

Title: Strategies, Models, and Motivations: A Comparative Study of Xiamen University and the University of Nottingham as Transnational Education Exporters in Malaysia

Research Overview:

This paper uses a comparative qualitative study of two international branch campuses (IBCs), Xiamen University Malaysia and the University of Nottingham Malaysia, to examine the differences in their delivery models, institutional motivations and local strategies. It shows that transnational education can bridge cultures and build knowledge but also reproduce unequal power relations that complicate host-country goals today.

Purpose

This paper investigates how two IBCs in Malaysia, Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) and the University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM), differ in their delivery models, institutional motivations, and strategic practices, and what these differences reveal about Malaysia's ambition to become an international education hub. The study addresses a gap in the transnational education literature. Existing research often focuses either on host-government policy or on branch campuses from a single sending country. Less attention has been paid to systematic comparison between Western and Asian exporters operating in the same host context. By comparing a Chinese public university campus and a British university campus in Malaysia, the paper explores how local innovation, national agendas, and global higher education competition intersect in one educational site. It examines how HEIs mediate between cultures, circulate knowledge across borders, and negotiate tensions between global visions and local policy priorities. Rather than treating branch campuses as neutral providers, the study asks how they function simultaneously as academic institutions, geopolitical actors, and instruments of nation branding.

Methods:

The study adopts a comparative qualitative design using the Contrast of Context approach and is informed by Marginson and Rhoades's glonacal agency heuristic. These frameworks make it possible to compare two branch campuses with contrasting national origins but a shared host-country setting, while tracing the interaction of global,

national, and local forces. The analysis draws on publicly available documents, including university websites, strategic plans, annual reports, Malaysia's Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2025), policy documents, quality assurance materials, and relevant media reports. Data were analyzed through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Three deductive themes were developed from the research questions: delivery model, institutional motivations, and institutional strategies. Inductive coding then allowed additional themes to emerge, including regional influence, soft power projection, stakeholder engagement, curriculum arrangements, and campus identity. This documentary approach does not capture lived experience directly, but it identifies formal institutional narratives, strategic priorities, and the political meanings attached to transnational higher education.

Results/Discussion:

The comparison shows that XMUM and UNM represent two distinct models of branch campus development. UNM operates through a hybrid commercial-academic model strongly tied to the University of Nottingham's tri-campus strategy and the UK quality assurance system. It emphasizes equivalence with the home campus, international mobility, and global employability. By contrast, XMUM is a state-backed model funded and supported by Chinese public institutions. While it also complies with Malaysian regulations, it is more explicitly connected to Chinese national strategies, bilateral diplomacy, and regional influence.

At the level of institutional motivations, both campuses are shaped by global pressures such as higher education internationalization, competition for talent, and the reputational value of global visibility. However, XMUM is openly embedded in China's broader political and cultural values, including educational cooperation linked to Malaysia-China relations. UNM, in contrast, frames itself more through market expansion, institutional resilience, and the global reputation of a UK university, even though its presence also contributes indirectly to UK soft power.

The institutional strategies also diverge. UNM presents itself as a globally integrated campus promoting cultural diversity, mobility, and collaboration with Malaysian industry. XMUM emphasizes Chinese language and cultural transmission, symbolic architectural identity, and partnerships in STEM and technology sectors that connect local Malaysian development with Chinese research and industry networks. In this sense, both campuses contribute to Malaysia's hub agenda, but they do so through different combinations of educational, economic, and geopolitical priorities.

The study also argues that these contributions are accompanied by tensions. Although

both campuses support Malaysia's aspiration to attract students, develop talent, and enhance international visibility, their strong alignment with home-country curricula, standards, and strategic interests can limit localization. The replication of home-campus models may constrain Malaysia's control over curriculum, weaken the development of a more locally grounded knowledge hub, and reinforce asymmetrical power relations between host and sending countries. International mobility pathways, while attractive, may also contribute to talent outflow rather than talent retention.

To conclude, the findings suggest that transnational education in Malaysia should not be understood simply as educational export or international partnership. It is a glonacal process in which universities act across multiple scales at once, bridging cultures and co-creating knowledge, but also advancing uneven forms of influence. The paper contributes to comparative and international education research by showing that branch campuses can simultaneously support host-country development and reproduce structural frictions around power, localization, and national interest.