how this links to the business plan.

Marketing resources and expertise

> Recommendation 3: Provide adequate marketing budget and coordinate account reporting.

Treat the new campus as a start-up business and invest in marketing accordingly

Development of a new campus is effectively a start-up business – within a national context where brand awareness may be lower than expected. Budgets need to reflect this. One participant noted: 'the original business plan did not really budget for marketing costs in the

way that we need to operate in today's market.' This participant went on to observe: 'whatever you thought you'd spend on marketing, double it.'

Establish clear marketing budget ownership and accounting processes

Since there will be calls on the marketing budget by both in-country and home campus marketing teams, it is crucial to clarify ultimate responsibility for it. Account reporting needs to be synchronised; and there should be mechanisms for registering all marketing costs (including those to be 'absorbed' by the home campus) to generate a complete picture.

> Recommendation 4: Foster a cross-campus team culture between all those involved in marketing and student recruitment.

Position the campus project to optimise collaboration amongst those involved in marketing

It is important to avoid an 'us' and 'them' culture developing between marketing professionals based at the home campus and those working in-country. This links to the way the campus is positioned by leaders within institutional strategy. There are ethos issues, related to the conceptualisation of the new campus as 'child' / satellite or as emerging partner / member of a network. One participant observed that the level of autonomy desired by the international campus in relation to marketing may be higher than for other professional functions: 'In technical areas (IT, Estates etc.), you don't feel a need to be autonomous… Marketing and Communications is a much more contested area.' However, starting off by working collaboratively as members of a single distributed team brings great advantages.

Lay the foundations for an inclusive, flexible marketing and student recruitment team

In a small start-up operation, your marketing and student recruitment 'team' will not all be marketing professionals. Most international campus staff will need to get involved (e.g. in outreach work and generating web content) and academics should be appointed with this in mind. The challenges of operating as a team across different cultures (both national and organisational) and over large distances and time zone differences should not be

underestimated. Building an appreciation of the operating context at the 'other' campus is essential.

Facilitate team-building and open communication

Members of the distributed marketing team should meet as often as is viable. Long-distance communication becomes much easier if face-to-face contact is kept topped up. Time should be set aside to build relationships and an ethos of sharing common goals and helping each other to achieve them. A key requirement of all marketing team members should be flexibility to try different approaches and ability to challenge existing practice in a constructive way. Some participants suggested involving home campus marketing professionals in the recruitment process for their in-country colleagues.

> This will help in terms of setting expectations in the context of the local market, but also help the central marketing and comms team to understand the ways they will need to 'cut their cloth' (depending on the skillsets and experience secured locally).

> Recommendation 5: Define the marketing roles required, recruit specialists at an early stage and invest in developing their expertise

Determine the most suitable organisational location for key marketing functions

The team as a whole needs to cover: strategic marketing; local and international student recruitment (including outreach and open days); public relations (PR), corporate and marketing communications; enquiries and admissions. Some functions are best led from the home campus initially, some from the international campus.

In most cases, participants advised drawing (during the early stages) on home country expertise in marketing strategy (aligned to broad organisational objectives) and on in-country expertise in local student recruitment. These two strands were seen as requiring different skills and experience but needing to go hand in hand.

All parties should have a common understanding of their respective roles and the associated time commitment. Dotted line reporting relationships need to be considered carefully to ensure staff have clear direction on a day-to-day basis and when issues need wider debate or escalation.

Where the home campus marketing team is providing a service to the in-country team (e.g. editorial or design), service levels and turnaround times should be agreed. It is helpful to appoint a home campus coordinator for marketing requests: the 'single point of contact' model is more efficient than liaising remotely with multiple individuals. The balance of roles and responsibilities should be reviewed regularly: these will change over time as the international campus develops a greater degree of marketing autonomy.

Secure staff with the right skills and experience early in the process

A strong in-country marketing and student recruitment lead should be appointed up to three years before the campus is due to open. The postholder should appreciate the full range of marketing functions, even if not an expert in all areas. Participants noted that it can be challenging to find someone who combines local HE sector knowledge, student recruitment experience, strategic marketing expertise and an understanding of how UK universities operate. One observed that 'it was easy to find people with experience of getting out to recruitment fairs, but securing someone with strategic level expertise was where we struggled'.

Specific qualities are required during the start-up mode. These include resilience (see Howlett and Cussons 2013, 8) and ability to innovate. Cross-cultural communication skills are also critical as there may be different norms relating, for example, to providing feedback to managers or evaluating progress towards targets (10).

Opinion diverged on whether to second a senior marketing professional from the home campus to the international campus and allow them time to develop a market-informed plan, or whether to recruit to the lead marketing post locally, giving priority to candidates with strong student recruitment experience. Whichever option is pursued, professional development is likely to be needed.

Draw up a plan to fill any gaps in expertise and capacity whilst developing staff

When asked about critical skills for an international campus marketing team, one participant highlighted the following.

> Local market knowledge is hugely important. It drives so much activity. Then there are a whole series of skills around being able to link product characteristics with known features of the market; being able to predict how the market is likely to develop and segment, and what is

driving key trends; being able to analyse data and information to aid prioritisation; being able to source the right types of student for different products; being able to plan effectively; and then being able to communicate and influence internally and work with a diverse range of stakeholders.

If there are initial gaps in the expertise or capacity of the in-country team, these will need to be filled – usually by drawing on professional marketing expertise at the home campus or by outsourcing work to external agencies. At the same time, staff should receive appropriate induction, training and support, with visits in both directions (either on short-term or secondment basis) built into plans.

Professional development needs should be identified and strategies put in place to address these. Where practice between teams diverges, it is important to understand what lies behind this. Existing expertise should be recognised. For example, International Officers may well have relevant local / regional market knowledge.

For a start-up business, outsourcing can increase agility in the early years. 'We started off saying that we would outsource a lot more than we do in the UK. This gives us greater flexibility, agility and speed… [Y]ou… can bring things in-house at an appropriate time if you want.' There will be some functions where existing home campus suppliers offer best value and some where local suppliers do. When using local suppliers, it is essential to build in training time. Hybrid approaches to delivering standard marketing outputs (e.g. collateral) should be considered. '[W]e undertake design work in the UK but printing in Malaysia – this works out best in terms of quality and cost.'

Marketing activity planning

Recommendation 6: Factor in enough time for building in-country relationships and reputation

Don't neglect reputation-building and 'soft' marketing

In-country relationships are the foundations on which student recruitment activity takes place. The right people (from both campuses) need to be involved. There are few global brands in HE, so significant effort is needed to establish one's credentials in a new market. Enough time should be allowed to build deep relationships with key external stakeholders: for

example, employers, school and college leaders and government. A detailed outreach plan should include 'soft' marketing activities such as public lectures or development of industrial advisory groups. Campus leaders and academic staff should expect to be heavily involved in these aspects of marketing – both locally and (if the campus seeks to recruit international students) in other target countries (making sure activity is coordinated with the home campus International Office).

> Recommendation 7: Develop a broad-based, jointly owned marketing and student recruitment plan whose success can be measured

Ensure the marketing activity plan is comprehensive and jointly owned

When developing the marketing plan, this should not focus solely on student recruitment activities. Marketing communications including website and social media, profile-raising and PR, market intelligence gathering, enquiry-handling and conversion, and international (as well as local) student recruitment should all be covered. This requires joint ownership of the plan across international and home campus marketing teams, since responsibility for some of the outcomes will be shared. It is particularly important to plan in website and social media activity, to clarify who will be responsible for which elements (technical, design, content creation, posting and monitoring) and to ensure staff have relevant expertise.

Include mechanisms for measuring and reporting on progress

Metrics and monitoring should be built into the plan for every activity strand and staff should be equipped to analyse the effectiveness of different activities. The frequency and format of reports against the plan should be agreed and there should be review points when progress can be evaluated and a longer term view taken. It is critical to keep up momentum once the first intake has arrived, building on what was successful and learning from what was not. Differences between home and international marketing practice should be appreciated and every effort made to keep pace with changes. For example, the Malaysia market has long been heavily reliant on newspaper advertising and fairs-based recruitment. Although there is increasing emphasis on digital marketing, the traditional approaches still have their place. It is essential to listen to local staff and stakeholders and be guided by their knowledge. 'There

is always the danger of assuming that, because something works well in the UK, then it transfers.'

Concluding remarks

There was broad consistency across interviewees' recommendations, despite differences in operating model, maturity of campus and physical location. In general terms, Malaysia-based interviewees tended to emphasise the need for local knowledge (about the regulatory environment and the market) and for practical student recruitment experience. UK-based interviewees stressed strategic marketing expertise, data analysis and research informed planning. As one participant observed: 'This may just be different ways of thinking about the same problem – e.g. understanding demand'. This relates back to the way the new campus is positioned when it is first conceived. Ultimately, all parties must want the international campus to succeed as a strategic institutional development. There will be differences in perspective but these can become drivers for innovative new approaches if the overarching objective is shared and firmly embedded. Developing and managing an international campus is an exercise in collaboration – across distance, time zones, national and organisational cultures.

Amongst the recommendations made by participants, the ones that stand out are: the campus proposition should be demand-led, requiring a deep understanding of local market and operating context; sufficient resources (human and financial) should be allocated to international campus marketing; local and home campus expertise should be harnessed and collaborative working facilitated; relationship-building, marketing and student recruitment activity should start early enough to generate the required momentum.

Feedback from the institution with the most mature international campus indicates that the journey towards maturity is not linear. The level of input from the home institution fluctuates – and the very fact of having an international campus means the home institution also undergoes a change process. 'There was institutional evolution – co-evolution – going on in both places.' The home institution needs to be willing to learn and adapt. 'There should be an effort to work across boundaries and take a global approach, but it's important to be prepared to adapt to the local context when required.'

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