POLICY PAPER

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI
FOUNDATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper addresses the question of how well quality assurance systems support the quality of international branch campuses (IBCs) in the United Arab Emirates. There are different systems of quality assurance for IBCs in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras Al Khaimah, and a federal system of accreditation that is unevenly utilized across the emirates. Furthermore, the UAE's 38 IBCs hail from 13 countries, each with its own procedures for regulating branch campus quality[1]. This complexity results in a segmented quality assurance environment with different quality assurance models applied to the UAE's branch campuses.

This qualitative study is based on interviews with 47 IBC stakeholders conducted in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras Al Khaimah from January to April 2012. The paper begins with an overview of the dimensions of quality in higher education and a description of how the UAE's current quality assurance systems approach quality assurance. The paper then presents the study's findings on stakeholders' perceptions of IBC quality assurance in the UAE. Finally, recommendations aimed at improving the alignment between quality assurance and stakeholders' expectations for IBC quality are presented.

International Branch Campus Quality in a Segmented Quality Assurance Environment

Christine A. Farrugia, *State University of New York at Albany*

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) currently hosts 38 international branch campuses (IBCs) located in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras Al Khaimah. While there is a process for quality assurance at the federal level, each emirate takes its own approach to quality assurance of its IBCs (see ADEC, 2009; Swan, 2010; 2011; UQAIB, 2009). Most of the UAE's IBCs come from India, the UK, and Australia, but several other countries are represented as well, including the US, Iran, Pakistan, and France (CBERT, 2012; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012). The variety of IBC origins means that there is a wide array of internal and home country quality assurance processes operating within the UAE's IBCs. The multiplicity of quality assurance systems has created a segmented quality assurance environment for the UAE's IBCs with varying levels of oversight and scrutiny of IBC quality.

Around the world, countries have sought to assure academic quality of IBCs through a variety of means, including quality audit, best practices, licensing, and regulation (Gallagher, 2010; Rawazik & Carroll, 2009). In the UAE, federal regulations require higher education institutions to be licensed and accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), but the emirates of Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah have adopted free zone regulations that allow the establishment of IBCs without meeting the federal requirements for accreditation (Swan, 2010). In 2008, Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) began its own quality review process for IBCs operating in Dubai free zones (Lane, 2010). Ras Al Khaimah currently has no locally-based quality assurance system (Swan, 2010; 2011). Abu Dhabi is selective in which IBCs it allows to operate and requires them to receive CAA accreditation (ADEC, 2009; 2010; Schoepp, 2009).

This policy paper addresses the question of how well existing quality assurance processes support quality education in IBCs through an investigation of how IBC stakeholders in the UAE perceive the quality assurance processes. The paper begins with an overview of the dimensions of quality in higher education and a description of how the UAE's current quality assurance systems approach quality assurance. The paper then presents the study's findings on stakeholders' perceptions of

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[1] This count is based on the author's analysis of comprehensive listings of international branch campuses produced by the Cross-Border Education Research Team (CBERT) (2012) and the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) (Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012). However, there are variations in the definition of IBCs and noted difficulty in coming to agreement on a universal definition (see Cox, 2012; Kinser & Lane, 2012; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012).

IBC quality assurance. Finally, recommendations are presented aimed at improving the alignment between IBC quality assurance and stakeholders' expectations for IBC quality.

What Kind of Quality Are We Assuring?

The concept of quality higher education has many dimensions. Quality in higher education can refer to excellence, value, consistency, meeting needs and expectations, fitness of purpose, fitness for purpose, or transformation of students and communities (Harvey & Green, 1993; Reeves & Bednar, 1994). No one quality assurance system can address all aspects of quality, so choices are made, implicitly or explicitly, about what kinds of quality are to be assessed. Establishing quality indicators involves preferring certain conceptions of quality over others, with each conception of quality supported by different stakeholders who share certain conventions and values (Morley, 2003; Skolnick, 2010; Telford & Masson, 2005). While quality education is widely considered a desirable goal, the wide variety of stakeholders in higher education means that there are different understandings of what it means to be a quality program (Hopper, 2007).

In the cross-border higher education sector, equivalency is one of the dominant principles guiding quality assurance (Lim, 208). An equivalency model involves ensuring that a transnational program is equivalent to what is offered in the home country (Coleman, 2003; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Stella, 2006). However, some question the appropriateness of using an equivalency model because it limits the responsiveness of cross-border programs to the local context; quality may be better served by offering education that fits within the mission of the institution, meets the needs of learners in the host country, and results in a credential recognized by both host and home countries (Stella, 2006).

Segmented Quality Assurance Systems

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates that balances emirate-level autonomy with a federal government structure. Federal regulations dictate that higher education institutions must be licensed and receive program accreditation by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), but each emirate retains the right to regulate higher education within its borders. This has created a segmented higher education system with multiple systems of quality assurance across the

emirates, creating different levels of scrutiny of IBCs across the country (Lane, 2010).

Abu Dhabi – The Abu Dhabi government controls quality by selectively and strategically inviting high reputation universities to establish IBCs to fulfill specific educational objectives (Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), 2010; Schoepp, 2009). For example, INSEAD's role is to provide business education, New York University offers liberal arts education and research, and the Sorbonne supports cultural and museum development. IBCs operating in Abu Dhabi receive federal accreditation through the CAA (ADEC, 2009).

Dubai – Dubai's educational free zones allow universities to operate without meeting federal accreditation requirements. Initially there was no locally-based quality assurance of Dubai's IBCs and this allowed a number of low quality institutions to operate (Bardsley, 2010). In response to quality concerns, the KHDA established the Universities Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) to ensure that the branch campus programs offered in the IBC are equivalent to those of the home campus (Lane, 2010; UQAIB, 2009). Some IBCs operating under KHDA rules elect to pursue CAA accreditation, which is then accepted by KHDA without having to undergo UQAIB review (UQAIB, 2009).

Ras Al Khaimah – Similar to Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah's free zone regulations allow IBCs to operate without CAA accreditation. The model in the emirate is a free market model to welcome in any universities who would like to come and provide education to residents. There is currently no emirate-based quality assurance review of IBCs (Swan, 2010; 2011).

Aim and Methods

The purpose of this study is to understand how well quality assurance systems support IBC quality. The study investigates how stakeholders view the effectiveness and usefulness of the quality assurance systems that are in place. The data for this qualitative study are drawn from interviews with 47 higher education stakeholders conducted in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras Al Khaimah between January and April 2012. Study participants are drawn from international branch campuses and government agencies and include administrators, faculty, and students. The study participants represent 16 of the UAE's 38 international branch campuses, as well as government agencies.

Conditions Affecting IBC Quality

IBC quality is a function of both quality assurance processes and of the environment in which IBCs operate. In the UAE, most IBCs are reliant on student tuition to provide operating funds; most IBCs do not have government funding from local governments or home country governments. Some stakeholders perceive that IBCs do not invest enough in education and the creation of a full university experience because they are too dependent on market mechanisms for funding. As one stakeholder states,

> "Branch campuses, they are here to make money. They don't believe in education. Because if they believed in institutions as foreign campuses they would invest in it... As long [as the IBC is] making money, the main campus is taking the money. They are not happy to bring back the money internally and invest in maybe growing programs and open a medical school or fund research. So I can see branch campuses will always be branch campuses. They will never grow to a level of a real institution."

This study participant sees that the market model of higher education limits the range of academic programs offered by IBCs. Some stakeholders perceive that the need to generate revenue pressures IBCs to admit less prepared students than on the university's home campus. Stakeholders attribute some IBC closures to an unwillingness to lower admission standards or institute remedial foundation programs. This points to a perception that there is an inverse relationship between IBC student quality and enrollment numbers. However, a few IBCs receive funding from government sources which reduces their dependence on tuition. Stakeholders perceive that because sponsored universities are less dependent on the student market, they are able to invest more in education and be more selective about the students they admit. Sponsored IBCs are characterized as being more strongly oriented towards quality.

Study participants indicate that IBCs educate different types of students than on their home campuses. The perception is that the education of many students in the UAE's IBCs does not prepare them for Western-style education. Many stakeholders reference the differences in learning styles of students coming from different models of secondary education, including American, British, Indian, and Emirati. Students from non-Western style secondary schools are described as being familiar with rote learning styles. One study participant describes the skills of students educated

in an American system as being strong in "critical thinking or language skills, English language skills because they've come through twelve years, eight, nine, ten years of the American system... Versus a student who graduates from an Indian system or from the UAE system... they are not taught the same skill set, so when they try to enter into an American system it is going to be a mismatch." One IBC student previously educated in the UK observes,

> "The main difference in the classroom... between the university here and the university in Britain is the lack of critical thinking or being able to think for yourselves... The lecturer [in the IBC] talked about some things, and then there were questions asked, and [other students] were just trying to recite word for word what was being told. They're not able to take the information and formulate their own critical appraisal of it as well."

Some stakeholders identify the lack of a sorting mechanism as detracting from IBC quality. Other than English proficiency exams, most IBCs do not use testing for admission or class placement. One faculty member describes it as there being, "no standard... Here there is not that filtration. And this is a problem. You cannot judge [one student's preparation against another]."

Many students and faculty cite small institution size as providing an incomplete collegiate experience. Low entry barriers in the free zones of Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah make it relative easy for universities to open small campuses, some of which offer one or two programs out of a suite of offices. "Basically what you need is a couple of rooms, one secretary, and that's it. And you start teaching." Even large IBCs do not offer the same experience as the home campus. Many stakeholders associate quality higher education with a full collegiate experience. One IBC faculty member states,

> "I always tell my students... if you need to do a PhD program, pack your stuff and leave. Go to an institution that gives you the experience of higher-level education. Because all higher-level education is about the experience. It's not about the information. It's not about the knowledge because... it's not about only what I get from the book... A higher education, [like at Cambridge or Harvard], that experience itself is totally different. You will never be able to get it here. Even at small universities [abroad] you can find that experience. But you cannot find it here."

IBC students also feel that they are not getting a full university experience, but most do not associate the limited experience with a deficiency in academic quality. At one IBC in Dubai, several undergraduate students indicate that while their professors are very good, there are not enough of them. Some students feel like they are not getting a full university experience because every IBC is independently operated and there is not a feeling of being a comprehensive university. As one student states, "We have the feeling of going into an office rather than a university."

Need for IBC Quality Assurance

There is widespread agreement among stakeholders that locally based quality assurance is necessary to safeguard the quality of education offered in the UAE's branch campuses. Local quality assurance in the importing region is important because there is a "continuum of quality" in the programs available in exporting countries, meaning that affiliation with a foreign university is not in itself a guarantee of a quality program in the IBC. As one stakeholder describes,

> "Some institutions, they come here raising a foreign flag, imagining themselves that they are better. And because they have this flag, they may think that whatever they do would be accepted. [But] some of them come with extremely poor quality."

Variations in the IBCs' home country quality assurance also contributes to the need for local quality assurance. Some stakeholders describe home country quality assurance of IBCs as insufficient. One stakeholder critiques American accreditors for "let[ting] these institutions go abroad without checking on them." Likewise, British universities are viewed by some as not having enough controls because, "they are sort of self accredited because they are chartered by the Queen and they have the capacity to overview the programs." Quality assurance agencies in home countries are described as not delving deep enough into their overseas programs to do a decent job at assuring quality.

Several stakeholders express that receipt of local accreditation is an indicator that an IBC is high quality enough and stable enough that it will survive. One participant observes, "The number one thing that I've noticed living here for four years now is that accreditation is extremely critical. If you're a university that's not accredited, it could shut down, they will shut it down." Stability of IBC programs is perceived as important by stakeholders in all three emirates,

even among respondents that do not participate in accreditation or local quality review. One stakeholder describes the disadvantages of the streamlined procedures for establishing IBCs in the free zones:

> "When universities make the choice to set up a branch campus, they're not always done on a whole lot of research... They can very quickly come into this market without doing a lot of the thinking and the planning and all of the other things the CAA requires. They can make choices that aren't in their best interests... [If they went through] all of the CAA paperwork, they might come to the conclusion that maybe [they don't have a viable plan]. 'Now that we've done a full scale market analysis, maybe we should slow down and reconsider.'"

The overall perception is that the more rigorous the quality review required to establish an IBC, the more stable the IBC will be.

Commission for Academic Accreditation Not Flexibile Enough for IBCs

The CAA has a system of institutional licensure and program accreditation that applies to all non-federal higher education institutions outside the free zones. Many study participants portray CAA accreditation as a desirable thing even if they don't have the accreditation themselves. Local accreditation is time consuming and costly, but stakeholders see it as enhancing IBC quality because it indicates the universities are investing significantly in education.[2] One participant states, "The cost of running an accredited institution is higher than an unaccredited institution. You have to provide a lot of resources from student facilities to faculty offices, while in some non-accredited operating in the Free Zone, you have a great deal of flexibility." Another stakeholder describes accreditation as, "reassuring for all students who are here because they know that we have very strict criteria that they have to meet." Thus, stakeholders associate CAA accreditation with greater investment in resources and education.

While some IBCs operating in the free zones have elected to receive CAA accreditation, others have not. Despite the widely shared perception that accreditation promotes IBC quality, stakeholders see the CAA requirements as placing too many restrictions on branch campus programs. Many IBCs feel that CAA accreditation would require them to make changes that

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[2] Receiving CAA accreditation also opens an IBC up to a potential market of Emirati students because CAA accreditation is required to have degrees recognized for government employment.

would bring them too far out of alignment with their home campuses. As one stakeholder describes, "We want to have a curriculum that's kind of contextual in a global situation, but we don't want to be dictated about what to teach." Another participant states that IBCs, "want to stay within the rules and the curriculum and the hiring [of their home campus]." CAA requirements for Arabic and Islamic studies are cited as problematic by some IBCs who desire CAA accreditation. Others cite restrictions on student admission and academic progress rules, and the ability to hire adjunct faculty.

Study participants note that the CAA process is rigorous and thorough, but that it is based on a US accreditation model that is not always an appropriate fit for IBCs from other countries. One recurring issue is the requirement that universities offer four year degrees. In the UK and Australia the norm for university education is three years, so the additional year is viewed as undesirable. Adding an extra year may place some IBCs at a competitive disadvantage compared to IBCs offering the same 3 year degree as at their home campus. In the words of one participant, "That's an extra year that students don't want to spend and it's extra money that they don't want to spend."

Many stakeholders note difficulties in balancing the accreditation requirements of the CAA and those of their home countries. In discussing such conflicts, one stakeholder says, "There is no choice. The CAA comes first because that's where the license comes from." However, many others cite the maintenance of home country accreditation as a primary concern. One faculty member describes the difficulty in benchmarking IBC programs internationally for CAA accreditation. He states,

> "Because you already have a structure of a program through the main campus... you have to try to manipulate all the outcomes of the benchmarking and the market study in a way to tell [the CAA] look, the structure of the program that we are adopting, with some modification... fits with the international standard... That does not give flexibility for programs to grow or to be modified according to market requirement. So you cannot modify programs easily."

This faculty member finds that the need to satisfy the quality assurance requirements of many different actors limits the ability of the IBC program to meet local education needs.

Many stakeholders discuss conflicts between the quality assurance systems within the UAE, namely the CAA and Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). Currently the KHDA accepts CAA accreditation, but the reverse is not true. Issues such as federal recognition of free zone degrees, the ability to enroll graduates from free zone universities into CAA-accredited programs, and sharing of information across agencies are cited as concerns. Stakeholders desire greater harmonization and cooperation across systems to ease duplication of effort and to develop a more unified system of quality assurance across the country. One stakeholder expresses his support for greater harmonization: "It would be desirable... to link the systems together in a more sensible way. Each one does a job, so it is a matter of geography, nothing else. I can do Dubai. You can do Abu Dhabi."

Equivalency in Quality Assurance

The principal of equivalency or comparability is the most prevalent logic of quality assurance for IBCs in the UAE. Many participants describe this model positively because affiliation with an overseas university is seen as contributing to university quality. As one stakeholder describes, "[The international affiliation] is good because it allows you to assure your students and the community that you are not just doing something locally here. You have an international base." However, some study participants critique the equivalency model as one that permits low quality programs to establish themselves in the country. One participant states, "[In] American universities we know that there is a continuum of quality in the degrees they offer. Even Harvard has very lousy programs also... Or this other British university with a very fancy name that actually is [low ranked] in Britain." Thus, international affiliation suggests quality in the minds of students and parents, but does not guarantee quality IBC programs.

IBCs' internal quality assurance procedures are viewed as necessary to guarantee the quality of IBC offerings and to safeguard the reputation of the home campus, but several stakeholders express concerns about the lack of flexibility that IBCs and their faculty have to adapt curricula and program offerings to local conditions in the UAE.

> "[At] a branch campus, you don't come up with your own programs. You're not allowed to venture out. You teach a subset of what your home campus teaches... which is slightly challenging because sometimes you're in two different markets and market stages of programs. So it's a bit restricting."

Maintaining equivalency of academic programs is a particular concern for home campuses because they

need to maintain their accreditations in the home country or with programmatic accreditors like the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) for engineering and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) for business. One participant describes her IBC's motivation for maintaining the accreditation of programs on the home campus: "[Program accreditations] rely on the quality of students that we have, the curriculum, the faculty we hire. So we have to make sure that we match the standards at [the home campus]."

All IBCs in the study are aware of the need to adapt their curricula to local conditions. Some IBCs allow a certain percentage of their course syllabi to be adapted to local contexts. Others utilize case studies, guest speakers, conferences, and extracurricular activities, but faculty and students frequently remark that there is not enough localization of curricula. This may not be a problem for some subjects because "regardless of where you teach, computer programming is still computer programming. It doesn't have any local flavor." But in most areas, greater localization of curricula is seen as a desirable goal. One participant's view is that, "You can't do plug and play... It doesn't work, no matter how good your program is, how new your systems are, plug and play will not work... you have to bring in some local influence cultural nuance to make sure it fits within the context." Another study participant notes, "If you teach an MBA program, shouldn't you have some local input in terms of rules, regulations, character, how you do business, and so on?" The equivalency model is also perceived as a constraint by some faculty teaching in IBCs. The ability to adapt curricula can vary by the institution. At some universities, "you deliver exactly what has been offered from there. So there's even a template and you just do it." Another professor remarks,

> "As for [this IBC], I've never had the experience before, if you're a qualified professor and you've been hired based on your qualifications, anybody can quality audit you. In major institutions nobody audits your off time, and nobody audits your exams, and nobody audits the way you lecture... when you start doing a lot of [evaluation], you're limiting the flexibility of the professor in learning general tasks... You start to have a lot of constraints on academics."

Several faculty members feel that maintaining equivalency with the home campus limits their ability to teach locally relevant material or to design locally based programs and limits the faculty autonomy they have experienced in other countries.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at modifying existing quality assurance in the UAE's IBCs to bring quality assurance in line with what stakeholders identify as important factors for IBC quality.

1. Harmonize quality assurance systems across the UAE.

Many IBCs operating in the free zones perceive a value in CAA accreditation, but find the accreditation process too restricting and not flexible enough to meet their needs for equivalency with the home campus. Harmonizing the quality assurance systems of the CAA and KHDA would allow IBCs to balance local accreditation with home campus equivalency and would encourage more IBCs to participate in the CAA process.

2. Exporting countries should engage in more active quality assurance of their IBCs.

Quality assurance agencies in exporting countries should engage in rigorous review of the programs that their institutions offer abroad. Such review should include site visits to overseas programs to verify that the delivery of programs at the international site matches what is on paper and meets the criteria for home country accreditation.

3. Allow greater flexibility to adapt curricula to serve to local educational needs.

Quality assurance systems should balance a need for equivalency with the IBC's home campus with the flexibility to adapt programs to suit the local conditions in the UAE. IBC faculty should be given greater autonomy in designing course syllabi and support for localizing course materials. IBCs and their parent universities should engage in initiatives to localize programs and course syllabi in a more robust way.

4. Institute locally-based quality assurance systems for all IBCs.

There is widespread agreement that local quality assurance systems are valuable tools to support the quality of education offered in IBCs and are necessary safeguards against uneven or insufficient internal quality assurance in IBCs. Currently, there are quality assurance systems in place for IBCs in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, but not in Ras Al Khaimah. To support the quality of its branch campuses, Ras Al Khaimah should take steps to create a system of quality review to serve as an external monitor of IBC programs.

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Christine A. Farrugia was a Visiting Scholar at the Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research and is currently pursuing her doctoral studies at State University of New York at Albany.

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