

# **International branch campuses: The influences of country of origin and campus environment on students' institution choices and satisfaction**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Based on the first ratings of international branch campuses (IBCs) by Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), which are further supported by findings in the literature, we investigated students' institution choices and satisfaction focusing on country of origin and campus environment as possible key influences. The study adopts an inductive qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with 53 IBC students in Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We found that an IBC's country of origin influences both students' institution choices and students' overall satisfaction with their institution. Although we also found that campus servicescape and facilities impact upon students' institution choices and satisfaction, these were secondary when compared to education-related factors. We conclude that while a favourable campus servicescape may contribute less to overall student satisfaction compared to other factors, a campus environment with poor or inadequate facilities and equipment may result in student dissatisfaction.

## **KEYWORDS**

Transnational education; international branch campuses; country of origin; servicescape; physical environment; university facilities

## **Introduction**

At the start of 2023, 333 international branch campuses (IBCs) were operating globally (C-BERT, 2023). These campuses operate in a host country under the name of a foreign institution, which, at least in part, owns the branch campus and assumes some degree of responsibility for its overall strategy and quality assurance (Wilkins & Rumbley, 2018). Some researchers have suggested that IBCs do not offer students the same experience they would receive at the institution's main 'home' campus, in terms of curriculum breadth; academic staff and student quality; learning resources; and physical environment (Altbach, 2010; Bhuian, 2016; Merola et al., 2022; Steele & Douglas, 2021). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the regulatory authorities have closed several branch campuses because of low academic standards and/or committing fundamental violations of the academic accreditation standards.

However, other studies have found that IBC students are largely satisfied with their academic and overall student experiences (e.g., Ahmad, 2015; Pieper & Beall, 2014; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012a). These contradictory findings result in high school teachers, careers advisors, and employers having diverse opinions about the quality of IBCs, which may leave students and parents unsure about the wisdom of enrolling at these institutions.

Nowadays, students and parents often rely on global rankings to obtain information on institution quality. Such rankings are embedded in popular discourse and they are used not only by students and parents, but also by policy makers, employers, and the decision-makers responsible for university strategy (Hazelkorn, 2014). However, IBCs are not included in the most popular global rankings, even though the largest campuses are now bigger than many of the domestic institutions that are included in such rankings. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) is responsible for the growth and quality of private education in the Emirate of Dubai. In July 2019, the KHDA published its first ratings for 17 IBCs based on eight quality indicators that included teaching, research, program strength, facilities and internationalisation (KHDA, 2019). These indicators were used to generate an overall rating score for each institution, where 5 was the highest and 1 the lowest.

All of the three institutions that were awarded '5 stars' were British institutions, whereas the institutions receiving 1 or 2 stars were from Pakistan, Iran and France. Of the eleven institutions that were awarded one of the top two ratings (4 or 5 stars), five could be classified as large, multi-disciplinary institutions that possessed a purpose-built campus, which had a library, computer labs, dining facilities, social and leisure spaces, and, in some cases, student housing. In contrast, all of the three lowest rated institutions (rated 1 or 2 stars) could be classified as small operations, which offered only a narrow range of degree programs (maximum four subjects) in small premises with limited facilities, located on a shared 'hub' campus.

Thus, country of origin and campus environment appear to be two key factors that may influence KHDA's IBC rating scores. Their relevance to the KHDA classifications, together with support from the literature, provides a rationale for focusing on these factors as influences on students' institution choices and satisfaction. In the next section, the study's purpose and propositions are provided, as well as the research questions. Following this, key literature on country of origin, country image and campus servicescape is discussed. Then, details of the study's method is provided before the findings are presented. Finally, the discussion and conclusion summarise and analyse the main findings, and the implications for institutions are explained.

### **Study purpose and propositions**

The student choice and satisfaction literatures are rich. However, much of the student choice literature is concerned with domestic students selecting domestic institutions (e.g., Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Obermeit, 2012) or international students selecting countries rather than institutions (e.g., Wen & Hu, 2019; Yu, Liu, & Waller, 2023). Furthermore, many of the studies are conceptual in nature (e.g., Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007) or have quantitative research

designs (e.g., McManus, Haddock-Fraser, & Rands, 2017; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2006), so students are unable to explain or elaborate on their reasons for making particular choices.

The transnational student choice literature is a newer stream in the student choice literature. Again, many of the studies in this stream actually investigate country choice rather than institution choice (e.g., Ahmad, & Buchanan, 2017; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012b). A few studies undertaken in transnational settings are concerned with institution choice, but these do not focus on the concepts of interest in this research, i.e., home country image and campus environment (e.g., Li, 2020; Sim et al., 2020) and they adopt non-explanatory quantitative research designs (e.g. Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Hill & Sughnani, 2021). Some studies have a very specific focus. For example, Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022) investigated the effects of new, purpose built premises on transnational students' institution choices and satisfaction.

Similarly, most of the student satisfaction research is concerned with domestic and international students. Studies concerned specifically with campus environment and facilities have mostly been undertaken in domestic university settings (e.g., Hanssen, & Solvoll, 2015; Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018), while many of the studies undertaken in transnational settings have adopted non-explanatory quantitative research designs that do not consider in any detail the two concepts of interest in this study, namely home country image and campus environment (e.g., Ahmad, 2015; Merola et al., 2022; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013).

This research is not intended as a replication study to validate earlier studies; rather, it seeks to offer a possible explanation for the results of KHDA's first ratings of IBCs in the Emirate of Dubai, which was the first host country rating of international branch campuses globally. By adopting an inductive qualitative research design that focuses on home country image and campus environment, this study fills an important literature gap, and it offers explanations for IBC students' institution choices and levels of satisfaction.

Previous research has found that country image, personality and reputation may have strong influences on the destination choices of international students (Hendriana, Awang, & Yusof, 2021; Nghiêm-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020). A study undertaken by Herrero-Crespo, Gutiérrez, and Garcia-Salmones (2016) concluded that country image influences the perceived quality and awareness of the country's universities. In one of the few studies undertaken in a transnational education setting, Chee et al. (2016) found that an IBC from a developed country (the United Kingdom) was perceived by prospective students in Malaysia as having superior image, reputation and quality compared to an IBC from a developing country (India). Students often choose to study at an IBC because they want an educational experience that is comparable to what they would receive in the country where the institution is based (Smail & Silvera, 2018). Thus, we propose:

Proposition 1a: An IBC's country of origin influences a student's institution choice

An institution's country of origin may influence the institution's curriculum, teaching and learning styles, assessment practices, extra-curricular activities, cultural experiences, student involvement (e.g.,

through student councils), and academic staff-student relationships. Students may be satisfied with their IBC experience if their motivations for studying at an IBC are realised. For example, Fang and Wang (2014) found that Chinese students chose transnational education to obtain advanced foreign knowledge; experience foreign culture and teaching methods; improve foreign language competency; and develop intercultural skills.

When friends, relatives and employers perceive that a foreign institution is more prestigious and higher quality than the domestic alternatives, students may enjoy the admiration and esteem of others, as well as improved career prospects (Moufahim & Lim, 2015). Foreign institutions may increase student satisfaction by offering a range of cultural and sporting events and activities that are associated with everyday life in the institution's home country, as well as its values, e.g., freedom of expression (Wood, 2011). Hence:

Proposition 1b: An IBC's country of origin influences a student's overall satisfaction with the institution

Nowadays, higher education students worldwide perceive themselves as consumers and they demand a high quality teaching and learning experience in a functional and pleasant environment (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014). Campus size, design, facilities, and attractiveness may serve as cues that assist individuals in evaluating a campus environment. Several studies have indicated that the campus environment may influence students' attitudes and institution choices (e.g., Price et al., 2003; Reynolds, 2007; Winter & Chapleo, 2015). In one of the few studies undertaken in a transnational education setting, Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022) concluded that campus design, physical environment and facilities may have an influence on both students' institution choices and satisfaction. Students are often attracted to larger IBCs that are perceived as offering a superior experience, and they avoid small institutions that lack specialist learning resources, a dining hall, and facilities for sports, leisure and recreation (Wilkins, Hazzam, & Ireland, 2022). Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 2a: An IBC's campus environment influences a student's institution choice

Several studies have concluded that an institution's campus environment and facilities may influence levels of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction (e.g., Hanssen & Solvoll, 2015; Kärnä & Julin, 2015; Weerasinghe & Fernando, 2018; Wilkins, Hazzam, & Ireland, 2022). Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes (2006) argue that a high quality campus environment and facilities produce satisfaction by promoting academic life and student experience. While large IBCs may possess the scale and financial resources to offer a high quality student experience, small IBCs will struggle to offer an experience that is comparable with the home campus (Wilkins, 2020). Hence:

Proposition 2b: An IBC's campus environment influences a student's overall satisfaction with the institution

The purpose of this research is to assess the extent to which country of origin and campus environment impact upon IBC students' institution choices and levels of satisfaction with the institution. Specifically, the research addresses four research questions:

Research question 1: In what ways does an IBC's country of origin influence students' institution choices?

Research question 2: In what ways does an IBC's country of origin influence students' overall satisfaction with the institution?

Research question 3: In what ways does an IBC's campus environment influence students' institution choices?

Research question 4: In what ways does an IBC's campus environment influence students' overall satisfaction with the institution?

To answer these research questions, 53 undergraduate students enrolled at an IBC were interviewed using a semi-structured format.

## **Literature review**

### ***Country of origin and country image***

Marketing professionals have for several decades recognised the influences of country of origin and country image on consumers' product evaluations (Brodie & Benson-Rea, 2016). A country's image is an aggregation of the specific attributes that are attached to it, which may include its cultural identity, history, language, political climate, and economic, social and technological development. Country image is generally formed as a holistic impression – e.g., favourable or unfavourable – which result from a mix of sensory and cognitive images (Nghiem-Phú & Nguyễn, 2020). Individuals use country image as an extensive cue to infer the potential attributes and benefits of a product or service (Chee et al., 2016). When a country's image is perceived as attractive, an individual is more likely to purchase products or services from that country. Students may rely on country of origin for cues because higher education is a credence service, where quality and value are difficult to determine before, and even after service delivery is experienced (Mourad, Ennew, & Kortam, 2011).

Individuals consider country image in both macro and micro contexts. At the macro level, individuals may consider economic development, technological advancement and social development, including things such as levels of literacy and participation in higher education, while at the micro level the individual seeks and organises information to help them assess a specific product or service (Hamzaoui-Essoussi, Merunka, & Bartikowski, 2011). The developed Western countries have macro level characteristics that promote them as providers of higher education, e.g., high levels of economic development and technological innovation; well-developed higher education systems with a long

history; high literacy and tertiary education participation rates; as well as having English as a native or widely used language. Global university rankings and the popular 'world-class' discourse promote the idea that universities in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) are generally higher quality than their international counterparts (Siltaoja, Juusola, & Kivijärvi, 2019).

Conversely, in a study of three Chinese IBCs in South East Asia, He and Wilkins (2019) concluded that China is able to leverage its soft power to assist and promote the export of higher education. Many students in South East Asia perceive China's country image as favourable and as a result choose to study at Chinese IBCs. More specifically, another study undertaken by Nghiê-m-Phú and Nguyễn (2020) found that country image positively influences institution image, self-image and intention to study in the target country. A person's self-image may be regarded as the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings about him or herself, and studying at an IBC may deliver certain benefits to a person's self-image, e.g., through the acquisition of academic knowledge, socio-economic status, global citizen status, and the development of foreign language competency (Aresi et al., 2018).

### ***Campus servicescape and facilities***

In service organisations, the physical environment may strongly influence the organisational image created by an individual, as well as their subsequent behaviours towards the organisation (Kandampully, Bilgihan, & Amer, 2023). The contemporary understanding of the role of the physical environment in influencing an individual's attitudes and behaviours in service settings is generally attributable to Bitner's (1992) servicescape concept. Bitner (1992) regards servicescape as the environment that facilitates service delivery, which influences consumers' attitudes, behaviours and satisfaction through the activation of internal cognitive, emotional and physiological responses in the individual. She identified three distinct physical factors – namely ambient conditions (such as lighting and sound/noise), spatial layout and functionality (such as room layouts, furniture and equipment), and signs, symbols and artifacts – but argues that individuals generally assess an environment holistically.

Servicescape is often conceptualised as having two dimensions, namely substantive staging and communicative staging (Chang, 2016). Substantive staging refers to the functional and mechanical clues that enable an individual to assess an environment, such as architectural design, interior design, layout and equipment. The communicative staging is concerned with how the service environment is presented and interpreted. Servicescape meanings may be transferred from the service provider to the consumer through customer-focused employees and high quality service provision. Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model provides a theoretical explanation for individual responses to servicescape stimuli. According to the model, individuals evaluate a servicescape based on the degree of emotional stimulation they receive from it, which in turn influences their future behaviours. Both substantive and communicative staging of servicescape may contribute to influencing the individual's emotional reactions.

A service provider's physical environment is rich in cues, which may assist an individual to make judgements about the provider's capabilities, performance and quality (Ezeh & Harris, 2007). Indeed, research has indicated that students may form a mental association between an attractive servicescape and the provision of high quality education (Wilkins, Hazzam, & Ireland, 2022). A modern, attractive, functional, and well-designed service environment may impress prospective students and encourage them to join the institution (Wilkins, Hazzam, & Ireland, 2022). Individuals may consider the quality of the teaching rooms; the availability and quality of specialist learning resources; sports, leisure and recreation facilities; retail and catering outlets; spaces for individual or group study; as well as the overall attractiveness and ambience of the institution's buildings and grounds (Reynolds, 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010). Research has indicated that campuses with extensive facilities for sports, leisure and recreation will likely enjoy higher ratings for student experience and satisfaction (Buckley & Lee, 2021). In summary, a physical environment that delivers pleasure is more likely to achieve student satisfaction (Wells & Daunt, 2016).

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

To answer our research questions, we used an inductive, exploratory qualitative research method involving semi-structured interviews with students who were studying at an IBC. Cresswell and Poth (2018) suggest that this approach may be effective to help us understand how individuals make sense of the world and their experiences in it. A convenience sampling approach was used to recruit self-selected students who had at least one term or semester of experience studying at an IBC. Informed by the literature, an interview guide was developed, to obtain sufficient rich data to enable a judgement on whether there is sufficient confirmatory data to support each of our four propositions.

In addition to our demographic questions, we asked 14 open questions, some of which had prompt or sub-questions. Examples of questions include, 'Did you visit the campus before enrolling at the university? What were your first impressions of the university and its campus?'; 'What were your original reasons for enrolling at this university? Have your expectations been met? Why/why not?'; 'To what extent do you believe that the your institution's physical campus has enhanced your general experience as a student?'; 'What particular features of your campus – the general environment and its facilities and resources – do you like and not like?'; 'How would you rate each of the following at your university: 1. Educational experience, 2. Social experience, 3. Sports/ leisure/ recreational experience, 4. Physiological needs, e.g., for food, housing, banking services, and shopping to satisfy everyday needs?'; 'To what extent does your institution's campus – the general environment and its facilities and resources – impact upon your overall satisfaction with the university?'

### ***Sample***

The study population is full-time undergraduate students studying at an IBC in Malaysia or the UAE, two countries that host particularly high numbers of IBCs. Analysing the student data from two different countries allows a degree of generalisation of the study's findings. However, it should be noted that this research is not concerned with country choice, but institution choice. So, intracountry location is more important than the country. Our samples were drawn from four locations: in the UAE, from Dubai Knowledge Park (19 students), representing a city location, Dubai International Academic City (15 students) and Dubai Silicon Oasis (6 students) representing rural/semi-rural locations with limited facilities, and in Malaysia, EduCity (13 students), representing a semi-rural location with more extensive facilities, e.g., student accommodation, sports stadium, and Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Graduate students were excluded from the research because a great majority of these students study on a part-time basis and make minimal use of campus facilities compared to full-time students. Various methods were used to recruit interviewees. Of our 53 participants, approximately one-fifth were recruited by a member of the research team from classes they had taught. Through chain referral/snowballing, these known students generated in total a similar number of previously unknown students who were willing to be interviewed. The remaining participants were provided by the institutions, either resulting from direct invitations made to specific students or students responding to open email calls for research participants.

Of the 53 student interviewees, 29 were female and 24 were male; 65% study a business-related subject, 14% computer science/information technology, 8% engineering, 7% psychology, with the remainder studying other subjects such as Architecture, Design and Communication/Media Studies; 8% are in their first year of study (lowest proportion of the total sample because some students had gained direct entry to Year 2), 32% in their second year, 43% in their third year, and 17% in their fourth or fifth year. Thirteen students studied in Malaysia and 40 in the UAE. In Malaysia, all students were citizens; in the UAE, 30% hold Indian nationality, 24% are Pakistani, while Americans, Emiratis, Iranians and Syrians each account for 5-8% of the total sample. The remainder of the participants come from a large range of countries, mainly in South Asia, Africa and Europe; 11% study at an American institution, 21% at an Australian institution, 51% at a British institution; and 17% at a Singaporean institution. It should be noted that all of the degree programs offered at the Singaporean institution are accredited by British universities.

In the UAE, all but four students were non-citizens, i.e., children of expatriate families living and working in the UAE. In contrast, all of the students in Malaysia were citizens of Malaysia. This distinction is important as expatriate children often choose to study at IBCs originating from their country of citizenship because in the future they intend to return to these countries. In particular, IBCs in the UAE from countries such as India, Iran and Pakistan recruit high numbers of citizens of these countries. However, it should be noted that in the UAE, the vast majority of children of Western expatriate families return to their countries of citizenship for higher education rather than studying in the UAE (Wilkins, 2013). At our sample American, Australian and British IBCs in the UAE, more than half of the students were either Indian or Pakistani. For this reason, although the expatriate/citizen distinction is important to consider in general country comparisons of transnational education participation, it is not

very relevant in this study, as the vast majority of students in our sample study in Western IBCs but have no direct connection with Australia, the UK or US. However, it should also be noted that many of these students were born and raised in the UAE, and they have no intention of leaving the UAE in the foreseeable future.

Of the 53 research participants, 38 were interviewed online and 15 in person face-to-face. Each interview was conducted by one of the four research team members and audio or video recorded (e.g., on Zoom). The interviews had a mean duration of 32 minutes, with the longest lasting 66 minutes and the shortest 15 minutes. The researchers are confident that data saturation has been easily achieved. A process of thematic analysis that involved manual coding and categorisations was used to analyse the data. The aim was to code, sort, and categorise the data systematically to identify common patterns, salient themes, and also sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis proved effective in helping the researchers make sense of the participants' attitudes, opinions and experiences (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2014). One of the researchers undertook the initial data analysis to identify the key ideas and patterns in the data. The interpretations and conclusions of this researcher were later confirmed by the other researchers, thus ensuring inter-rater reliability.

## **Findings**

### ***Country of origin***

#### *Students' institution choices*

Students' university choice is usually based on a range of factors (Li, 2020). Our research participants in Malaysia and the UAE reported being most influenced by rankings and institutional reputation; program content and accreditation; perceived quality of education and student experience; and financial factors, such as the tuition fee level and availability of scholarships. Most of our students used rankings and accreditations as a proxy for educational quality. Since IBCs are not included in the most popular global rankings, students generally judge the quality of an IBC based on the ranking of the parent institution in its home country. Therefore, institutions that are highly placed in global rankings may enjoy a considerable competitive advantage in international markets.

In terms of rankings, XXX was the highest, and it was the first international university to open a campus in Dubai. Another big advantage is that the university is from Australia, so we [the student and parents] thought that the teaching and education would be better, and you get an Australian degree, which is obviously better than a local degree. (*3<sup>rd</sup> year business student, Australian university, UAE*)

Western institutions that are not highly placed in global rankings may still enjoy an advantage over non-Western institutions because of the common global discourse that promotes Western universities as being 'world-class' and of the highest quality (Siltaoja, Juusola, & Kivijärvi, 2019). Our sample institutions offer American, Australian and British-accredited qualifications, and for virtually every

participant this was important, for reasons related to perceived educational quality, prestige, career benefits, and future international mobility. Although many parents in Asian and Middle Eastern countries prefer their daughters (and sometimes also sons) to remain living at home while studying, this is a country decision and this research is about institution choices.

I was always attracted to getting a British education because the quality of British universities is high and I wanted to study there. I originally got accepted by XXX's campus in the UK, but my mother wasn't keen on me moving to the UK on my own when I was eighteen. She suggested that I considered other options, so I looked at XXX's campus in Dubai. So in the end, I still got a British education, but without leaving the UAE. *(4<sup>th</sup> year psychology student, British university, UAE)*

When students have relatives or friends who had studied at the institution, the opinions about educational quality and student experience held by these individuals is often more influential above everything else in determining perceived institutional quality. While Western students often independently select their higher education institution, it is quite normal for parents in Asian and Middle Eastern countries to make this decision (Wilkins, 2013). In the example below, the father's belief that the standard of education at the British IBC would be good was influenced by his favourable perception of British higher education in general.

The brand of the university was the thing that most influenced my decision to study here. Also, my father read about the British universities in the newspapers and he was quite impressed. We felt that the standard of education would be good at XXX. *(3<sup>rd</sup> year business student, British university, Malaysia)*

Some students' institution choices are determined by specific personal issues. For example, in the Emirate of Dubai, the children of Indian expatriate families often choose to study at Indian IBCs because they intend to return to India in the future.

I am an American citizen, so it was my preference to study at an American institution, where the curriculum would meet my needs and the final qualification would be fully recognised back in the US. Also, if I ever had an issue here or decided that the program here was not for me, I could easily return home and continue my study at a local institution. *(4<sup>th</sup> year engineering student, American university, UAE)*

### *Student satisfaction*

In general, IBCs based in Western countries such as Australia, the UK and US were perceived by our research participants as having the highest quality and most experienced lecturers; curricula that incorporates the latest ideas and techniques in the subject area; modern teaching methods; emphasis on critical thinking and independent learning; and superior resources, facilities, and learning technologies, particularly when compared to domestic higher education institutions. Furthermore, students expect Western IBCs to uphold Western values such as freedom of speech and equality for all, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. Several students mentioned

words like ‘freedom’ and ‘openness’, as well as the satisfaction gained from studying in a multicultural environment where students and lecturers have diverse backgrounds (more so in the UAE than in Malaysia, where a much higher proportion of students are citizens). Some students recognise the career benefits of developing intercultural and English language competency through studying at an IBC.

Overall student satisfaction is determined by both in and out-of-classroom experiences. While virtually every participant indicated that an Australian/UK/US institution was likely to deliver a higher quality of education, it was also widely perceived that these institutions offer the best student experience in transnational settings, i.e., compared to non-Western IBCs and domestic higher education institutions. In many cases, the sports and cultural events of an IBC reflect the IBC’s nationality. Basketball and volleyball may be popular team sports in an American IBC, while the favoured team sports in a British IBC may be soccer and cricket. Because of sports, music, films, television shows, or previous visits to a particular foreign country, some students may identify more strongly with a particular foreign culture, and studying at an IBC that reflects this culture may be a source of satisfaction. Individuals may also identify more strongly with other students who share the same interests and values, thus enabling them to form and maintain stronger and more satisfying relationships with others.

British universities use modern teaching methods, which are more enjoyable and improve our learning experience. And in my university, I can participate in committees, helping to organise the clubs and events, which is enjoyable and satisfying. As a British university, we have a good Christmas celebration, and this year we will be having the annual ball again, which was cancelled during the Covid pandemic. *(3<sup>rd</sup> year business student, British university, Malaysia)*

The methods of delivery and gaining knowledge are different in a British university compared to local universities, and Western countries are more open, so we have more freedom here. And the relationships between lecturers and students are better, more supportive to the individual’s needs. Finally, having a British degree will be good for my future career. *(2<sup>nd</sup> year business student, British university, Malaysia)*

I enjoy studying at this campus and I think that the engineering programs are good, the same as in the States. One thing that doesn’t quite live up to my expectations, although I don’t really think it’s a problem, is that I was told when I was enrolling that the professors here are from the American campus, but I have not found this to be the case. *(4<sup>th</sup> year engineering student, American university, UAE)*

### ***Campus servicescape***

#### *Students’ institution choices*

In the UAE, almost every student had visited the campus before enrolling, to attend an admissions interview or open day, or for a meeting regarding financial support. In Malaysia, two-thirds of the students had visited the campus in person before enrolling. Students and parents used in-person visits

to assess the campus servicescape, and many individuals made assumptions about education quality based on the quality of the campus design, facilities, and equipment. Some of the Malaysian students mentioned using institution websites and prospectuses to evaluate campus servicescapes and facilities.

Every participant in our research considered both educational and experience factors when choosing their university. When considering student experience, more than two-thirds of our participants evaluated the campus servicescape and facilities. Although these are important to many students, campus servicescape and facilities are secondary factors that have less influence on institution choices compared to perceived quality of education, rankings, accreditations, and financial factors, as well as practical factors such as proximity to the family home. Some students prefer a city location that is more accessible and closer to shops, entertainment and other facilities, while others wanted a quiet atmosphere, where they can study with minimal distractions.

The main things that I considered when choosing where to study were the quality of education, the course content, and the implications for my career. The campus environment is important because you know you will spend many hours at the campus over the course of your study, but it is a secondary factor that comes after educational factors. That said, I would not have chosen to study at a university that has a bad campus with poor facilities. (*4<sup>th</sup> year computer science student, American university, UAE*)

The location of the campus was convenient for me, but as I like sports, the facilities at Educity were impressive, like the stadium, swimming pool and gym. Also, I thought that it would be a nice place to live, where I can focus on my studies. (*2<sup>nd</sup> year business student, Singaporean institution, Malaysia*)

### *Student satisfaction*

Extracurricular activities and student life are important to most undergraduate students, but several individuals indicated that they would sacrifice these for a superior education. Except for a handful of individuals, every student in our research is broadly satisfied overall with their institution and their student experience, regardless of its location in a city or rural location. The students who are not satisfied tend to have specific grievances like a lack of food outlets selling vegetarian food or the lack of spaces for eating or preparing food brought from home, e.g., because of no access to a microwave.

Only one participant compared their student experience at a UAE IBC with what they thought it might have been at the institution's main campus. This student believed that they would have had a better student life at the UK campus. Student satisfaction is usually assessed against expectations (Swan et al., 2002) and most of our participants appeared to have realistic expectations, based on the size and financial resources of their institution. Some students recognised that tuition fees may be considerably lower at the IBC than at the institution's main campus, and as they are unwilling or unable to pay the higher overseas fees, it is unreasonable to expect everything at the IBC to be the same standard as the main campus (c.f. Sheppard & Smith, 2016). However, it is important to some students that their university looks and feels like a university, and such students spoke negatively about the very small IBCs that are often located on just one floor in an office block.

I am satisfied being a student at this university because the campus feels more like a proper university compared to other institutions, in terms of the layout, design, study spaces and quality of the lecture rooms and labs. I think the university gives me a good learning experience and a good student experience overall. *(3<sup>rd</sup> year business student, American university, UAE)*

I enjoy coming to the campus for lectures. Everything is well designed and there are nice open spaces, and spaces for private study. The new technologies in the lecture rooms have improved teaching and our learning. *(2<sup>nd</sup> year business student, Australian university, UAE)*

It's a nice campus with a professional atmosphere. The teaching facilities are good, and being located in Educity means that there are other facilities apart from those provided by XXX, like for eating and recreation. I am very satisfied studying at XXX. *(2<sup>nd</sup> year business student, Singaporean institution, Malaysia)*

I have no complaints being a student here at XXX but I don't think that it is really the same as it would be in the UK. Here, the university is located in just one building and there aren't many facilities on site, like for sports, but in the UK the campus consists of many buildings in extensive grounds. Also, in the UK, there would be more specialist labs, so the quality of practical learning would be higher in the UK. *(1<sup>st</sup> year engineering student, British university, UAE)*

## **Discussion**

Chee et al. (2016) found that students' perceptions of an IBC are influenced by the institution's country of origin. However, the study did not investigate whether students' perceptions of university image and reputation influenced their choice of institution. Similarly, Nghiêm-Phú and Nguyễn (2020) found that both country and institution image may influence the decision to study abroad or stay in the home country. However, the study also did not investigate how students' perceptions impact upon their institution choices. Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022) considered how campus environment and facilities may influence students' choice of institution and satisfaction, but this was in the specific context of new, purpose built campuses. Other studies that have investigated student satisfaction in transnational settings have tended to adopt non-explanatory quantitative research designs. Allowing students to explain how, why, and to what extent country of origin and campus environment influence their choice of institution and satisfaction is a main contribution of this study.

For example, Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022) found that when evaluating university campuses, students were particularly attracted to the concept of newness and campuses that had a visual 'wow' factor. In contrast, most of the students in this study were more concerned with the functional benefits offered by a campus. The findings of this research support the conclusion of Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022) that although campus servicescape and facilities may influence students' decision making, these are secondary factors that are less important compared to perceived quality of education, rankings, accreditations, and financial factors, as well as practical factors such as proximity to the family home.

Based on the first IBC ratings of Dubai's KHDA, which are further supported by findings in the literature, we focused on the IBC's country of origin and campus environment as possible key influences on students' institution choices and satisfaction. Of all our research questions and propositions, the empirical support was strongest for the relationship between the IBC's country of origin and students' institution choices. Every participant in the research reported that education quality was a key, if not the main factor, determining their institution choice. More than three-quarters of the students mentioned rankings and/or accreditations. Of the 53 participants, 44 mentioned the IBC's country of origin, always in a positive context (except one individual), related to educational quality, prestige, career benefits, and future international mobility. One dissatisfied student perceived that their British IBC uses its country brand in student recruitment to support claims of status, reputation, and quality, but that it does not deliver on its promises with regard to teaching quality and student experience.

The research question and proposition with the second-strongest level of support was related to the IBC's country of origin and student satisfaction. Individuals often have expectations about the educational quality and student experience that will be offered by an Australian, UK or US university. Students are satisfied when they perceive that their lecturers are well-qualified and experienced; curricula incorporate the latest ideas and techniques in the subject area; modern student-centred teaching methods are employed; and Western values are upheld. Many students commented positively on the diverse backgrounds of students and academic staff, and the opportunities to develop intercultural and English language competencies. Students particularly value having lecturers whose nationality is the same as the institution's, particularly when the lecturer has substantial teaching experience in the country where the parent institution is based.

The third and fourth research questions and propositions are concerned with the IBC's campus environment. More than two-thirds of our participants had considered the campus servicescape and facilities when evaluating different institutions, and although they are important to many students, campus servicescape and facilities are secondary factors that have less influence on institution choices compared to other factors such as perceived quality of education. Likewise, although campus servicescape and facilities are usually contributory factors in determining overall student satisfaction, they are again secondary when compared to factors associated with perceived education quality. The findings of this study should not be interpreted to mean that IBCs should do more to promote and benefit from their country of origin, compared to investing in their physical campus, facilities and equipment. While a favourable campus servicescape may contribute less to overall student satisfaction compared to other factors, a campus environment with poor or inadequate facilities and equipment may result in student dissatisfaction. With regard to institution choice and level of overall satisfaction, no notable differences were observed between students of different gender or nationality.

## **Conclusion**

This study furthers our understanding of how an institution's country of origin and campus environment may influence the perceptions, attitudes and choices of transnational students. Our

findings support and build upon the findings of Chee et al. (2016) – who concluded that students perceive an IBC from a developed country as having a more positive image, reputation, quality, and brand equity compared to an IBC from a developing country – and Wilkins, Hazzam, and Ireland (2022), who found in research involving three IBCs which had opened a new, purpose-built campus, that no student was less satisfied with the new campus compared to the previous premises.

For a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews, our sample size of 53 participants would generally be considered as large and sufficient, and although we are confident that data saturation was easily achieved, we acknowledge that the data were collected only in Western IBCs in two countries. It is possible that institutions, students, and the country environment may be different in other transnational settings, which may have an influence on individual attitudes, perceptions and experiences. For example, our sample students were drawn from Western IBCs, and students from non-Western IBCs may have different objectives – e.g., Indian expatriate students preparing for their future return to India – and attitudes towards university reputation and student life. Furthermore, it is possible that the students who volunteered to participate in this research are particularly loyal and supportive towards their institution. A random sampling approach may have generated different findings, particularly regarding student satisfaction.

The cross-sectional research design does not allow for analysis on how institutions and student experiences, attitudes and perceptions may change over time. In the most recent KHDA IBC ratings (KHDA, 2022), the 5 star category now includes institutions from Australia and India in addition to the UK, but the only remaining institution in the 2 star category is from Pakistan. Future research could investigate how student attitudes and perceptions change over time, as well as students' post experience outcomes and behaviours, e.g., academic performance and engaging in positive word of mouth.

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