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Access, Internationalisation, Economic Growth and Skills: The Impacts of TNE in Dubai

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Introduction

This section discusses the massification of higher education and the emergence of transnational higher education. Higher education has been through rapid expansion over the last two decades largely due to internationalisation efforts of higher education institutions, which has resulted in the mass movement of students, faculty, programmes and providers (Knight 2007).

Knight (1993, p. 21) defines internationalisation as ‘the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution’. Internationalisation has also benefited from liberalisation of trade through international agreements such as the General Agreement for Trade and Services (GATS),

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which has opened up the education sector and promoted the import and export of foreign education (Lane and Kinser 2011).

Internationalisation strategies are usually driven by social, economic and political objectives and have opened up various opportunities for higher education institutions such as curriculum development, research partnerships and collaborations (Van Damme 2001; Wilkins and Huisman 2011). One area that has emerged as a consequence of internationalisation efforts in higher education is transnational education (TNE) or cross-border higher education (Stella and Woodhouse 2008). UNESCO and OECD define TNE as environments where 'the teacher, student, programme, institution or course materials cross national borders'. Various countries in Middle East and Asia have resorted to transnational education to support economic development, increase local competitiveness and improve access of high-quality education for students (Chan 2011; Mok 2011; British Council 2014).

There are various forms of TNE including distance education, franchises, articulation agreements, twinning programmes and international branch campuses (IBC) (Stella and Woodhouse 2008). Lane (2011, p. 1), defines an IBC as 'an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; engages in at least some face-to-face teaching; and provides access to an entire academic programme that leads to a credential awarded by the foreign education provider'. The focus of this paper is on IBCs set up in Dubai.

Dubai, one of the seven Emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has adopted a TNE strategy for higher education. Dubai has gone through rapid and planned diversification since the early 1990s in various sectors, including trade, retail, logistics, aviation, health and education in order to reduce dependence on oil. A key aspect of the diversification strategy was the development of dedicated free trade economic zones, which provided the necessary infrastructure and regulatory environments to help attract foreign investment. The diversification process also led to an influx of expatriates resulting in a unique demographic structure whereby fewer than 10% of the population are UAE nationals. The remaining 90% are foreign expatriates largely from South East Asia and the Arab region (UAE Interact 2011). To cater to the needs of the

expatriate community and to develop a talented workforce for the economy, Dubai has adopted an interesting TNE model of higher education.

The next section sets the context of higher education in Dubai, provides further details on the on the TNE model adopted, and explores the current literature on the impact of TNE on a host city/country.

Context

Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates

The UAE has three federal higher education institutions: Zayed University, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) and United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), which have campuses across the country including in Dubai. These institutions were established by federal decree and are funded through the Ministry of Education (MOE). They offer a diverse range of programmes to Emirati students free of cost. Dubai hosts campuses of Zayed University as well as two HCT campuses, Dubai Men's College and Dubai Women's College (Fox and Al Shamisi 2014).

In addition to the federal campuses, the UAE higher education landscape includes two other categories of institutions: local and international. Local institutions are comprised of private, government funded and quasi-government funded institutions. They are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), an arm of the MOE, and offer UAE qualifications. The international institutions, often referred to as branch campuses, are branches of foreign institutions that have set up in the UAE and offer international qualifications. The branch campuses are usually set up in free trade zones. The MOE is responsible for regulation and licensing of higher education in the UAE, while institutions in the free zones are licensed and regulated by state regulatory bodies in their respective Emirates. Dubai and Ras-Al-Khaima have the largest presence of higher education institutions in free zones, and both Emirates have independent education regulatory bodies.

Higher Education in Dubai

The Dubai higher education landscape comprises of federal institutions, local institutions and international branch campuses. According to the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the education regulatory arm of the Dubai government, Dubai has a total of 64 institutions offering over 600 programmes to approximately 65,000 students. Thirty-four institutions are considered international institutions (KHDA 2017). This section focusses on the international branch campuses and the impact of the TNE model in Dubai.

The journey of the international branch campuses in Dubai started in 2003 with the establishment of Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP), which was initially called Dubai Knowledge Village (DKV). Dubai was on a planned path of diversification and the free zones were used a catalyst for economic growth and expansion. Dubai established Jabel Ali, a large shipping free zone, in 1977 and expanded the free zone concept to the media and technology sectors in 2001 through the establishment of Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City. The free zones were designed to remove barriers and attract foreign investment, and resulted in a massive influx of expatriates coming to Dubai to take advantage of the newly created job opportunities. This created an urgent need to increase access to higher education and support the growing economy with a skilled workforce (Fox and Al Shamisi 2014).

DKV was set up to attract foreign higher education institutions in order to meet the growing and unmet need from the expatriate community. UAE nationals had access to the federal campuses, however there weren't sufficient higher education options for the expatriate population who wanted to study for internationally recognised and internationally awarded qualifications from foreign universities.

Through the establishment of DKP, Dubai opened up the higher education sector to foreign providers and removed some of the barriers that previously existed for foreign providers. Prior to that, international branch campuses were not formally allowed to set up in Dubai or the UAE. Free zone law exempted institutions from federal licensing and accreditation requirements and offered an alternative route whereby

incoming institutions could establish campuses using their home country accreditation and offer international qualifications to students in Dubai. The law also allowed institutions 100% ownership, and enabled companies to repatriate their funds and profits, in contrast to federal law which mandated 51% ownership by a local investor. DKP also provided institutions with ready infrastructure and facilities and this removed the need for any capital investment. These features made DKP an attractive destination for higher education providers and attracted several institutions to set up in DKP including foreign campuses from India, United Kingdom, Australia and USA. In the first year, eight branch campuses set up in DKV (KHDA 2017).

The success of DKP and the demand from international providers resulted in the establishment of Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) in 2007, a second free zone dedicated to higher education. DIAC provided institutions with the additional opportunity of leasing land to build their own facilities. The TNE model was expanded to other free zones as well, with higher education institutions emerging in other free zones across Dubai including the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Dubai Health Care City (DHCC) and Dubai Silicon Oasis (DSO). The growth of providers in the free zones increased access to higher education for the expatriate and local community and simultaneously addressed the need for a talented workforce to support Dubai's economic diversification process. By 2017, 39 higher education institutions were registered in free zones with just over 30,000 students (KHDA 2017).

The expansion of the TNE model prompted the need for better regulation of the sector. In 2007, the Dubai government established an education agency tasked with the regulation of private education in the Emirate of Dubai. This included the regulation of nurseries, schools (K-12), higher education and training and professional development. KHDA was also given responsibility for the licensing and quality assurance of all higher education institutions located in Dubai's free zones (KHDA 2017). In 2008, KHDA setup the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB), a new quality assurance Board comprising of international members from eleven different countries, to provide international advice and oversee the quality of international campuses in

Dubai's free zones (UQAIB 2017). In 2011, new legislation was passed in the form of Executive Council Resolution 21 (2011), specifically in relation to higher education institutions located in the free zones. The legislation formally gave KHDA, the power to certify or attest degrees and provided recognition of these qualifications in the Emirate of Dubai (KHDA 2017).

The establishment of infrastructure through the free zones, the growth in number of foreign institutions and students and the various regulatory measures implemented have resulted in significant growth of the Dubai TNE model over the last 15 years. Dubai, currently hosts 34 international branch campuses, the highest number in a single location in the world (KHDA 2017). This growth has also shifted Dubai's strategy in higher education from that of increasing access and retaining talent towards establishing Dubai as an international hub for the higher education, with an emphasis on attracting international students from the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

International Branch Campuses

Even though IBCs are often thought to be a recent phenomenon, they have existed since the early 1920s when a branch of the Parsons Fashion School was established in Paris (Lane et al. 2014). The most significant growth took place in the 1990s with nearly 40 IBCs springing up in countries including Japan, China, Singapore, France, Spain, UAE and Qatar (Garrett et al. 2016). The number of IBCs doubled from 82 in 2006 to 162 in 2009 (McBurnie and Ziguras 2011). By 2015, there were 249 IBCs reported (Garrett et al. 2016). IBCs can be very different in terms of their characteristics and tend to differ in size, number of programmes, faculty models and ownership models (Wilkins 2010).

With the growth in the number of IBCs globally, a lot of research has been carried out into the rationales or motivation as well as the challenges of such models, which are often categorised into 'political', 'academic', 'social' and 'cultural' (Knight 1997). The rationales and challenges also tend to differ among different stakeholder groups (Qiang 2003). The key rationales from a host country perspective include increasing access to

meet local demand, reducing the outflow of students; diversification of programme offering, and increasing competitiveness of local institutions (Chan 2011; British Council 2014; Lane and Kinser 2011). The rationales for providers tend to focus on student and staff exchanges, research development, economic opportunities and enhancement of status or reputation (Lane and Kinser 2013; Garrett et al. 2016).

Various scholars have also covered the key challenges with IBCs and TNE models. From a host country perspective challenges include recognition of qualifications; contextualisation of curriculum, and contribution towards national objectives (Robertson et al. 2002). For institutions some of the challenges highlighted include regulatory issues, resource management, adapting to cultural and social settings, and financial and reputational risk (British Council 2014).

However, there is limited research into the benefits or impact yielded by TNE globally and nationally. Most of the current research focusses on potential benefits. These include academic benefits of access and diversification, the economic benefit of additional revenue, the human resource benefit of building a skilled workforce, the cultural benefits of engaging with different countries and the reputational benefit to host countries (Lane 2011). Benefits to providers are generally focussed around the economic incentives of expansion into new markets, creation of partnerships and the academic benefits of student and faculty mobility (McBurine and Ziguras 2011). The Dubai TNE model has operated for over 15 years and this presented an opportunity to better understand some of the realised benefits from the TNE model and its overall impact.

Methodology

Using qualitative research methods, an embedded single case study design has been utilised. Although typical case studies focus on an institution (case) or a group of institutions (cases) this case study focuses on the system or model of TNE in Dubai.

By adopting Knight's (1997) approach to rationales for internationalisation in higher education and Qiang's (2003) view that these rationales differed between different stakeholder groups, an adapted framework was

developed to assess the benefits of TNE in four areas: academic, social, political/regulatory and economic. This was done from the perspective of two stakeholder groups, government planners of the host country, and international providers that have set up IBCs in the host country.

Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with participants from both stakeholder groups (government planners and higher education providers). A sample was selected from each stakeholder group to ensure fair representation for each group. For the government stakeholder group, organisations were selected to cover three key groups including the regulatory authority, the free zone authorities as well as policy makers in government. A total of seven interviews were conducted for the government stakeholder group. For the institutional group, the sample was selected based on the size of the institution, the level of degrees awarded, the location of the home campus and the type of faculty model used in Dubai. This was done to ensure that different types of IBCs were included in the study. A total of 12 interviews were conducted across eight institutions for the institutional stakeholder group.

All participants were senior members at their organisations including Academic Presidents and senior management staff. Two separate interview schedules were prepared, one for each group, and shared with the participants in advance. One of the sections within the interview schedules focused on the impact or benefits of TNE in Dubai. Prior permission was obtained from all participants to record the interviews and names of the organisations and individuals were anonymized for confidentiality.

The interviews were supported by documentary analysis of relevant reports that were available. For the government stakeholder group, reports reviewed included guides, manuals, strategic documents and an external review report conducted by the government. For the institutional stakeholder group, the documentary analysis covered strategic documents and other information available on the institutional websites.

The limitations of the study include its scope, as this only focusses on one model of higher education in the Dubai context. There are other models that are not included, such as the federal system. The study also covers a sample of the two stakeholder groups and does not consider other important stakeholders such as students or investors.

The Impacts of TNE in Dubai

This section presents the impacts of transnational education in Dubai on the host city. Participants were asked questions about the impacts in Dubai over the last 15 years and the findings are presented under four themes: economic, academic, political/regulatory, and social impacts.

From an economic perspective, the most significant benefit from TNE was the 'contribution to the economy'. The contribution to the economy is evident through the growth in the model in terms of the number of institutions and students. Over 30,000 students are enrolled at the 34 IBCs located in the free zones. The free zone model has a clear economic objective, *'the development of infrastructure, attracting branch campuses and students, all have commercial components to it with economic expectations'*. According to one of the government respondents *'Dubai has been able to attract a sizeable number of international institutions offering hundreds of programmes to people who live in Dubai or the region'*. This economic impact is both direct, through revenue generated from rental income and licensing fees collected by the free zone authorities but also from all the related expenditure such as student and faculty housing and living costs. The increase in the number of graduates available to go into the Dubai workforce is another benefit from this model according to one participant *'in 2008, there were around 4000 graduates in Dubai and now (2018), there are over 10,000'*. The TNE model is expressed as a *'win-win for Dubai, as it brings together people (students, faculty, staff) who spend money but are also creating an educated workforce for the future'*. It is also important to note the compounded impact from the education sector on other sectors in Dubai and the UAE. One participant used the example of Emirates airline to describe this compounded effect *'for Emirates airline, the economic impact is not just on the airline but on the whole city, including on transportation, hotels and entertainment'*, and that the same applies to higher education in Dubai. Participants from the institutional stakeholder group discussed 'growth and expansion' as a key economic benefit rather than generation of revenue, which is commonly cited as a key motivating factor for the establishment of branch campuses. Having a presence in Dubai allowed institutions to attract students from new

markets and grow enrolment. Several campuses also used their experiences in Dubai as a catalyst for further expansion and establishment of international campuses in other jurisdictions, *'Dubai is where it all started, had we not achieved success in Dubai, we would have not been able to replicate it in other places'*. Institutions also felt that having a campus in Dubai supported economic risk management. One campus expressed that growing challenges faced in its home country around reduced public funding, changes in visa regulations and increased tuition fees made it important to diversify its portfolio and reduce risk through its TNE activity.

In discussing the academic impact with participants of the study, the prominent feature was the fulfilment of the institution's 'internationalisation' objectives. Having a branch campus in Dubai provided the opportunity for student and staff mobility, internationalisation of curriculum and collaborative research. According to a participant from an Indian higher education institution, *'faculty members often come and teach at the Dubai campus as well and they can use these experiences when they are back at the parent campus'*. Even campuses that used the fly-in-fly out model, where faculty from the home campus would travel to Dubai, deliver classes and fly back, felt that there was a positive impact and that *'it resulted in a richer experience for faculty members'*. A participant from a UK campus, provided an example of internationalisation of curriculum, *'one of the courses is contracts, and the contracts in Dubai are more international in comparison to contracts in the UK and our students in the UK are also expecting internationally relevant curriculum'*. Another example was provided for a post-graduate programme in tourism, whereby faculty in Dubai had suggested curriculum and assessment changes based on the Dubai context as they felt that those were more *'current and relevant'*. The branch campus model in Dubai also enabled greater control over the student experiences offered by an institution as compared to other forms of TNE, which for some institutions was a high priority and part of strategic plan of the parent institution, *'to create a vibrant student experience that promotes wellbeing and builds a sense of belonging and commitment'*. Participants also discussed the opportunities to adopt best practices from other institutions located within the free zones as an important academic benefit. The creation of a *'Research Steering Committee'* was cited as an example of collaboration and sharing of best practices. This committee

involves campuses from across the free zones in Dubai and has created a platform for institutions to discuss ideas and explore collaborative research opportunities. From the host city's perspective, the TNE model had supported the academic 'diversification of programmes through the addition of programmes in disciplines such as engineering, media, design and law, which were addressing strategic priorities of the country.

Some of the social benefits highlighted include the 'access to higher education', 'engagement with local industry' and 'diversity'. Through the TNE model, Dubai has provided access and choice of higher education programmes to nearly 30,000 students. This was considered an important social benefit of the TNE model. A lot of these students would have left Dubai if not for these opportunities resulting in a loss of talent. The model has allowed retention of students and is also producing graduates in priority areas for the city and country. One example presented was in the field of construction, where once participant expressed their views, *'we have graduated hundreds of construction managers, quantity surveyors and engineers that are all working in this region'*. Another benefit discussed was the opportunity to engage with local industry either through academic partnerships or collaborative efforts to address social priorities such as Emiratisation. Some campuses also felt that having a branch in Dubai also resulted in a very diverse nationality mix across the broader institution increasing socio-cultural awareness. Due to the transnational nature of Dubai and the presence of expatriates from all over the world, Dubai gave institutions the opportunity to develop as truly international organisations through their programmes, student populations and market engagement. According to one institution, the Dubai campus enabled them to significantly diversify their faculty profile by attracting international faculty to work in Dubai. Finally, the opportunity for cultural and social exchange was also highlighted, *'Universities would not have had the chance to learn about the region, the culture and the local context'* in the absence of the TNE model. Institutions were also able to build strong alumni networks in the region.

Participants were also asked about political or regulatory benefits realised through the TNE model in Dubai. One participant felt that lessons learnt over the years had resulted in well-developed regulatory process that strengthened the sector overall. *'Rigorous standards and reviews of*

all applications have allowed the government to be more selective about which institutions can establish in Dubai'. This has enhanced Dubai's reputation as an international hub for higher education and has enabled Dubai to attract better quality and higher ranked institutions. The flexibility of the regulatory and quality assurance model was also considered an important achievement in the quality assurance community, '*creating a model where the quality assurance is carried out for institutions across 12 systems is something Dubai should be proud of*'. This success in the quality assurance was also attributed to the international nature of the sector, allowing the regulator to learn from different systems and adopt best practices. It also enabled opportunities for collaboration with other international regulatory bodies and quality assurance agencies. One participant discussed the value of the Quality Beyond Boundaries Group (QBBG), a network of agencies that was established by Dubai to promote collaboration and cooperation related to TNE activity. Providers also felt there was a reputational benefit of having a presence in Dubai.

Conclusions

The impact of the TNE model in Dubai is evident through the growth in the number of institutions, programmes, and students in the last 15 years. As with motivations and challenges, the benefits differ for each stakeholder group. From a host country perspective, the evolution of the model, regulatory systems and processes has resulted in Dubai becoming a well-established and attractive hub for both campuses and students. This has positive economic, academic, social and regulatory implications. It has enabled a diverse programme offering, attracted highly ranked institutions and provided talent for the workforce. The providers on the other hand have seen the realisation of their internationalisation objectives by reaching out to new markets, improving student and faculty mobility and curriculum. It has also created new collaborative opportunities and supported brand development and expansion.

The TNE model has always had its critics; there are those opposed to the commodification of higher education and others have concerns about the quality of branch campuses (Wilkins 2010). These concerns are often

linked to the revenue generation aspect of TNE, which stems from a view that education should not be a tradable commodity (Stella 2006), and a risk of lower academic standards or poor quality arising from the tension between academic and commercial expectations (McBurnie 2008).

The Dubai case demonstrates that if the right environment is created, TNE can have positive impacts for both the host country and providers. There are several pieces of the Dubai TNE puzzle that have enabled this positive impact including the development of hard infrastructure through the free zones, the implementation of regulatory and quality systems that support TNE, diversity of international campuses, and investment from the private sector. These have allowed institutions to come and thrive whilst also contributing to the local community and the country's national priorities.

Despite the positive impact seen so far, the Dubai TNE market is still in its infancy and there are many opportunities for further growth and development, especially through new models of TNE such as online education, and other partnership approaches such as joint and dual arrangements. Another opportunity that has not been tapped into yet is collaboration between the various international institutions located in Dubai or collaboration between local and international institutions in Dubai. For example, an area for exploration is collaboration between campuses through joint programmes and staff and student exchanges. Research is another significant area where further impact can be seen as more campuses begin to offer doctoral programmes and develop a research culture on campus.

Dubai has been successful in creating a higher education sector with strong foundations in terms of regulations, infrastructure, institutions and student population. Given this, Dubai is well positioned to fulfil its aspiration of becoming a global hub for education and TNE is at the very heart of this ambition.

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