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Student perception of study at international branch campuses: implication for educators and college managers

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that in any service industry it is the customer who defines service quality, so it is logical for researchers and practitioners to research the customer perspective. The international branch campus has emerged as a popular form of transnational higher education but to date little research has been undertaken on student attitudes, beliefs and experiences, other than the student feedback evaluations conducted by institutions. This quantitative study employed a survey questionnaire to investigate student perceptions of study at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates. Across the seven dimensions examined, it was found that students are largely satisfied, but several issues have been identified that managers can attempt to address in order to further improve service quality and student satisfaction at their institutions.

Keywords: international branch campuses; transnational higher education; student perceptions; student satisfaction; service quality

Introduction

In response to the forces of globalisation, many universities worldwide have decided to engage in transnational education. The term 'transnational education' refers to programmes in which learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007: 21). In the 1990s, common forms of transnational education included distance education and partner-supported delivery, which includes franchised programmes and twinning. Twinning is the system where students undertake the first part of their programme at the partner institution overseas and the latter part of their programme at the home campus of the awarding institution. Since the turn of the century, the international branch campus has emerged as a popular form of transnational education with both higher education institutions (HEIs) and students.

By 2009, there were over 162 international branch campuses globally, and, with over 40 institutions, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was host to more branch campuses than any other country worldwide (Becker, 2009). The largest source countries of international branch campuses (where the parent institutions are based) are the United States (US), Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) (Becker, 2009). An international branch campus is an educational facility where students receive face-to-face instruction in a country different to that of the parent institution. Two features distinguish branch campuses from other forms of transnational education that also adopt a physical 'bricks and mortar' approach: first, a branch campus operates under the same name as its parent institution, and second, the qualifications that the students gain bear the name of the parent institution (Wilkins, 2010).

There is an expectation among stakeholders - such as students, parents and employers - that an international branch campus will deliver the same programmes and adhere to the same standards and procedures that apply at its home campus. Furthermore, in order for a branch campus to be registered, licensed or legally recognised locally, its management must often demonstrate to a local accreditation body that the branch replicates as far as possible the structures and operations of its home campus. In addition, most host countries have quality assurance agencies that have the same expectation. However, Altbach (2010) suggests that the total product offerings of international branch campuses rarely come close to the home

products in terms of breadth of curriculum, quality of academic staff, physical environment, learning resources and social facilities.

Staffing a branch campus with quality faculty who have previous experience of teaching at the home campus or at least of teaching in the country where the home campus is located is one of the biggest challenges facing branch campus managements. Senior academics are often unwilling to leave their work or uproot their families and junior staff are concerned that spending time overseas will damage their future career prospects. Some branch campuses have organised programme delivery in such a way that professors from the home campus can 'fly in' for short periods of intensive teaching. This mode of delivery has generally not proved cost-effective or popular with students, and regulatory bodies such as the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) discourage it.

Most international branch campuses are relatively new and therefore they have not yet had enough time to develop the scale needed to replicate the home campus offering. Branch campuses typically offer a limited curriculum and very often specialise in subjects such as business, management and information technology, which are relatively cheap to establish and which can easily accommodate high student numbers. For example, 43% of all students at non-federal institutions in the UAE study one of these three subjects (Aboul-Ela, 2009). Most branch campuses lack the range of physical facilities and services found on home campuses, such as libraries housing extensive collections, sports and leisure facilities, student accommodation, specialist careers advice and support, and extra-curricular activities. It is interesting therefore to discover how students at international branch campuses rate their experiences as learners and customers of these institutions.

Much of the previous research on transnational higher education has focussed on the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but little attention has been given to student attitudes, beliefs and experiences (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010). If one accepts that in any service industry it is the customer who defines quality, then it is logical to research the student perspective. HEIs must ensure that student expectations are met and that student satisfaction is achieved if they are to grow and benefit from positive word-of-mouth.

Miliszewska and Sztendur (2010) undertook a study that investigated student views on various dimensions of Australian transnational education programmes in South East Asia, which included curriculum and instruction design, lecturers and teaching, use of technology, evaluation and assessment, programme management and organisational support. The findings were intended to help HEI managers in reviewing existing transnational provision and planning new transnational ventures and programmes. This research has similar objectives, but it was not limited to institutions and programmes from a single country and it was conducted in the UAE, the country with the largest number of international branch campuses globally, but also a country that has seen relatively little academic research into its transnational higher education.

Service quality and student satisfaction

Aldridge and Rowley (1998) suggest that service quality in higher education should be assessed according to the perceptions of students. Coates and Koerner (1996) observe that studies on student perceptions of service quality tend to be based on teaching and classroom experience, the adequacy of learning and library resources, the efficiency of course administration and other operational aspects of institutions. As expectations determine the outcome of satisfaction, it has become common for researchers to examine the formation of expectations (Mai, 2005). Zeithaml et al. (1990) found that consumer expectations are influenced by the consumer's individual needs, their past experience of the service, word-of-mouth communications, other external communications and price.

Virtually all HEIs attempt to assess their service quality by measuring student satisfaction using internally created and distributed student evaluation and feedback surveys. Some students turn to non-institutionally sanctioned resources, such as the student evaluation website *RateMyProfessors.com*, to express their views and opinions and to gain information on institutions, teaching quality and lecturer performance (Wilkins & Epps, 2011). There is disagreement in the literature however on the direction of causality between service quality and satisfaction (Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2007). Although Sureshchandar, Chandrasekharan and Anantharaman (2002) suggest that service quality and satisfaction are two distinct but related constructs, in practice, HEI managements and marketing practitioners often use the two terms interchangeably.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) regard satisfaction as a transaction-specific measure and service quality as a form of attitude associated with a long-run overall evaluation. It follows, therefore, according to this view that satisfaction contributes to the determination of service quality. In contrast, Cronin and Taylor (1992) see service quality as an antecedent of satisfaction and so argue that the direction of causality is from service quality to satisfaction. Furthermore, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue - based on their empirical research on four service industries - that satisfaction exerts a stronger and more consistent effect upon purchase intentions than service quality. They conclude that customers may not necessarily buy the highest quality service, as convenience, price and availability may enhance satisfaction but not the customers' perceptions of service quality. Therefore, regardless of whether the service quality of international branch campuses matches the service quality of home campuses, student satisfaction at the branch campuses *could* actually be higher. This research seeks to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of students at branch campuses in the UAE, in order to assess the extent of student satisfaction and to identify the size of the service gap (if any) between student expectations and student perceptions of reality on various aspects of the student experience at a branch campus.

Method

This quantitative survey utilised a questionnaire developed by the authors, which consisted of 49 items relating to student perceptions, experience or satisfaction. A further 4 items collected data about the respondents: their gender, nationality, level of study and the country that accredited their high school qualification(s). Each item was randomly placed on the questionnaire to encourage respondents to consider each question individually. Of the items, 46 used a 7-point rating scale where 1 = disagree strongly, 4 = neutral and 7 = agree strongly. The questionnaire finished with three open questions, which asked respondents to identify advantages and disadvantages of studying at a branch campus in the UAE (as opposed to studying at universities located in countries such as Australia, the UK and US), and to identify the differences they experienced between their secondary education and the system of education/learning that they received in their higher education undertaken at an international branch campus. The survey questionnaire was completed by respondents using hard copies or an online version.

The survey questionnaire was completed by students who were studying at an international branch campus in the UAE. The full service branch campuses in the UAE (offering complete degree programmes) differ from the smaller branches scattered around the world that are mainly intended as study abroad facilities for students enrolled at home campuses. Several US universities have overseas branches, known as study centres, which provide students with a study abroad experience that usually lasts less than one academic year. These branches do not generally enrol students directly.

There is one peculiarity that is common to several of the countries that host a number of international branch campuses: their populations consist of high proportions of expatriates

and foreign workers. In 2010, nearly 26% of Singapore's population was made up of non-residents (foreigners who were working, studying or living in Singapore but not granted permanent residence) (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2010). Most of the Arab Gulf States have populations with even greater proportions of expatriates. For example, over 80% of the UAE's population consists of expatriates and foreign workers (UAE Interact, 2009).

Many international branch campuses globally enrol large proportions of their students from local (and sometimes also regional) expatriate communities, although there are exceptions, such as Qatar, where the international branch campuses are intended to cater mainly for Qatari nationals. In the UAE, expatriates typically account for at least three-quarters of total enrolments at branch campuses. The remaining students are either UAE nationals or international students. If expatriates want to undertake higher education in the countries where they completed their high school education and where their families live, or for mature students, where they work, then private providers/branch campuses are usually the only option, as most federal/state institutions do not admit expatriates. Furthermore, in some countries, such as the UAE, an expatriate father can only sponsor a son over the age of 18 for residency if they are a student in the UAE (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2010). As residency in the UAE is never permanent for non-nationals (even property owners have to apply for a new residency visa every three years), expatriate students are generally considered as international students (and they pay international student level fees). We accept that an Indian living in India who decides to study in the UK is not directly comparable with an Indian expatriate living in the UAE who decides to study in the UAE, but we would argue that this does not invalidate our method or our findings and conclusions.

The questionnaire was distributed by students of a capstone project (a final year subject - in this case Marketing - that has a report on a particular topic embedded in it, which synthesises all knowledge accumulated in previous subjects studied) at an international branch campus in the UAE by posting the survey link on their Facebook accounts and sending personal emails to all of their friends in the UAE who study at an international branch campus. The questionnaires were distributed over a five-week period, generating 247 usable responses. Most of the responses came from just six institutions - one Australian, two UK and three North American. Over 85% of the respondents were following a programme in Business, Management or Computer Science/Information Technology, which is not surprising given that most branch campuses in the UAE operate in these fields and 43% of all students at non-federal institutions in the UAE study these subjects (Aboul-Ela, 2009). Table 1 shows a summary profile of the respondents.

Table 1 Summary profile of respondents ($n = 247$).

Categories		Number	%
Gender	Male	127	51.4
	Female	120	48.6
Nationality	Indian	78	31.6
	Pakistani	55	22.2
	Emirati (UAE)	32	13.0
	African	18	7.3
	Other	64	25.9
Level of study	Undergraduate	161	65.2
	Postgraduate	86	34.8

Country in	India	57	23.1
which student's	United Arab Emirates	14	20.6
high school	United Kingdom	39	15.8
qualification(s)	Pakistan	14	5.6
were accredited	United States	13	5.3
	Other	73	29.6

Results and discussion

Student perceptions of their experience of study at an international branch campus were assessed against seven dimensions: programme effectiveness; quality of lecturers and teaching; student learning; assessment and feedback; learning resources; use of technology; and facilities and quality of social life. For each of these dimensions a score was created – a mark out of 10 – which was calculated by converting the averages of the item means for each dimension. The scale items are shown in Appendix A.

1. *Programme effectiveness – Score: 7.1/10*

By their very nature, transnational programmes are designed in countries other than the ones in which they are delivered. Some institutions might be tempted to deliver at international branch campuses 'off-the-shelf' standardised programmes with generic content that are irrelevant or inappropriate in local contexts (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Naidoo, 2007). There has been debate about the extent to which transnational programmes should be globalised with removal of all location-specific content (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007).

Some institutions package their curricula by providing teaching staff at branch campuses with standardised syllabi, learning objectives, student reading lists, lecture slides and notes, and assessment tasks. For example, Monash University's Bachelor of Business and Commerce has 100% commonality, so that each student, irrespective of the campus, studies the same curriculum, receives the same study resources and undertakes the same assessments (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). Pre-packaged material can be a useful teaching and learning tool, providing a solid base for a programme, which can be developed and refined over time. However, Schapper and Mayson (2004) argue that standardised programmes rob academics of professional autonomy, professional judgement and intellectual engagement, and that they stifle creativity.

Although local employers may prefer higher education programmes to be contextualised for the local environment, students often enrol at international branch campuses specifically to receive an international education (Dobos, 2011; Phyvis and Chapman, 2004). However, Wang (2008) argues that it is important for institutions to not impose cultural colonialism and the indiscriminate use of western theories upon offshore academics and students. Ziguras (2008) suggests that it is important for lecturers to put theories into perspective for students so that they can relate them to their own experiences and social contexts.

Many students are motivated to study at an international branch campus because they believe that local employers prefer them over other local institutions or because they believe that an international education and a foreign qualification will better prepare them for a career in the international labour market (Wilkins, 2011; Zimitat, 2008). The respondents in this study agreed slightly that course content was made relevant to the UAE and that their programme was intellectually stimulating, and they agreed to a slightly greater degree that their course was relevant to their intended future employment.

2.   *Quality of lecturers and teaching – Score: 7.1/10*

Students can be positively affected by effective teaching and negatively affected by ineffective teaching but students' perceptions of effective teaching can vary greatly (Saafin, 2008). According to attribution theory, successful learning outcomes are commonly attributed to the quality of the teacher rather than the motivation and effort of the learner (Weiner, 1974). Educators are aware, however, that a student's motivation is a key determinant of their academic attainment and it is the task of lecturers to play a contributing role in stimulating student motivation.

The vast majority of higher education lecturers in the UAE are contracted from other countries (Saafin, 2008), usually from other Arab nations, the US, Europe, Australia, India and Pakistan (Randeree, 2008), but some lecturers are employed locally from the existing expatriate workforce, often on a part-time or fixed period basis. Some of the smaller branch campuses employ relatively high proportions of locally contracted part-time teaching staff, which may represent an effective method of reducing costs, but less effective as a method of achieving employee commitment and higher levels of involvement (Wilkins, 2010). In a study by Smith (2009) at an Australian branch campus in the UAE, it was found that most of the academics had little prior knowledge of the Australian higher education system and had never been to the institution's campus in Australia.

There are potential advantages and disadvantages of employing local staff as opposed to expatriate teachers from the country of origin of the institution. On the one hand, many students (and parents) expect that if they enrol on a foreign programme they will be taught by lecturers from that country, but academics employed locally often have a better understanding of student needs and are better able to make course content relevant to the local context (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). In a survey of students undertaking Australian transnational programmes in South East Asia, it was found that in programmes taught by both university and local instructors, students reported higher overall satisfaction with the university lecturers (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010).

Some institutions in the US – and also in the UK and elsewhere – have resisted the temptation to establish international branch campuses over concerns of damage to their brand names and reputations, and fears about their ability to staff such campuses with academics of sufficient standing and quality (Olds, 2008). All lecturers are expected to teach in English. Branch campuses in the UAE generally prefer to employ lecturers who have experience of teaching both in the country where the parent institution is based and in a multicultural environment, particularly in an Arab speaking country. Lecturers, as everywhere nowadays, are expected to have good communication and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

The performance of lecturers is usually evaluated annually, and in the UAE student feedback via student evaluation questionnaires is often a major part of the performance appraisal process (Saafin, 2008). College managers use evaluations of lecturer performance to make decisions about promotion, continuity and contract renewal; the results also provide feedback to lecturers to enable them to improve their teaching performance. Academics in transnational education work in environments that are very different to their own. Classroom culture and the extent and style of student-staff interaction can vary considerably across countries as can students' preferred learning styles (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010).

It is necessary, therefore, for academics to challenge their assumptions about the higher education methods they have used elsewhere and to review the suitability of their teaching and assessment practices for local contexts (Smith, 2009). Teaching staff must also remember that for the majority of students, English is their second or third language, and they should therefore take care in their language usage by not, for example, using overly complex words and sentence structures.

Many institutions fail to give academics starting their first assignment in transnational education any significant training to prepare them for offshore teaching, such as advice and guidance on pedagogical issues or country-specific issues and differences (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; Getty, 2011; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). It is however beneficial for staff to understand the local culture and traditions, such as religious customs and family relationships and expectations, so as not to offend students and to appreciate the factors that might affect student performance. A study conducted by Saafin (2008) in the UAE identified teacher characteristics and practices that higher education students judged to be effective, which included treating students with respect; being flexible and willing to compromise; being helpful; being friendly with students; having a sense of humour; helping students understand; giving students the chance to speak and ask questions; being dedicated and knowledgeable of his/her subject; and being patient and fair.

Across all of the criteria assessed, the respondents were broadly satisfied with the performances of their lecturers and the quality of teaching they received. It is notable that for the item 'My lecturers are experts in their fields' the mode score awarded was 7. This indicates that students in the UAE generally have high amounts of respect for their teachers.

3. Student learning – Score: 7.1/10

International branch campuses in the UAE enrol students with diverse backgrounds and abilities; student cohorts typically include UAE nationals, expatriates living in the UAE and international students, mainly from other Middle Eastern countries, but also from Africa and South Asia. The range of secondary educations that these students have undertaken is equally diverse, sometimes making the teaching task more complex and difficult. Students who have completed a UK or US secondary education (21.1% of respondents) are likely to have experience of student-centred learning, writing essays and preparing coursework.

In contrast, cultural and historical traditions, as well as the teaching methodologies used in UAE secondary education generally lead UAE students (20.6% of the respondents) to expect to be passive recipients of taught information and to not have to adopt an independent approach to learning and problem solving (Randeree, 2006) as the norm in the state education system is for the teacher to state facts that must be memorised and regurgitated by students (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005).

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to assess how students who had achieved secondary qualifications accredited in different countries perceived the differences between their secondary and higher education. The results show that there are significant differences between the groups' perceptions about having to work more independently at university than they had to at school [$H(5) = 18.87$, $p < .01$] and the extent to which their higher education course is academically challenging [$H(5) = 10.88$, $p < .05$]. Examination of the mean scores revealed that students who had completed their secondary education in a UAE state school had awarded higher scores for both items than students who had achieved Indian, Pakistani, UK or US secondary qualifications. However, when Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted as post hoc analysis, with a Bonferroni correction applied, the scores of students who had attended a UAE state school were found to be not significantly different to those who had achieved Indian, Pakistani, UK or US qualifications.

Some of the comments made by respondents about the differences between their secondary education and their higher education at an international branch campus include: "In high school we learnt more theory and bookish information whereas the knowledge gained at university is more practical and useful in the corporate world."; "It's more interesting now but much more challenging."; "We are not spoon fed anymore. We now need to stretch our knowledge through our own research and wide reading."; "University has been

a steep learning curve and the workload is much higher than at school." and "I have had to learn to work more independently and in groups."

Virtually all of the teaching at international branch campuses in the UAE is conducted in the English language. Students who completed an Indian secondary education (23.1% of the respondents) usually have sufficient ability in English, but students who did not undertake their secondary education in English often require a foundation programme in English and additional on-going language support. A student's ability to read and write fluently in English usually has a significant impact on their overall academic attainment.

Students who perform poorly in their higher education often suffer from a mismatch of learning and teaching styles (Rahal & Palfreyman, 2009). Lecturers need to adapt their teaching methods to satisfy both the expectations of their institutions and the preferences and expectations of students, but often it will be the students that have to adjust to new styles of learning and lecturers will often need to offer additional guidance and support to students not familiar with student-centred learning methods.

The students participating in the study agreed that they received effective course materials and had access to sufficient learning/library resources to enable their learning and the development of skills.

4. Assessment and feedback – Score: 7.2/10

Higher education students at branch campuses in the UAE have diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. Students who completed an American or British secondary education are likely to have received an interactive student-centred education with varied assessment methods including assignments, coursework, group work and examinations, which required application of theory and problem-solving (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). In contrast, pedagogy in state schools across the Middle East depend almost solely on lectures, dictation, reading from textbooks and rote learning, with assessment relying almost entirely on examinations (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). As a result, UAE national students in particular often struggle to adjust to the independent learning expected by Western higher education systems, and these students do not have the skills to write essays or plan coursework, which requires creativity and problem-solving.

The social culture of the Middle East emphasises social status and reputation, and students (and their families) often expect to achieve qualifications regardless of their ability or effort applied. Altbach (2010) suggests that many students studying at international branch campuses would probably not have been accepted onto the same programme at the institution's main home campus. Once enrolled, there often exists considerable pressure on academics to satisfy students by giving them inflated grades (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Wilkins, 2010). In the UAE, such pressure can be greater if the student comes from a notable family.

A survey conducted in the UAE revealed that many professors believed their students had average or below average ability in mathematics and writing in English, and that students were awarded higher grades than they deserved (Gerson, 2010). Poor course evaluations, complaining students and concerns over job security were identified by professors in the survey as some of the causes of grade inflation. As in other countries, plagiarism has become an increasing problem in UAE higher education, often the result of naivety among students, where they consider the sharing of work to be merely co-operative and helpful rather than an unethical act (Randeree, 2006).

The design of assessment tasks and grading of students can be undertaken by either the parent institution or locally by academics at the branch campus. When assessment is organised and undertaken locally, the moderation process undertaken at the parent institution ensures that assessment tasks and grading are fair and consistent across campuses. The

moderation process is intended to ensure that student results are reliable and that the quality of assessing students' work is comparable (Dobos, 2011). The moderation process can be a major challenge for both parties as standards at offshore branches often vary from those at the parent campus (Castle & Kelly, 2004). When grading of coursework or examinations is undertaken at the parent campus then it usually takes longer to distribute the results to students, which can often lead to student dissatisfaction with the assessment process.

The respondents were generally satisfied with the organisation of assessment at their institutions although 20.9% of students did not agree that they received detailed and helpful feedback on their work (scores of 1-3 on the 7-point rating scale). Some 73.3% of students thought that their course was much more demanding than their secondary education courses and 56.2% of students perceived that it was difficult to get high marks on their course (scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale).

5. *Learning resources – Score: 7.1/10*

Some researchers regard the growth of transnational programmes as evidence of the commodification of higher education (Altbach, 2001, 2004; Naidoo, 2003, 2007). Since commodified systems tend to be lean systems that emphasise cost minimisation, it might be expected that investment in libraries and learning resources fall below international norms (Naidoo, 2007).

However, this survey found that students were generally satisfied with the learning resources available to them. Although many international branch campuses do have small libraries with fairly limited collections, students can usually order the books and resources that they require, and virtually all students at branch campuses have the same access to online journals and learning resources that students at the parent campuses have.

6. *Use of technology – Score: 7.2/10*

ICT is a common teaching and learning tool used by both academics and students. Western higher education has increasingly depended on ICT to achieve independent student-centred learning. Secondary age students in virtually all developed countries, including those in the Middle East, now have high levels of ICT skills. Although UAE nationals generally have good ICT skills, many still prefer a structured learning environment where they are directed by their teachers rather than engaging themselves in independent, autonomous learning. Most international branch campuses are located in higher education hubs - cities, countries or designated zones in countries – but what these countries have in common (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, UAE) is the desire to develop as knowledge economies and to increase the participation of nationals in the labour market. Personality traits such as being proactive, autonomous and creative are associated with successful knowledge economies and this fact offers support for pedagogy that promotes student-centred learning.

ICT plays a large role in ensuring that the academic products of branch campuses remain comparable with those offered at parent campuses, as ICT provides students, regardless of their location, with the same set of learning resources. A study by Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) found that UK and US students rated computer simulation as a learning tool higher than students in Middle Eastern countries, possibly because Middle Eastern students have less experience of active learning using ICT, but the Middle Eastern students' rating for online communication with their teachers was higher than those for the UK and US students, possibly because Middle Eastern students suffer higher levels of anxiety over their study and therefore value more one-to-one help with problems and difficulties, and quick feedback.

The respondents were largely satisfied with the ICT facilities provided in teaching rooms, with their lecturers' use of ICT, with the availability of computers for personal use and the provision of online learning resources for use outside of lessons.

7. *Facilities and quality of social life – Score: 7.2/10*

At a conference in 1998, the vice-chancellor of Central Queensland University (CQU) admitted that CQU's international branches had no sporting facilities, no spacious landscaped lawns or gardens, and no significant facilities for cultural, political, religious or hobby activities, but that this mode of operation did not compromise on the academic product or academic standards and in operating in this way students were not having to pay for services that they had no wish to use (Chipman, 1998).

However, since 1998, the desires and expectations of many students have increased and the growth of higher education hubs such as Singapore and the UAE has created highly competitive markets where many institutions feel the need to differentiate themselves from the crowd by offering additional services and facilities. Eldridge and Cranston (2009) found that students in some countries perceived the social aspect of education as more important than students in other countries. Many of the students in transnational higher education study professional vocational programmes such as business management or information technology, and improving their future career prospects is their primary goal. It is possible that these students prefer to focus on their study and not be distracted by recreational and social activities. Also, the customs and cultures of various Middle Eastern and South Asian communities may deter female students from participating in social activities, particularly those that my involve interaction with males.

The respondents generally judged that their institutions provided a good range of facilities for sports, recreation and leisure with 65.9% of students believing that there was a lively social scene on their campus (scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale). As most of these students have not studied at a Western home campus before they therefore have no benchmark on which to base a comparison, and what a UAE female student considers lively might equally be considered dull by a European male student.

Student satisfaction

Five items were used to assess student satisfaction with their experience of study at an international branch campus in the UAE. The survey results are shown in Table 2. The scores of these five items were then averaged to create an overall satisfaction score for each student. The Kruskall-Wallis test was used to assess whether there are differences in the satisfaction scores of students of different nationality and the Mann Whitney U test was used to assess whether there differences in the satisfaction scores of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Table 2   Indicators of student satisfaction with their experience at an international branch campus in the United Arab Emirates.

Indicator	% students agreeing with statement[a]
So far, my course has met all of my expectations	64.4%
I am very satisfied with my university and would definitely choose it again	66.5%
My choice of university was a wise decision	72.0%
My programme offers good value for money	65.6%
I would recommend my university to friends	67.3%

[a] Scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale.

The Kruskall-Wallis test revealed that Indian students had the highest satisfaction scores, then followed by Pakistani students and African students; UAE students had the lowest satisfaction scores. The differences in satisfaction scores between the groups was not however significant ($p = .47$). In India, higher education and higher education teachers are both generally highly respected (Smith, 2009). Previous research has indicated that students who achieve lower grades often award lower lecturer/course evaluations (Wilkins & Epps, 2011), and given that this study found that the students who had completed their education in a UAE state school tended to find their higher education course more academically challenging than other students suggests that the UAE students might have been achieving lower grades.

The Mann Whitney U test indicated that undergraduate students had awarded higher satisfaction scores than postgraduate students but also this difference was not significant ($p = .10$). A high proportion of postgraduate students at branch campuses in the UAE study on a part-time basis and these students spend less time on campus. This might result in postgraduate students having lower levels of identification with their university (the student's perception of belongingness to their institution and their sense of oneness with the institution), and previous research has indicated a link between customer-organisation identification and customer satisfaction (Kim, Chang & Ko, 2010).

Some of the advantages of studying at an international branch campus cited by students include: "You get the same quality of education without having to leave Dubai or your family."; "You get the brand name on the degree without having to study at the main campus."; "I can study part-time and do my job in Dubai, which enables me to pay the fees of my education." and "My university has an international crowd so you can get to learn about different cultures."

The disadvantages of studying an international branch campus mentioned by students include: "The reputation of the main branch outshines the offshore branch."; "The quality of education is not the same as it is abroad."; "High fees, lack of qualified professors, no scholarships, bad campus." and "We miss the full student experience of a bigger campus and it doesn't feel like studying at an international university."

Conclusion

Across all of the dimensions examined in this study, the UAE international branch campuses' "scorecard" indicates that they are performing well and largely satisfying their principle customers, the students. Of course, the managements of international branch campuses should not become complacent. Transnational higher education has become very competitive and the expectations of stakeholders – students, parents, employers, governments – are ever increasing.

The results of the survey indicate that the main dimensions needing improvement are not related directly to teaching or learning. Of the items relating to academic matters, there were only five that had relatively high proportions of negative scores (scores of 1-3 on the 7-point rating scale): 21.5% of students did not agree that they had as much contact with their lecturers than they had with their teachers at school and 17.9% disagreed that they had as much contact with their lecturers as they needed; 20.7% of students disagreed that they received detailed and helpful feedback on their work; 18.7% disagreed that their lecturers were sympathetic if they had problems that affected their work; and 17.8% disagreed that their lecturers involved them in lessons more than their teachers at school.

All of the other items with high proportions of negative scores fell into the 'facilities and quality of social life' category. Some 17.5% of students did not agree that their university provides a lot of leisure activities and entertainment for students; 15.9% disagreed that their university has a lot of clubs and societies for students; 15.8% disagreed that there was a lively

social scene on their campus; and 16.6% disagreed that their university has a good careers advice and internships service.

Whilst the findings of this study might refute some of the criticisms of international branch campuses to be found in the literature regarding quality and other issues, including political and ideological concerns (Altbach, 2001; Altbach, 2004; Becker, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Naidoo, 2007; Romani, 2009; Wilkins, 2010), there still remains considerable scope for international branch campuses to improve their operations. It is hoped that institution managers might use these finding to review and improve their own provisions. Given that cultures, customs, traditions and social contexts vary considerably in different locations there is scope for other researchers to conduct similar research in other locations and eventually, when a database of such findings can be constructed, we might be in the position to propose a set of generalizable propositions regarding the operation and management of international branch campuses.

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Appendix A Scale items[a]

Construct	Item	Mean	SD	Mode
Programme	Course content is made relevant to the UAE	4.68	1.60	5
	My course is intellectually stimulating	4.89	1.57	6
	My course is relevant to my intended future employment	5.37	1.55	6
Lecturers & teaching	My lecturers make the subjects interesting	4.68	1.65	5
	My lecturers are experts in their fields	5.07	1.65	7
	My lecturers use language that I understand	5.33	1.56	6
	My lecturers use technology well in their teaching	4.87	1.56	5
	I have as much contact with my lecturers as I need	4.92	1.64	5
	My lecturers are sympathetic if I have problems that affect my work	4.82	1.65	5
Student learning	My course has improved my problem-solving & analytical skills	5.03	1.57	6
	The library meets all of my learning needs	4.83	1.57	5
	The course materials satisfy all of my learning needs	5.00	1.58	5
Assessment & feedback	Modules/units are assessed using a variety of methods	5.07	1.52	6
	My course involves coursework/on-going assessment	5.22	1.63	6
	I receive detailed and helpful feedback on my work	4.76	1.68	6
Learning resources	The library meets all of my learning needs	4.83	1.57	5
	The course materials satisfy all of my learning needs	5.00	1.58	5
	Technology is used to provide learning resources outside of lessons	4.98	1.60	6
	I can always find a computer to work on when needed	5.14	1.71	6
Use of technology	All teaching/lecturing rooms have good audio-visual facilities	5.04	1.60	6
	My lecturers use technology well in their teaching	4.87	1.56	5
	Technology is used to provide learning resources outside of lessons	4.98	1.60	6
	I can always find a computer to work on when needed	5.14	1.71	6
	I use ICT when undertaking research and to present my work	5.23	1.61	7

Facilities & social life	My campus has a good range of facilities e.g. a refectory, sports and leisure provision	5.01	1.72	6
	My university has lots of clubs and societies for students	5.09	1.69	7
	A lot of leisure activities and entertainment are provided for students	4.90	1.68	5
	My university has a good careers advice and internships service	4.84	1.65	5
	There is a lively social scene on campus	5.00	1.68	6
	My university provides accommodation for students	5.38	1.53	7

[a] All items used a 7-point rating scale, where 1= disagree strongly, 4= neutral and 7 = agree strongly