

# Is the well-known phrase 'small is beautiful' true of small transnational education institutions?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to consider the potential attractiveness of operating a small international branch campus (IBC). Drawing upon resource-based and legitimacy theories, we examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the business model that is based on having a small institution size. The data for the study were obtained from expert informants who held a senior management position at 1 of 12 IBCs globally. The most commonly mentioned strengths of small IBCs cited by our participants related to the advantages and benefits received by students, such as small class sizes, individualised learning, better student-teacher relationships and a stronger sense of community. The weaknesses of small IBCs mentioned most by our participants related to financial and resource issues. We conclude that while there may be opportunities for higher education institutions to develop small campuses overseas that are successful, considerable risks exist. Many of the findings are also applicable to institutions operating in domestic settings.

## KEY WORDS

international branch campuses (IBCs), organisational size, small universities, SWOT analysis, transnational education

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Globally, higher education institutions are getting bigger, both through organic growth and mergers. Small institutions often lack resources, economies of scale and brand reputation, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger institutions. Small institutions tend to exhibit lower performance levels and higher failure rates than their larger counterparts, so this research investigates the viability of small campuses, using international branch campuses as the case context.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Although small higher education institutions may have resource and legitimacy disadvantages, they may also have strengths and advantages over their larger counterparts, which presents opportunities for growth or sustainable existence. We identify two main strategic approaches that may enable small transnational education institutions to prosper, namely to serve a niche market by delivering programmes only in a specific field or by targeting students of a particular nationality or ethnicity

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'small is beautiful' was coined by Ernst Schumacher in his book titled 'Small is beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered' (Schumacher, 1973). The phrase 'small is beautiful' may be interpreted as meaning that smaller organisations may be just as efficient, successful and valuable to individuals and societies as larger organisations. Schumacher's book challenges the idea that bigger is always best, but the scope of the book is much wider than just organisation size, as it also considers ownership, education, technology and economics. However, this research is concerned only with the concept of organisation size and how scale may impact upon the operations and performance of the international campuses of higher education institutions.

The term 'transnational education' refers to educational programmes that are offered by institutions to students studying in a foreign country. In terms of reputational damage and potential financial loss, international branch campuses (IBCs) represent the riskiest form of transnational education (Healey, 2015a). The vast majority of IBCs commenced operations as newly established institutions that possessed no preowned premises, resources or students. Until campuses start enrolling students, institutions do not know whether actual student demand will match their forecasts. To minimise the risks of financial loss, it is common for IBCs to be launched on a small scale, typically occupying only one or two floors in an office block (Wilkins et al., 2024) (See Figure 1). Many IBCs enrol fewer than 100 students in their first year. Operating on a small scale may limit the overall study experience of students, as well as the institution's profitability, since tuition revenue alone cannot fully cover the costs of premises, equipment and staff.

Nevertheless, commencing operations on a small scale may be an effective market entry strategy, as institutions can minimise financial risks, assess the longer term viability of the campus, and adapt their programmes and services over time according to student feedback and local trends. Some institutions start small with the intention to grow student numbers each year, while other institutions seem content to remain relatively small in the long term.



Synergy University Dubai's premises on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor of this tower may be suitable long term premises for a business school



CUQ Ulster University's original premises in Qatar, on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of this tower, before moving to a new purpose-built campus in 2024



Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts Qatar specialises in art and design programmes



Saint Joseph University Dubai specialises in law programmes



SZABIST University Dubai is a Pakistani institution that has a high proportion of Pakistani students



Albizu University Miami, where about 80% of the students are Hispanic or Latino

FIGURE 1 A selection of small international branch campuses operating globally in 2025.

For example, CUQ Ulster University in Qatar commenced operations in 2020 from the 12th floor of a commercial tower, but in 2024 it relocated to a new purpose-built state-of-the-art campus that can cater for 5000 students. In contrast, Synergy University Dubai, a Russian business school, is located on the 20th floor of a tower in the Jumeirah Lake Towers (JLT) area of Dubai, but as these premises are suitable for a business school, there will likely be no need to relocate. Globally, the vast majority of IBCs remain relatively small; for example,

in 2015, the mean enrolment at the 249 institutions operating globally was only 723 students (our calculation based on data provided by Garrett et al., 2017).

Given that some IBCs remain small for many years, it is not clear whether operating on a small scale represents an effective business model or a sign of failure. Thus, the purpose of this research is to consider the potential attractiveness of operating a small IBC. The central research question may be stated as '*How viable are small institutions in transnational education?*'. In this research, we consider institutions to be small if they have less than 2000 students. We use SWOT analysis to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the business model that is based on having a small institution size. The data used in this study were derived from the survey responses provided by senior institution managers. The findings of this research may be of interest to both researchers and practitioners in transnational higher education. Many of the findings are also applicable to institutions operating in domestic settings.

In the following two sections, we present an overview of key relevant literature on organisation size, and then discuss aspects of the development and operation of IBCs that may be affected by scale. We then provide details of our method before presenting our findings. The paper finishes with a discussion that considers the attractiveness and viability of the business model in transnational education that is based on having a small institution size, and a conclusion that acknowledges the study's limitations and identifies future research opportunities.

## ORGANISATION SIZE

Across diverse industries and countries, smaller organisations tend to exhibit lower performance levels and higher failure rates than their larger counterparts (Lampadarios et al., 2017). Many studies have sought to identify the factors that may determine the growth and success of small organisations. These factors may be classified as internal (e.g. the institution's resources, innovation, differentiation and programme quality) or external (e.g. market conditions, competition and government policy/regulation) (Al-Tit et al., 2019).

In a review of the success factors of small enterprises, Ng and Kee (2012) identified management skills and motivations, human resources, intellectual capital, organisational innovation, market orientation and entrepreneurial competence as key determinants. Also, in a study of small businesses in China, Chawla et al. (2010) identify the key success factors as marketing, competitive forces, industry trends, location, financial resources and managerial knowledge/experience. China is the host country with the largest number of IBCs, but it is not clear whether the factors of success are the same for educational institutions as businesses.

Hickey and Davies (2024) developed a framework that can be used by institution decision makers to determine whether or not to establish, and how to manage, an overseas campus. Their decision-making framework has five broad themes, namely strategic, leadership, academic, financial and operational factors. Similar to institutions in many higher education systems globally, IBCs are expected to behave like for-profit organisations, that is, prioritising revenue creation, while at the same time serving as organisations that promote international cooperation and relationships, as well as educational and economic development in the host country (Healey, 2023; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). The funding of IBCs is often hindered by internal stakeholders who oppose the main campus subsidising investment in overseas campuses (Wilkins, 2020).

Revenue-generating organisations typically specify growth as a key strategic goal and indicator of success. Growth is often measured using income or profit, or the number of employees or operating units. In higher education, growth is commonly measured by the

number of registered students. The marketisation of higher education globally has encouraged universities to seek growth. Many university managers believe that big is better, as larger institutions may obtain superior resources, benefit from economies of scale and develop favourable reputations (Lampadarios et al., 2017).

Small universities may enjoy some of the same advantages of small business organisations, such as the ability to make decisions quickly in response to environmental changes and to provide individualised services for 'customers'. Students at small universities may benefit from smaller class sizes for better engagement, more personalised attention from lecturers, stronger community bonds among students and superior opportunities for involvement in community and extracurricular activities (WPU, 2020). However, small universities are often overly dependent on tuition income, and many institutions experience resource and/or legitimacy disadvantages (Farrugia & Lane, 2013).

The extent to which operating on a small scale may be appropriate for an IBC may depend to a large extent on the institution's strategic vision and objectives, for example, the extent to which growth is a goal. This research considers the attractiveness of the transnational education model based on having a small institution size, both for institutions that see this strategy as a 'stepping stone' to future growth and those institutions that intend to remain operating indefinitely as a small niche operation. IBCs are owned by small and large universities. In this research, IBCs are considered as distinct entities; therefore, when we mention 'small campus' or 'small institution', we are referring to the size of the IBC and not the size of the parent university. However, in practice, while most IBCs are expected to be self-financing, some absorption of central overheads and scale economies may be achievable when the parent university is large and financially strong.

## RESOURCE AND LEGITIMACY ISSUES

From a theoretical perspective, resource and legitimacy issues often affect small institutions negatively. Resources have become increasingly important in higher education, as resources may be used to define an institution's differentiated position, but at the same time leaders face pressure to reduce costs and investment in resources (Lynch & Baines, 2004). Resource-based theory (RBT) argues that an institution's competitive advantage is gained by possessing and effectively utilising unique internal resources. RBT is widely acknowledged as one of the most prominent and powerful theories for describing, explaining and predicting organisational competitive advantage and performance (Barney et al., 2011). According to Barney (1997), institutions will only achieve a competitive advantage if their resources are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and organised (collectively known as VRIO resources).

Small higher education institutions tend to be teaching focused and tuition fees are often the main or only source of income. A few IBCs are fully funded by the government or an individual/organisation in the host country, but the vast majority of IBCs have to be self-financing as it is not politically acceptable for them to be funded from the main home country campus. This results in many IBCs being underfunded, with minimal investment in infrastructure, equipment and human resources. Small IBCs in particular are less likely to possess VRIO resources, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger institutions. For example, research has found that students' institution choices may be influenced by campus infrastructure, facilities and resources (Wilkins et al., 2024).

RBT and legitimacy theory are distinct but can work together, where RBV focuses on the IBC's internal resources for competitive advantage, while legitimacy theory suggests that the institution must act in accordance with societal norms and expectations to gain and maintain social acceptance. Legitimacy may be theorised as a thing (legitimacy-as-property), process or perception (Suddaby et al., 2017). The majority of researchers recognise legitimacy

as a thing, that is, an intangible resource of an organisation. Using this conceptualisation, legitimacy is achieved when the attributes of an institution fit with the normative expectations of the external environment.

Legitimacy may be necessary for an IBC to exploit other resources effectively (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006). Without it, IBCs may find it difficult to attract students, staff and funding. An IBC with high legitimacy—for example, an institution that is included in the Top 100 in global rankings—is better positioned to secure and develop the resources (e.g. external funding) needed for competitive advantage. So, while resources may deliver legitimacy, with students and employers holding favourable perceptions of the institution, legitimacy may be needed first in order to acquire VRIO resources. In summary, small IBCs are likely to lack legitimacy because they are less likely to possess VRIO resources (e.g. the best resourced campuses and the best professors), so students are more likely to perceive small institutions as lower quality and less attractive than their larger, better-resourced counterparts.

## INTERNATIONAL BRANCH CAMPUSES (IBCs)

At the end of 2025, there were 384 IBCs operating globally (C-BERT, 2025). The United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) are the largest source countries (exporters) of IBCs, and China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Uzbekistan are the largest host countries (importers) (C-BERT, 2025). As already mentioned, when measured by total student enrolments, IBCs tend to be relatively small. In the UK, where 24 universities have more than 30,000 registered students (HESA, 2023), recognising 'small' institutions as those that have less than 5000 students may seem reasonable (THE, 2016). However, in transnational education, 5000 may be considered medium sized, as there are only a few IBCs globally that have more than 10,000 students. Although many campuses enrol fewer than 500 students, the term 'small' is used in this research to mean institutions that have less than 2000 students.

While small IBCs may share many similar features and outcomes, the transnational education sector is far from homogenous and student enrolments are not always correlated with revenues or financial sustainability. For example, the total set-up costs of a medical school, which requires substantial investment in specialist equipment, are likely to be far greater than for a business school, while the IBC of an elite business school with 1000 students may generate more tuition revenue than a less prestigious liberal arts IBC with 2000 students.

To date, around 10%–15% of IBCs have failed (Wilkins, 2023). The majority of these institutions failed in their first 5 years of operation, with fewer than 200 students enrolled (Wilkins, 2020). Institution managers commonly face a 'chicken and egg' scenario because it is difficult to determine whether high investment in infrastructure, facilities and staff is needed to attract students, or whether it is prudent to enrol students first before committing to such investment. Research by Wilkins et al. (2024) found that many students favour larger institutions with well-developed infrastructure and facilities in preference to smaller and/or newly established institutions that may offer an inferior study experience. Larger institutions are commonly perceived as having the best professors, facilities and resources; the broadest ranges of elective courses and extracurricular activities; as well as superior careers and counselling services.

Hill and Thabet (2018) argue that, in its first 5 years of operation, a new IBC needs clear objectives and strategies and strong support from the parent campus. Except for a few IBCs that are funded by a host country government, organisation or individual, it is generally expected that an IBC is self-financing, since it is not acceptable to most internal stakeholders for a parent campus to subsidise an IBC. Regardless of whether an IBC is expected to ultimately achieve institution growth or not, it is important for a newly established campus

to break-even as soon as possible. Therefore, it is essential that institution managers have a thorough understanding of the implications of operating on a small scale, so that they can develop appropriate strategies to capitalise on external opportunities and their own strengths, and to overcome their weaknesses and any external threats that exist or may emerge. This research investigates and analyses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that may be associated with the transnational education business model that is based on having a small institution size. The findings may guide institution managers that are considering the establishment of a new IBC and those who are undertaking a performance or strategic review at a small IBC that is already in operation.

## METHOD

As this research used SWOT analysis to analyse the data, the study adopted an exploratory, qualitative research methodology. SWOT analysis is a commonly used framework for analysis of an organisation's strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats that may exist in its external environment. SWOT analysis was first used in the 1950s at Harvard Business School, and by the early 1970s the technique had become a popular decision-making tool in business organisations. The technique is now widely used by strategic decision makers in higher education institutions (Benzaghta et al., 2021). Although SWOT analysis is generally used in combination with other methods and approaches, it is an ideal tool to aid managers with preliminary data gathering and analysis that may inform their strategic decision making (Teece, 2018). SWOT analysis's popularity may be explained by the fact that it is easy to use, and interpreting the results is usually relatively straightforward.

The data for the study were obtained from expert informants who held a senior management position at one of 12 small IBCs globally. Each IBC had less than 2000 students. The participants held job titles such as Executive Director, Principal, Dean and Head of Research and Development. These individuals were well-placed to offer detailed insights into their specific institutional context (Bogner et al., 2009). Potential participants were identified from institution websites. Invitations to possible participants were sent by email to 42 individuals, with two reminders sent after approximately 7-day intervals. In addition, as their email addresses could not be found, three individuals were contacted using the LinkedIn professional networking platform.

Using an online survey questionnaire, 12 usable responses were received, representing a response rate of 26.6%. An online questionnaire was appropriate for this research because participants had time to think about and obtain/check facts, clarify their thoughts and opinions, and consider what information they wanted or were able to put into the public domain. Given that institution strategy and performance are generally considered as commercially sensitive subjects, the participants were assured of institutional anonymity. The sample IBCs were located in the UAE (four institutions), China (two), Bangladesh (one), Canada (one), Malaysia (one), Qatar (one), Spain (one) and Uzbekistan (one). The parent campuses of these institutions are based in the UK (four institutions), US (four), Australia (two), Ireland (one) and South Korea (one).

The survey questionnaire consisted of 15 mainly open-ended questions that were designed to obtain relevant information for each category of the SWOT framework. Examples of questions include, What are the main advantages of being a small institution?; What are the main disadvantages or challenges of being a small institution?; What do you think are the most important internal factors (that may be controlled/influenced by the institution), which are needed for your campus to be viable and successful in the future?; What do you think are the most influential external/environmental factors that may impact upon the future success of your institution?; and To what extent do you think that small higher education institutions

can survive and prosper in the future? Participants were asked to respond to each question in full sentences, presented as one or two paragraphs.

The data were analysed using a broad descriptive-interpretative qualitative research approach, which incorporated aspects of qualitative content analysis as well as thematic analysis (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Locke, 2001). This generic approach to qualitative research was appropriate for this exploratory study as it enabled us to gain a sound understanding of the key strategic issues in transnational education that are applicable specifically to smaller institutions (Kahlke, 2014). Words or short phrases that described a particular concept relevant to the participant's institution were coded. As the data analysis process proceeded, codes were grouped into themes that could be allocated to one of the four SWOT categories.

## FINDINGS

### Internal factors

#### Strengths

In considering the main strengths and advantages of being a small institution, 9 of our 12 participants appeared to focus strongly on the student perspective, mentioning things like small class sizes; student centred teaching; addressing individual needs; superior relationships between students and students with teachers; superior counselling and careers services; and maintaining a safe and secure environment. Some small IBCs have a strong academic focus that emphasises teaching quality and student attainment rather than research output. Students at small teaching focused IBCs are likely to have all of their lessons taught by qualified lecturers, while in larger institutions that have research-active staff, some lessons may be taught by graduate students or teaching assistants.

Popular IBCs may be selective in their student recruitment as they have fewer places to fill. It was generally perceived by our participants that it is easier for smaller institutions to build a strong sense of community, which may lead to improved personal relationships and shared institution goals. Students are less likely to feel lost or lonely, as they often do in larger institutions, so they are less likely to drop out. The advantages of small IBCs may lead to higher levels of satisfaction among both students and staff, and positive word of mouth and institution reputations may result in easier recruitment of high quality students and staff. Our participants commented:

With relatively small cohorts, we can have a strong academic focus. Students need attention and many individuals prefer small educational institutions rather than big ones, where they may feel lost and find staff unapproachable. We are very student centric, and both students and staff have direct access to management for quick decisions.

(IBC in the UAE)

The main advantages of being a small institution are having a strong focus on students, the ability to consider the individual, a strong sense of community, and greater flexibility.

(IBC in Spain)

Although every participant mentioned some possible advantages of small institution size for students, three participants discussed other things first, like the direct benefits for the institution

(e.g. the ability to be entrepreneurial) and the wider benefits for society. For example, the participant at an IBC that specialises in nursing and midwifery mentioned that the institution uses its expertise to help address the shortage of qualified nurses and provides job opportunities for individuals, as well as contributing to the overall improvement of healthcare services in the country.

Of our 12 sample IBCs, 11 have a very narrow subject offering, for example specialising in business; information technology; music and performing arts; or nursing and midwifery. These institutions can claim expertise in a specific field, which may enhance their reputation in the host country. Some small IBCs target expatriate and international students of a particular nationality or ethnic background, as they can then deliver an education (e.g. programme structure and content) that is appropriate for employment and higher education progression in the students' home countries. Targeting students with a particular background also allows the institution to better satisfy students' religious and cultural needs.

Smaller IBCs demand fewer resources from their parent institutions, so there may be less internal opposition to meeting funding requirements. Smaller IBCs are more likely to recruit academic staff locally rather than from abroad, and also on a part-time basis, which minimises labour costs while maximising flexibility. Due to the investment and resources committed, the larger an IBC, the more likely that the staff at the parent campus will assume responsibility for strategic decision making. In contrast, managers at small IBCs may be given more freedom and flexibility over strategic and operational decisions. This allows small IBCs to better satisfy local needs and wants—of students, employers and the host country government—as well as responding to local trends and opportunities. Small IBCs are often less bureaucratic, decision making is quicker, and it is easier for both students and staff to communicate with senior managers. It may also be easier to ensure the safety of students on a smaller, more compact campus.

Resourcing demands are typically more manageable and reduce pressures on the hiring of foreign staff, which is essential in an international institute, but still difficult even when small. The smaller teaching teams and number of administrators means that staff tend to know everyone and can function effectively in a familiar setting. Smaller numbers of students ensure marking loads and related work is more manageable, helping with related deadlines.

(IBC in China)

I think the main advantages of being a smaller institution are the ability to be less bureaucratic, more entrepreneurial, and to move quickly. Also, the management of students is less problematic, as the government puts a high priority on security and safety, and tries to control students by different means.

(IBC in Uzbekistan)

## Weaknesses

While the majority of participants focused on the benefits for students when discussing the strengths and advantages of a small institution size, when it came to discussing the weaknesses and disadvantages, 10 of the 12 participants focused first on financial and resource issues. A common 'complaint' among our participants was their campus receiving insufficient financial support from the parent institution and/or the host country partner. Although tuition fee income was the only or main source of revenue for their institution, 10 of

the participants acknowledged that their campus was expected to break even, which was a difficult objective to achieve.

More than half of the participants reported that their campus operated within tough financial constraints, as its funding was insufficient to pay for the desired infrastructure and facilities, as well as for high-quality staff. Small IBCs may lack the financial resources and/or reputation to attract the highest quality academic staff. Small IBCs are likely to have fewer physical resources in their libraries/learning centres, fewer support staff (e.g. research assistants and graduate teaching assistants), and fewer facilities for leisure and recreation. Sometimes, the reputations of IBCs do not match the reputations of their parent institutions, generally because the IBCs have access to fewer resources and are unable to produce high-quality and innovative research output.

Professors who are interested in undertaking research will also avoid small IBCs, as these are usually teaching focused. Even the IBCs of elite research-intensive universities typically do not undertake research during their first few years of operation. For example, although the UK-based University of Birmingham is a global top 100 university, in the first few years after its establishment in 2018, the job advertisements for academic staff at its IBC in Dubai emphasised that these were teaching only positions and that undertaking research would not be expected or supported.

As we currently focus on teaching and have a smaller number of students, this may have negative effects on our financial sustainability.

(IBC in Uzbekistan)

It has been difficult to fill some academic posts because working here [in Malaysia] is perceived as less prestigious than working at the home campus, especially among ambitious individuals who want career advancement. Also, academic staff know that they will have a higher teaching load here and less support for research.

(IBC in Malaysia)

Staff at small IBCs often have to perform multiple roles, which may lead to increased stress and reduced job satisfaction among individuals, as well as increased labour turnover. While some individuals may thrive on the challenges and variety of their work tasks and responsibilities, there are often fewer opportunities for career advancement in small IBCs, which may be another cause of labour turnover. Many small IBCs rely heavily on part-time academic staff, and students can find it difficult to contact these staff when they are not teaching. When the part-time staff are expected to perform personal tutor roles, the quality of pastoral care is sometimes unsatisfactory.

We have fewer resources, so staff need to wear many hats.

(IBC in Spain)

A small IBC is more likely to go unnoticed in its market, and so it can be difficult to develop a positive reputation in the host country. Some institution managers perceive that the host country government and regulators could be more supportive. The host country governments appear to be most supportive – often providing funding and/or premises and equipment – when the institution's programme offering supports the government's economic objectives and/or the nation's human resource requirements, for example, providing skilled employees for specific industries, like the health sector. One of our sample institutions is fully funded from a host country source, but this institution offers subjects

in the arts, which represents an educational provision that is intended to promote culture and diversity.

Small nursing institutes in Bangladesh face challenges including limited resources, infrastructure deficiencies, difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff, and potential struggles with accreditation and recognition, impacting the quality of education and training provided.

(IBC in Bangladesh)

Some of our participants reported that their campus struggles to achieve its student recruitment targets. Students may perceive small IBCs as less attractive as they offer a narrower choice of programmes, elective courses and extracurricular activities; have inferior facilities and equipment than their larger counterparts; and have fewer connections with local businesses and employers. It is natural that students will choose to study at the institution that they perceive will offer the best student experience and post-graduation opportunities. As a result, some small IBCs are forced to recruit the lowest ability students.

One participant reported that their institution responded to low student numbers by introducing new programmes that it hoped would be more appealing to students. However, this strategy was perceived as unsuccessful, as the institution didn't have sufficient resources, including teaching staff, to support these new programmes and the student numbers remained low (typically, fewer than eight students per programme). As small IBCs have many of the same fixed overheads as larger IBCs—such as human resource, finance and marketing departments, as well as student affairs functions—small institutions generally have higher total costs per student compared to their larger counterparts. This makes it more difficult for small IBCs to achieve financial break-even.

The institution wants to grow but many programmes have small student numbers. The management respond by introducing new programmes but the result is that our overall programme offering has become too wide, some courses are under resourced, and still the students do not come.

(IBC in the UAE)

The functioning and services are by and large the same for smaller institutions as larger institutions, so the benefits of scaling are harder to achieve. For instance, having a larger range of programme offerings but with high levels of overlap is likely more possible and reasonable with larger institutions than smaller players. We still need to hire staff for student affairs and welfare, alumni and careers, international cooperation, HR [human resources], general administration and so on, but all adding to overheads. Smaller numbers of students means a smaller financial base, and that limits us in all ways (especially with a student cap in place).

(IBC in China)

## External factors

### Opportunities

In many countries globally, there is considerable unsatisfied demand for higher education. Particularly in developing countries and countries with less developed higher education

systems, many students desire a 'foreign' education, which they perceive as higher quality and offering superior post-graduation opportunities. As the popularity of transnational education has increased globally, several governments have introduced new legislation and regulations that have made it easier to establish an IBC. Our participant in Uzbekistan reported that in order to achieve the nation's economic development objectives and increase participation in higher education, the Uzbek government has in recent years facilitated the development of many IBCs, in several cases providing land, premises or funding (cf. Muratov & Wilkins, 2024).

Five of our twelve sample institutions are located in purpose-built education hubs, where an infrastructure provider develops premises and facilities that are often shared by different institutions. Purpose-built hubs enable universities to establish campuses overseas quickly and with lower costs and risks, and therefore these hubs can be ideal for new and small IBCs. These hubs often have facilities that provide sports and recreational opportunities for students, thereby overcoming the fact that small IBCs could not afford such facilities on their own. Globally, several purpose-built education hubs are currently being developed, most notably in India, which may facilitate the development of new IBCs.

We are located in an education hub, and the campus is locally funded. If my university received a similar offer in another country, I am sure that they would consider it carefully.

(IBC in Qatar)

Small IBCs may be able to survive (and prosper) in smaller towns and areas that would be unviable for larger institutions. This results in some small IBCs locating in less densely populated areas, where competition for students may be less fierce. For example, while the early IBCs in Uzbekistan were mostly established in Tashkent, the capital city, more recently, campuses have been established in smaller towns throughout the country. Small IBCs may be established as a means to test a new market, without committing a huge amount of resources. One of our participants reported that their institution had occupied temporary premises for only 2 years, but then moved into new larger premises in order to achieve substantial growth targets.

Small IBCs can respond to external changes more quickly and effectively. Students and host country governments' demands for programmes in specific subjects change over time, and this may present institutions with an opportunity to satisfy the unmet demand. As small IBCs are often given more decision-making freedom compared to their larger counterparts, it is sometimes easier for small IBCs to adapt their programmes to local requirements. For example, much of the content of a business law course delivered by an institution in the UAE was changed from the British legal system to the system of the host country. After assessing market trends and specifically the tuition fees and scholarships offered by competitors, some IBCs have been successful in persuading their parent institution to reduce the IBC's tuition fees. Although competing on price may increase student numbers, it doesn't necessarily improve the campus's profitability.

Five to ten years ago, programmes in project and quality management were in high demand. Currently, the in-demand subjects are AI [artificial intelligence] and cyber security, so if we didn't move quickly, we could have missed out. We were one of the first institutions to offer a specialised programme in cyber security and this has been very successful.

(IBC in the UAE)

## Threats

IBCs often enter an overseas market with stakeholders assuming that the foreign provider will offer an education that is different and superior. Over time, the domestic providers in a host country may improve, even appearing in global rankings, resulting in the IBCs no longer being able to compete on quality. The domestic providers may also introduce new programmes that directly compete with those of an IBC. Small IBCs need to ensure that their graduates continue to be successful in the local labour markets.

While a particular higher education market appears attractive to foreign institutions, there will always be a danger that new competitors may enter the market. Small IBCs may suffer if the new institutions are larger and have superior resources, including external funding. The Emirate of Dubai is an example of a higher education market that has grown continuously for more than 20 years, with new IBCs being established almost every year. Over time, the campuses and facilities of the existing providers may be perceived as aged and less attractive than those of the newcomers. While market changes, such as student demand for programmes in new subjects, may be regarded as presenting an opportunity for small IBCs, such changes may also be regarded as a threat, as the demand for existing programmes can fall quickly and substantially. Indeed, some institutions in the Emirate of Dubai experienced declines in student enrolments of 30%–40% over the 7-year period to 2024 (Wilkins, 2024).

We were the first IT [information technology] focused foreign university in the country, and we maintained high standards and brand image. Therefore, we could be very selective in admitting students. However, since the higher education industry has grown rapidly in the last few years, there are now various government, private and foreign universities that offer IT degrees. As we are planning to grow the number of students, I am sure that we will not have any difficulty attracting applicants, but the difference in the quality of these applicants may increase, as they have now a lot of options.

(IBC in Uzbekistan)

Many IBCs are established with a partner based in the host country. These partners often provide funding, premises, support staff and local market intelligence. Many of the partners are for-profit organisations, so their objectives may sometimes conflict with those of the foreign universities. For example, to increase student numbers and revenues, partners have been known to demand that programme entry requirements are lowered, while institutions oppose this because they want to preserve their academic standards. Small IBCs may have less bargaining power when negotiating with a partner that is the host country government or a large commercial organisation. When the partner is an educational institution or host country government, there may be a danger that the partner wants at some time in the future to terminate the partnership or take full control of the IBC. For example, in the UAE, the Mohamed V University - Abu Dhabi (an IBC from Morocco) later became the Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities. Likewise, host country government policy and legal requirements may change at any time, which could threaten the accreditation and recognition of programmes, programme content, tuition fee levels, what is done with any financial surpluses and staff recruitment policies, for example, the need to employ host country nationals.

External threats we may face include shifts in market demands (for instance, there is currently a heavy premium on AI [artificial intelligence] related programmes), the quality assurance reports of Chinese and UK authorities, legal compliance audits (both educational and financial), changing government

policies (educational or foreign staff working in China), and ensuring that the high employability of alumni members continues.

(IBC in China)

Many changes in the external environment of an IBC could have a negative effect on its operation and viability, such as a natural disaster or a deep recession that is accompanied by high unemployment, high inflation or a depreciating exchange rate. For example, if a host country's currency depreciates against the source country's (where the institution is based), then students may be unable to afford the tuition fees and/or the IBC will generate less revenue when converted into the home currency. When problems emerge, small IBCs typically have less access to funding. Many countries that host IBCs are less politically stable or have authoritarian governments. Political and social unrest, as well as wars, could have detrimental effects on an IBC's operations and viability. Also, worsening relationships between the host and source country governments may affect the host country's education policies and student demand. Small IBCs may be perceived as less important than larger institutions and therefore may receive less support from host country stakeholders.

As far as I know, my institution's future in Qatar is secure, but I never take anything for granted. One only has to consider what happened at Texas A&M to appreciate what could happen at any other institution. (*IBC in Qatar*) Note: In 2024, Texas A&M surprisingly announced that it would close its campus in Qatar, largely over concerns of instability in the Middle East.

In relation to the transnational education business model based on having a small institution size, **Figure 2** provides a summary of the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for small IBCs, as mentioned by our participants.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to consider the potential attractiveness of operating a small IBC. The findings suggest that the business model that is based on having a small institution size may be associated with both institutional strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats in the external environment. The most commonly mentioned strengths of small IBCs cited by our participants related to the advantages and benefits received by students, such as small class sizes, individualised learning, better student-teacher relationships and a stronger sense of community. It was also noted that small IBCs were often more agile and flexible, possessing the ability to be entrepreneurial and react quickly to market changes, thereby satisfying local needs.

Student satisfaction has become a central concept in higher education management because quality assurance bodies set targets and measure student satisfaction; satisfaction is often one of the indicators used in institution rankings; and satisfaction can lead to positive word of mouth, enhancing an institution's reputation and increasing student applications. Goldschmidt and Chung's (2001) model suggests that there may be a direct relationship between institution size and student satisfaction.

Small IBCs often serve niche markets by delivering programmes only in a specific field or by targeting students of a particular nationality or ethnicity. For example, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts Qatar specialises in art and design programmes and Saint Joseph University Dubai specialises in law programmes; SZABIST University Dubai is a Pakistani institution that particularly attracts Pakistani students, while Albizu University Miami, based in Puerto Rico, attracts mainly Hispanic and Latino students,

	Positive factors	Negative factors
Internal factors	Strengths	Weaknesses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small IBCs demand fewer resources from the parent institution, so funding may be approved more easily</li> <li>• Managers of small IBCs are often allowed the freedom to be entrepreneurial, satisfy local needs, and respond quickly to local trends</li> <li>• By having a narrow subject offering, institutions can develop a reputation for high quality in a specific field</li> <li>• Small institutions are often less bureaucratic and more efficient</li> <li>• Smaller class sizes</li> <li>• Student focused and student centred teaching</li> <li>• Can address individual student needs</li> <li>• Superior relationships between students, and students with teachers</li> <li>• Superior counselling and careers services</li> <li>• Easier to maintain a safe and secure environment</li> <li>• Can often be selective in student recruitment</li> <li>• Strong sense of community among both students and staff</li> <li>• Higher satisfaction among both students and staff</li> <li>• Satisfaction may lead to positive word of mouth, strengthening institution reputations and making student and staff recruitment easier</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient funding for infrastructure and facilities</li> <li>• Insufficient support from parent institution or host country partner</li> <li>• Insufficient support from host country government and regulators</li> <li>• Fixed overheads - like human resource and student affairs departments - result in higher total costs per student in small IBCs</li> <li>• Over-reliance on tuition fee income</li> <li>• Insufficient scale to break-even</li> <li>• Insufficient resources and students for the range of courses offered</li> <li>• Staff often have high workloads and need to multitask, leading to stress and dissatisfaction</li> <li>• The IBC is too small to be noticed, so it is difficult to build a favourable reputation in the host country</li> <li>• Difficult to recruit the highest quality staff</li> <li>• Difficult to recruit the highest ability students</li> </ul>
External factors	Opportunities	Threats
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsatisfied demand for higher education in many countries</li> <li>• In several countries globally, new legislation and regulations have made it easier to establish an IBC</li> <li>• Small IBCs can be located in towns or areas that would be unviable for larger institutions</li> <li>• New purpose-built education hubs enable institutions to minimise costs and risks, but offer students a good experience</li> <li>• Easier to trial new markets without committing a huge amount of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New competitors may enter the market, or existing institutions may improve or widen their offerings</li> <li>• Changes in host country government or partner objectives</li> <li>• Changing economic trends, e.g., changing exchange rates could make tuition fees too expensive</li> <li>• Political and social unrest, and wars</li> <li>• Worsening relationships between the host and source country governments</li> </ul>

FIGURE 2 SWOT analysis for the transnational education business model based on having a small institution size.

and many of the students of Synergy University Dubai (a Russian institution) come from Russia and the former Soviet states (See Figure 1). Students are often drawn to institutions with which they identify as it promotes their sense of belonging (Verbree et al., 2025). Ayres (2024) observes that by serving a specific group of students, an institution can gain a better understanding of these students' needs and desires, thus enabling the institution to develop the programmes and services that will satisfy the students. Furthermore, niche institutions develop skills and specialist capabilities that larger competitors cannot easily

imitate, resulting in the small institutions having a competitive advantage that may promote their long term success in the market (Toften & Hammervoll, 2013).

Students may prefer to study at a small higher education institution because they prefer the stronger sense of community; feel that they are treated as individuals and have a voice; value student centred learning and the individualised approach to assessment and feedback; and appreciate the individualised support services outside of the classroom. For example, in the National Student Survey conducted in England in 2024, seven of the top 10 places were held by smaller institutions, such as Bishop Grosseteste University, the Arts University Plymouth and St. Mary's University (THE, 2024).

The weaknesses and disadvantages of small IBCs mentioned most by our participants related to financial and resource issues. It has long been recognised that an institution's resources may be the source of its competitive advantage and superior performance (Lynch & Baines, 2004). Similarly, the lack of resources might explain why smaller institutions consistently tend to have weaker financial performance than their larger counterparts (Hickey, 2024). The managers of small IBCs often face a dilemma because different stakeholders—for example, students, staff, local partners, quality assurance bodies and host country governments—often have conflicting interests and objectives, which leads to the stakeholder groups making incompatible demands (Healey, 2015b; Tran et al., 2023). For example, there can be disagreements over tuition fee and staff salary levels, as well as the amounts that should be spent on facilities and equipment. In practice, the stakeholders who fund an institution will be the individuals or groups that have the greatest influence on determining the institution's strategy.

The smaller class sizes, stronger sense of community and greater freedom to make decisions may be sources of job satisfaction for academic staff at small IBCs, but stress caused by high workloads and multitasking, the inability to undertake research and the lack of training, development and career progression opportunities may be sources of dissatisfaction (Tran et al., 2023). It is important that the staff at small IBCs are satisfied, as employee satisfaction is usually positively correlated with teaching and service quality (Goldschmidt & Chung, 2001) and negatively correlated with labour turnover.

The relationships between institution size, resources and institution performance vary considerably across discipline fields. For example, the majority of IBCs that specialise in the medicine and health field are funded by the host country government or an individual/organisation in the host country, so there may be minimal financial risk for the foreign universities. Sometimes, however, the local partner may fail to deliver the promised funding or resources (Muratov & Wilkins, 2024). Business schools are perhaps the most suited to operating small IBCs, since they require little specialist equipment and they often attract large student cohorts that are prepared to pay high tuition fees.

International higher education markets can change rapidly, which may present an institution with both opportunities and threats. The greatest opportunity for higher education institutions that want to offer transnational education through IBCs is that there are currently many countries and areas that are keen to see new campuses established, which include Egypt, Greece, Hainan (a Chinese island), India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia. In some of these countries, new legislation has been passed that makes the establishment of IBCs easier. However, the rush to establish campuses may see some institutions not going through an appropriate process of due diligence.

There is no reason to believe that the current 10%–15% failure rate of IBCs will decrease (Wilkins, 2023), so establishing an IBC may involve substantial financial and reputational risks. While many governments are currently welcoming the establishment of IBCs, this could change quickly with a change of government. Also, the current trend of education decolonisation in several regions globally represents a further threat to transnational education providers (Abdou, 2025).

If markets are not regulated, overcompetition and market saturation may occur, with institutions offering the same subjects in the same locations and targeting the same students. Large institutions that feature in global rankings will have a strong advantage, but every institution needs to achieve positive judgements from both host and home country quality assurance bodies. The institutions that are first to establish an IBC in a particular country may enjoy first mover advantages, as they can secure the best locations and resources, and they can start to develop positive reputations locally before competitors arrive. On the other hand, the first mover institutions may face undeveloped and unclear regulatory policies, systems and procedures (Wilkins & Huisman, 2021).

In summary, to answer our central research question about the viability of small institutions in transnational education, it appears that small IBCs may be viable if they implement a suitable niche marketing strategy based on subject specialism or student profile. Additionally, every small institution should also strive to be distinctive and differentiated from their larger counterparts, and they should deliver a high quality and individualised student experience. Effective contingency planning may enable institutions to limit the effects of potentially negative changes in their external environments.

Theoretically, small institutions may enjoy success if they shift their focus from a resource to market-based view, prioritising student needs and satisfaction, and responding effectively to competitor actions and changing industry dynamics. Satisfied students may engage in positive word of mouth, which enhances the institution's reputation. Small IBCs may gain legitimacy when they are recognised as being a leader in a particular disciplinary field and when they achieve high ratings in quality assurance audits. Many of our research findings are applicable in both transnational and domestic higher education settings.

However, the transnational education sector is fast changing. Recent regulatory changes, particularly the introduction of outcomes-based quality assurance frameworks with more rigorous performance measurement and reporting requirements, are likely to exacerbate the resource constraints identified in our findings (cf. CAA, 2025). This is especially the case for small IBCs operating without strong parent campus backing or global reputational capital. While small IBCs may historically have compensated for limited resources through niche positioning, high teaching quality or close student-staff relationships, these alternative sources of legitimacy risk being overridden by uniform quality assurance criteria that privilege scale, research outputs, international accreditations and extensive documentation capacity. As highlighted in recent policy-borrowing research (Alsaadi et al., 2025), such quality assurance regimes tend to standardise institutional expectations regardless of size, resources or mission, thereby structurally disadvantaging small and niche institutions, unless they possess exceptional reputational capital or strong parent campus resources.

Although this study has shed light on the transnational education model that is based on having a small institution size, the research is not without limitations. The primary limitation of this research is its relatively small sample size. It is possible that managers in other institutions and countries may have offered alternative views and information. Also, as the study utilised cross-sectional data, we cannot distinguish between new or long-established institutions that are experiencing higher, lower or stagnant year-on-year enrolments. Nevertheless, we feel that we did obtain detailed and candid data, which displayed clear and strong patterns and themes. Future research could use a broader sample and investigate the actual strategies used by small IBCs, as well as examining the actual performance of these institutions. Given the emerging evidence which suggests that regulatory and quality assurance bodies are not neutral arbiters but active agents in reshaping transnational education—which involves the redefinition of viability, risks and acceptable institutional forms—it would also be interesting to investigate the impacts of intensifying quality assurance-driven host country governance on small IBCs.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and/or the commercially sensitive nature of the data.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Digital, Technology, Innovation and Business at the University of Staffordshire on 20 June 2025. All participants in the research provided informed written consent as part of the online survey process.

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