

# University strategy in transnational higher education: The strategic approaches of newly established and 'small' international branch campuses

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## Abstract

Newly established international branch campuses (IBCs) commence operations without a student body, and even after several years, many institutions fail to grow beyond 500 students. Despite having unique strategic needs, small IBCs are largely overlooked in the higher education literature. This research examines the organisational-level strategies of small IBCs, along with the push and pull factors driving their adoption. Based on data from expert informants holding senior management positions at 14 IBCs globally, as well as various secondary sources, we identified five key strategic options: pursuing growth, maintaining the status quo and transforming, selling or closing the campus. It was found that institutional growth objectives serve as a primary driver of strategic direction, with prospector-type institutions often achieving the highest success. This paper explains the drivers behind institutions' strategic choices and discusses the implications, offering insights relevant to small higher education institutions in both international and domestic settings.

## KEYWORDS

institution objectives, international branch campuses (IBCs), organisational size, small universities, strategic options, transnational education

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## Key insights

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

While traditional universities follow well-documented structural models, the strategic nature of international branch campuses (IBCs) is more varied and less understood. This study addresses the need for empirical inquiry into IBC strategy and institutional performance. Notably, these entities are distinct in their limited size, with most institutions enrolling fewer than 2000 students. Given the divergent growth trajectories observed across the sector, this research examines the extent to which formalised objectives and implemented strategies influence institutional performance.

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

It was found that institutional growth objectives serve as a primary driver of strategic direction, with entrepreneurial and innovative prospector-type institutions often achieving the highest success. This research demonstrates that small IBCs can achieve superior performance by leveraging structured strategic planning to execute proactive initiatives. However, although rigorous planning facilitates organised and sustainable long-term growth, a degree of strategic reactivity remains essential for navigating unforeseen environmental shifts and crises.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions have a variety of motives for establishing campuses in foreign countries. Having campuses overseas enables institutions to achieve internationalisation objectives, access new markets for education and research, diversify revenue streams, as well as enhance the institution's prestige and reputation (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Being recognised as 'world-class' has become a key ambition of universities globally (Siltaoja et al., 2019). When an institution's goals are unclear, any strategic actions undertaken will lack coherency. Kleibert et al. (2021) found that some institutions lack clear objectives and strategies, and sometimes an institution's motives for establishing an international branch campus (IBC) are also unclear. This situation typically occurs when an institution accepts the invitation of a foreign government, individual or organisation in the host country to establish a campus, without having undertaken rigorous evaluation and risk analysis. Institution managers usually perceive such invitations as particularly attractive when the inviter offers to pay all or most of the set-up and/or ongoing operational costs.

In recent years, the recognised meaning of 'transnational education' has broadened to include domestic providers that adopt aspects of a foreign country's higher education system (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2025; Wilkins & Huisman, 2024), but the term is still most commonly associated with educational programmes and providers crossing national borders (Knight, 2016). This research is concerned only with the movement of providers across borders, and specifically the IBCs they operate in foreign countries.

At the start of 2026, there were 387 IBCs operating globally (C-BERT, 2026). Almost every IBC started life as a newly founded institution, which means that most institutions began operating on a small scale. Analysis of institution press releases and reports, media

coverage (in host country newspapers and professional journals concerned with international higher education), as well as reports published by quality assurance bodies in the home and host countries indicate that a high proportion of campuses recruit fewer than 100 students in their first year. Many IBCs still have fewer than 500 students after several years of operation, and student enrolment figures that were far lower than originally anticipated by institution managers have led to many campus closures (Garrett et al., 2017; Hickey & Davies, 2024).

Based on data provided by Garrett et al. (2017), we calculated that in 2015, the mean enrolment at the 249 IBCs operating globally was only 723 students. At the start of 2026, a considerable majority of IBCs still have fewer than 2000 students. Given that some institutions have remained in operation for many years despite very low enrolments, it may be assumed that organisational growth is not a key objective of these institutions. By investigating the strategies implemented by 'small' IBCs, we can gain an insight into the goals and objectives of these institutions, as well as the diverse range of strategies adopted.

The aims of this research are to identify the most common strategic objectives of small IBCs, and the resulting strategies that are implemented. In this research, 'small' shall be defined as campuses that have fewer than 2000 students. Although a university with 10,000 students in the United Kingdom (UK) is usually considered small (Hickey, 2024), in transnational education, 10,000 students would be considered large, given that less than 5% of IBCs have total enrolments exceeding this number. The term 'strategy' is used in this study to describe the key approach taken by institutions to achieve their organisational level objectives and desired outcomes, such as growth, survival or eliminating/escaping from financial losses.

Therefore, the research is concerned with the broad, top-level *strategic direction* chosen by an IBC, which generally reflects the institution's stated vision and mission. At this level, an IBC defines where it is going and how it will compete. This research is important because if the rationales for the IBC's strategic direction are not clear and well-understood throughout the institution, strategies developed lower in the organisational hierarchy can become disjointed and inappropriate.

The central research question in this study may be stated as, '*What organisational level strategies are adopted by small international branch campuses?*'. In answering this question, we also identify the pull and push factors that have an influence on the choice of these strategies. The findings of this research may be of interest to practitioners in transnational higher education, researchers and students.

The research draws upon the theoretical concept of proactive and reactive strategies to analyse the extent to which small IBCs are future-oriented, planning and taking actions in anticipation of planned or foreseeable future events, or reactors, which respond to unforeseen events and changes in their environments after they occur. To succeed in a dynamic environment, an IBC's strategy generally requires a blend of both planned (proactive) and emergent (reactive) elements (Voola & O'Cass, 2010). Therefore, we argue that in order to maximise institutional performance, it is important for strategy decision-makers to reflect upon their strategic choices and the outcomes of past actions in order to implement the optimal mix of proactive versus reactive strategies.

The primary data used in this study were derived from the survey responses provided by senior institution managers at 14 IBCs globally. Further data were obtained from a rigorous search of the scholarly literature and other secondary sources, which include institutional websites and publications, professional journals, newspapers, and the published data of government and specialist research organisations.

In the following two sections, we present an overview of key relevant literature on the role of transnational education in institutional strategy, and then specifically the strategy of small universities. We then provide details of our method before presenting our findings.

The paper finishes with a discussion that analyses the different strategic approaches for growth and operations adopted by small IBCs, as well as the implications for institutions, and a conclusion that acknowledges the study's limitations and identifies future research opportunities.

## University strategy and transnational higher education

Higher education institutions have a long history of strategic planning, but in the past this was often undertaken in response to government policies, requirements and budgets (Ahmed et al., 2015). In recent years, institutions' strategic planning has been more closely aligned with the institutions' desired outcomes. Small and newly established institutions generally have different strategic objectives compared to large institutions, and therefore usually implement different strategies.

During the past few decades, higher education internationalisation has evolved from being a marginal activity to a key aspect of the reform agenda (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Excluding North America, 90% of higher education institutions globally include internationalisation in their mission or strategic plan; in North America, about two-thirds of institutions have objectives related to internationalisation (Marinoni, 2019). Higher education internationalisation may be defined as, 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight, 2004, p. 11). The establishment of internationalisation objectives is encouraged both through external pressures such as government policy, and internal goals and requirements such as revenue generation; increasing student and staff mobility; improving institutional reputation and ranking positions; and increasing innovation through international research collaborations.

Transnational education is often associated with the concept of soft power, which may be recognised as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction, persuasion and co-optation rather than coercion, threats or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. For example, students at British IBCs may become more knowledgeable and appreciative of British values, and they may be more likely to engage in supportive behaviours that benefit the UK (Lomer, 2017). The objectives and strategies of IBCs often contribute to their home country's soft power, for example, by providing high-quality education that boosts both the institution's and home country's image and reputation, and by using the national language in teaching (Annabi, 2026). The benefits of soft power are widely recognised by governments worldwide, and in 2025, the UK established a Soft Power Council to help coordinate cross-sector efforts to enhance the country's global influence. Such initiatives may encourage IBCs to specify objectives and implement strategies that deliver soft power benefits.

Some institutions have altruistic motives for engaging in transnational education, such as contributing to economic and social development in countries with less developed higher education systems or insufficient capacity to satisfy student demand. Education delivery internationalisation can be achieved through either student mobility (i.e., inward international students) or programme mobility (i.e., outward franchised and virtual/online programmes, and IBCs), as well as internationalisation at home (i.e., the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments; Beelen & Jones, 2015).

An IBC is owned, at least in part, by a specific foreign higher education provider (the parent institution), which has some degree of responsibility for the overall strategy and quality assurance of the branch campus; it operates under the name of the parent institution and offers programming and/or credentials that bear its name (Wilkins & Rumbley, 2018). While the parent institution typically assumes responsibility for the IBC's strategic direction,

curricula, academic standards and senior academic staff appointments, host country governments and partners sometimes provide land, facilities and financial support. Thus, many IBCs actually have a partnership ownership arrangement, where strategic decision-making is shared between the foreign institution and the local partner. In some cases, an IBC operates more like a franchise, with the partner claiming it owns the IBC. For example, on its website, the Transnational Academic Group (TAG), a privately owned company based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), states that it owns and operates Lancaster University's campus in Ghana and Curtin University's Dubai campus (TAG, 2026).

An institution that wants to establish an IBC needs to select the host country, ownership structure and funding model, as well as determine the extent to which it will have control over strategic and key operational decisions, such as future growth targets, whether the campus premises should be owned or rented, and which programmes should be delivered (Hickey & Davies, 2024). A wholly owned campus gives the parent institution full control over all key decisions and the right to any profits made, whereas a campus fully funded by a local partner that assumes responsibility for most key decisions reduces the financial risks for the parent institution and allows its senior managers to remain focused on home campus issues.

## Small universities and institution strategy

While the business management literature that has examined the organisation level strategies implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is quite substantial (Abosedo et al., 2016), relatively little research has been undertaken on the strategic approaches of small higher education institutions. Although a few, mostly quite old, publications on the strategy of small institutions in domestic higher education markets exist (e.g., Chaffee, 1984; Hammond, 1984), researchers have largely ignored the impacts of small scale on institution strategy and performance in transnational education, i.e., the campuses located in foreign countries.

Compared to large universities, small higher education institutions have unique characteristics in terms of their objectives, resources and strategies. These differences are influenced by the operating environment in which each type of institution operates. For example, small institutions are more likely to be teaching focused, and typically these institutions offer programmes only in a single or small range of discipline areas. IBCs also have to respond to the requirements of governments and regulatory bodies, including quality assurance agencies, in both the home and host countries.

Social, economic and market conditions have posed a serious threat to the survival of small institutions (Bonvillian & Murphy, 2014). Lampadarijos et al. (2017) claim that regardless of the industry or country, smaller organisations tend to exhibit lower performance levels and higher failure rates than their larger counterparts. Small institutions commonly lack resources, economies of scale and brand reputation, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage compared to larger institutions. In Western domestic markets like the United States (US), small higher education institutions have responded to a worsening economic climate, rising costs and falling revenues by freezing staff recruitment and salary increases, reducing the financial aid granted to students, and, in some cases, making staff redundant or reducing their salary or benefits (Chabotar, 2010). For many of these institutions, the primary strategic objective has become survival rather than growth.

In any industry, it is normal for a newly established business to initially focus on survival before being concerned about growth, but Armstrong (2013) argues that by implementing competence-based strategies, which draw upon the institution's expertise and unique skills, the institution may achieve both survival and growth objectives simultaneously. Although every IBC starts life on a small scale, some institutions seek to grow over time, while others

are content to remain relatively small in order to focus on satisfying a niche market. In deciding whether or not to pursue a growth strategy, an institution may evaluate opportunities, values, pressures, feelings, risks and resources (Baxter & Floyd, 2019).

Niche marketing often involves specialising in a specific subject discipline, such as business, medicine and health, or fashion design. The University of Manchester's campus in Dubai, which was established in 2006, is highly successful and financially profitable even though it offers only four broad (business) degree programmes. This institution would likely experience diseconomies of scale (increased unit costs) if it introduced new programmes that were more specialised. Alternatively, rather than specialising in a particular subject field, institutions may target students of a particular nationality or ethnicity, e.g., the University of Białystok in Vilnius was established primarily to satisfy the educational needs of ethnic Poles residing in Lithuania.

IBC managers need to be proactive—by setting clear organisational-level objectives and then developing and implementing strategic plans for achieving the objectives—and reactive, in order to be agile and able to respond to unexpected events and changes in the institution's environment. IBCs need to respond not only to changes in student demand and new competitors, but to changes in the regulatory and quality assurance requirements of the host countries (Alsaadi et al., 2025). Some events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, may not be foreseeable, but appropriate reactive strategies are required to avoid operational failures and reputational damage. Further, in a transnational education context, it is important that institution strategies satisfy the interests and requirements of the main stakeholders, namely students, partners, the home institution and the host country government (Healey, 2023).

Miles et al. (1978) identified four strategic types of organisation, namely prospector, defender, analyser and reactor. Each group has a different approach to strategy. To achieve organisational growth, *prospectors* are entrepreneurial, innovative, opportunity-oriented and risk-taking; *defenders* prefer stability and focus on defending their existing market (often a niche market) by emphasising efficiency and quality; *analysers* aim to maximise profits and minimise risks by maintaining performance in their established markets, while cautiously entering new, promising markets when opportunities arise; and *reactors*, which have no desire to grow, judge success at the current state and focus on responding to events and environmental changes rather than being proactive.

A study by del Mar Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015) concluded that although proactive and reactive strategies can be effective for minimising an organisation's costs, only prospectors develop the dynamic capabilities that provide a competitive advantage and which enable the organisation to survive in times of crisis. Dynamic capabilities may be recognised as an organisation's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997).

This research seeks to identify the strategy types of different small IBCs, to assess the extent to which the different strategic approaches appear to have influenced organisational performance and outcomes. The research findings also identify the strategic options available to IBCs, and the factors that led institutions to pursue a particular strategic path.

## METHOD

An exploratory, inductive, qualitative research methodology was adopted for the study. The data for the research were obtained from 14 expert informants who each held a senior management position at a different small IBC globally. Each IBC enrolled a maximum of 2000 students. The participants held job titles such as Principal, Executive Director, Dean and Vice-President of Research and Academic Affairs. These individuals were selected as they were able to offer detailed insights into their specific institutional context (Bogner

et al., 2009). We acknowledge that in some relatively rare exceptional cases, these individuals may not have complete knowledge about the long-term strategic plans or intentions of funders or home campus managers.

Potential participants were identified from institution websites. Invitations to possible participants were sent by email to 62 individuals, with two reminders sent after approximately 7–10-day intervals. Fourteen responses were received, representing a response rate of 22.6%. The research participants provided the data using an online questionnaire. This approach to data collection was appropriate for the study 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.

The sample IBCs were located in the UAE (4 institutions), China (2), Qatar (2), Bangladesh (1), Canada (1), Indonesia (1), Malaysia (1), Spain (1) and Uzbekistan (1). The parent campuses of these institutions are based in the US (5 institutions), UK (4), Australia (3), Ireland (1) and South Korea (1). The participants were assured of institutional anonymity, as institution strategy and performance are often considered commercially sensitive subjects, particularly in transnational education, due to differences between the home and host country cultures, e.g., different attitudes to ethical considerations.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 16 mainly open-ended questions that were designed to answer the study's central research question, 'What organisational level strategies are adopted by small international branch campuses?', as well as identifying the pull and push factors that had an influence on the choice of these strategies. To make sense of the institutions' strategies, it was also necessary to identify their strategic objectives. Participants were asked to respond to each question in full sentences, presented as one or two paragraphs. Examples of questions include:

- Over the last 2–3 years, what were the key objectives of your campus?
- What strategies did your institution use to achieve these objectives?
- What were the rationales for choosing these strategies?
- To what extent were these strategies effective?
- To what extent are these strategies the same or different from those of other institutions?
- For the next 5 years, what do you think are the most important objectives for your campus?
- What strategies are likely to be used by your institution to achieve these objectives, and what are the rationales for choosing these strategies?
- What are the main advantages of being a new/small institution?
- What are the main disadvantages or challenges of being a new/small institution?
- What do you think are the most influential factors that may impact upon the future success of your institution?

In these questions, the term 'institution' refers to the IBC at which the participant was employed, and not a 'parent' institution that owns or offers its name for an overseas campus.

A broad descriptive-interpretative qualitative research approach was used to analyse the data, which incorporated aspects of qualitative content analysis as well as thematic analysis (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Locke, 2001). For this exploratory study, the generic approach to qualitative research adopted enabled us to gain a sound understanding of the key strategic approaches used in transnational education that are applicable to smaller institutions (Kahlke, 2014). Codes were applied to words and short phrases that described a particular concept relevant to the central research question in the participant's institution. As the data analysis process proceeded, the coded items were inductively grouped into themes, which are presented in the next section of this paper. For example, codes that were related to the strategic objectives of financial self-sufficiency or generating revenues for the parent institution could be linked with codes related to increasing student enrolments and using

innovative marketing approaches. Additional data from institutional publications, professional journals, newspapers and the published data of government and specialist research organisations helped validate the identified themes, and provided further specific examples of institutional strategies.

## FINDINGS FROM PRIMARY RESEARCH

In this section, the term 'institution' refers to the IBC in the foreign (host) country, while the term 'parent institution' refers to the main campus in the home country, where the institution is based.

### Strategic objectives of new and small IBCs

To make sense of the strategies of IBCs, it was first necessary to identify the strategic objectives of parent institutions and IBCs. According to our participants, the most important reasons for their parent institution to establish an IBC were to diversify revenues and make profit; enhance the institution's image/brand; support the institution's internationalisation objectives; and contribute to economic and social development in the host country. Indeed, these are also the most common motives for establishing an IBC cited in the literature (Escriva-Beltran et al., 2019; Hickey & Davies, 2024; Wilkins, 2020; Zhang & You, 2022).

Eleven of our 14 research participants mentioned that achieving growth was a key objective of their campus, which was generally measured by increases in student enrolments. This was by far the most cited objective of our sample IBCs. These institutions appeared to fall within the prospector or analyser strategic type, and these IBCs established key growth targets and strategies for achieving them. Rather than increasing student enrolments, three individuals reported that maintaining existing student numbers was their institution's objective. In two cases, this was the choice of the institution's funder (which fully funds the IBC), and not the institution's home campus or IBC management. Since these three institutions had no or little desire to grow, they can be classified as defender or reactor strategic types. As niche institutions operating only in a narrow discipline area, these IBCs may perceive that they are already capturing all or most of the available demand, and so they may already be judged as successful institutions. However, reactors can struggle when they face unforeseen problems for which they are ill-prepared.

It is interesting that when asked to state the most important objectives for their campus over the next 5 years, many, if not most, of the participants' responses could also be interpreted as strategies. This suggests that while obtaining profit and reputation enhancement may be the key higher-order objectives of the home campus management, IBC managers establish specific objectives for the overseas campus that contribute toward achieving the higher-order objectives. Four individuals mentioned that it would be necessary to expand the campus's physical capacity in order to increase student numbers, and therefore developing campus infrastructure was perceived as an objective. Although building a new campus is a proactive strategy that can promote rapid institutional growth, it is also a high-risk strategy (Healey, 2015a).

We will need to build our own campus in order to increase our student number to 5000–7000.

(IBC in the UAE)

The most important objectives for our campus in the next 5 years are to build a new building, start new programmes and grow the number of students.

*(IBC in Uzbekistan)*

Ten of our participants said that in order to achieve student growth targets, introducing new programmes would be a key objective for their campus.

Our objectives include establishing an undergraduate programme, building existing Masters numbers and building a higher degree by research programme.

*(IBC in Indonesia)*

The objectives mentioned by some participants were concerned with improving quality, such as consolidating the existing programme provision; strengthening student support services and the student experience; improving the use made of the parent institution's resources and key competencies; and obtaining favourable results in quality assurance reviews and audits. It was perceived that achieving such objectives would enhance the institution's image and reputation, which would also contribute to achieving student enrolment and graduate employability targets. Seeking to improve quality with some degree of innovation, but with minimal risks, is a popular approach among the analyser-type institutions. These institutions collect and analyse data before making strategic decisions. Five individuals mentioned that an objective of their campus was to move from being a teaching-focused institution to one that also undertakes and values research.

We want to develop new programmes; grow enrolment; strengthen connections with other institution [*name anonymised*] learning environments; strengthen student support services; and grow our presence in [*city name anonymised*], Spain and Europe.

*(IBC in Spain)*

Fulfilling student quotas maximises financial stability and therefore is a target. We will be aiming to settle the new programmes and take through the inaugural intakes. We currently don't have any master programmes, but it would be important to get at least one in place in the coming years. The emphasis on quality assurance is critical, and we need to ensure we pass both UK and Chinese reviews/audits and obtain favourable reports. Improving staff research targets via our newly established research centre is equally important.

*(IBC in China)*

## Strategies adopted by new and small IBCs

Strategic options may be recognised as the different paths an institution can take to achieve its long-term vision, mission and goals. Among our 14 research participants, we identified two broad strategic options, both of which are associated with student enrolments: achieving growth or maintaining the status quo. It may seem strange that any institution would not want to grow, but the purpose of the institution (e.g., to serve a relatively small expatriate population) can make growth as an objective unnecessary, or the decision may not be the institution's to make if it is fully funded by a host country government, individual or organisation.

## Growth-seeking institutions

As already mentioned, 11 of our sample IBCs could be classified as prospectors or analysers, which are growth seeking, while the remaining three institutions are defenders or reactors, which aim only to maintain their current level of operations. According to our research participants, the strategies most commonly adopted by growth-seeking IBCs to increase student numbers include expanding campus capacity; introducing new programmes; improving campus facilities and the student experience; developing revenue streams from research; and increasing collaboration with industry and other higher education institutions in the host country. Such collaboration can result in effective knowledge sharing and innovation, and student employability may improve. When students are satisfied with campus facilities and their overall experience, they are more likely to engage in positive word of mouth, which helps attract new students and contribute to enhancing the institution's reputation.

We are adding more space to the campus, so we will increase programmes accordingly.

*(IBC in Spain)*

We will serve as an anchor institution that helps build higher education capacity in all of Indonesia through partnering in research and other collaborative initiatives. We as an institution will act as a builder, broker, beacon and base.

*(IBC in Indonesia)*

As finance is the main concern, growing the number of programmes and students, and other income streams such as grants would help a lot. In addition, until now we have focused on teaching only. Now we need to develop a research stream too. But not research for the sake of publishing and rankings, but practical research that can bring benefits for all stakeholders. Moreover, this brings us also to the point of developing graduate programmes, as we have now only one MBA programme. We will also improve our facilities and services to improve students' overall experiences.

*(IBC in Uzbekistan)*

Our participants reported that the extent to which an IBC grows by developing new campus infrastructure, introducing new programmes and enrolling more students depends to an extent on the policies, regulations and interests of the host country government, particularly if the institution receives funding or special treatment from the host country, e.g., having programmes locally accredited. The objectives and strategies of IBCs must fit with the goals, interests and expectations of the host country, e.g., producing graduates with the skills that are in short supply in local labour markets, organising student internships in the institution's home country, and respecting local culture and customs. A degree of strategic reactivity is essential for navigating changes in the local government's policies, regulations and priorities. Host countries increasingly leverage transnational education to achieve their own strategic and diplomatic objectives.

Government priorities can change. We were the first foreign university in the country we are in, and this comes with responsibilities to respond to national agendas, but also vulnerabilities with respect to changing political views on foreign universities.

*(IBC in Indonesia)*

Also related to the growth objective, seven participants mentioned strategies that are related somehow to quality improvement. Among these individuals, effective management and investment in human development were seen as important to support the institution's success. Achieving quality is essential to ensure positive outcomes from external quality assurance inspections and audits. Some host countries now publish ratings of IBCs, and such ratings may be interpreted by students and employers as rankings, which then impact upon student recruitment and how the institution is perceived in the host country.

For a nursing institute in Bangladesh to thrive, crucial internal factors include a strong focus on quality education, faculty development, robust infrastructure, and effective management.

*(IBC in Bangladesh)*

For our campus to be viable and successful in the future, we will need professional development upskilling in all areas (teaching and research); clear workload expectations so everyone knows what they should say yes to and can say no to; structured annual review and mentoring; making sure professional staff (often not from the higher education sector) understand the university's mission and respect academic points of view/perspectives. That is, it is not all about marketing, it is about cultivating the substance of what is marketed: knowledge production and education.

*(IBC in Indonesia)*

In higher education systems that have embraced marketisation and neo-liberal ideals, two participants recognised the importance of effective marketing. The following quote serves as an example of an analyser-type institution implementing a reactive strategy in response to recognition that the institution's image in the eyes of stakeholders needed improving

We know that we are good, but we need to communicate this to stakeholders more effectively. The UAE is a relatively small country but it has more than 100 higher education institutions, so we need to use innovative marketing techniques, as well as the tried and tested methods, to publicise our attributes and strengths.

*(IBC in the UAE)*

## Institutions satisfied with the status quo

Although the research participants at three institutions reported that achieving growth was not a key objective of their campus, all 14 participants expected student enrolments to increase in the coming 5 years. As this research is concerned with new and small IBCs, it should be noted that a seemingly large percentage increase in student numbers may actually correspond to a relatively small number of students. Five of our sample institutions have fewer than 1000 students, so a 10% increase in enrolments over 5 years would equate to fewer than 100 additional students.

As mentioned earlier, at two institutions, the decision to (approximately) maintain the status quo was the decision of the funder. In these cases, the funder is (directly or indirectly) the host country government, which sets student quotas that will satisfy its economic, social and human development goals. Institutions that do not prioritise growth may adopt a defender or reactor strategic orientation, as they can maintain perceived success without increasing

their scale. As a result, the developmental and operational strategies of these institutions focus on improving educational quality and the student experience, as well as ensuring effective financial and resource management. There is also a focus on satisfying the particular cultural and educational needs of host country nationals, as these are generally the students for which the campus primarily exists.

Rather than focusing on generating revenues, our funding model allows us to focus on education and research quality.

(IBC in Qatar)

The operation is capped under the Ministry of Education licence at 450 per intake. Lower intakes are due to quota funding by the provincial government (they are not required to meet the 450 allocation, and it is subject to economic conditions) and marketing efforts, which vary. Our estimates of future enrolments are similar to the current levels (approximately 370 per intake) but our targets are higher at the capped 450 level. We will maintain and improve the quality of our hiring as it is very important and, for teaching staff, flows on into the classrooms and student experience. This impacts several quality indicators and student feedback too. The selection of high-demand programmes is controllable and necessary for survival. Sound financial management and controlled budgeting is also very important.

(IBC in China)

The participant at one institution did not perceive his/her campus as 'small', as it operates within a global network of campuses, and resources and expertise are shared across campuses.

I would not say we are small. We are not a private university campus that is going it alone in a big market. We are nested within the [*name of institution anonymised*] global network of campuses. All our standards and processes are determined by [*name of institution anonymised*] in [*name of home country anonymised*], yet we are a valued and valuable part of the parent campus's vision to be a university with global impact and reach. This seems like the best way forward with global higher education.

(IBC in Indonesia)

Our participants of the reactor strategic type suggested that institutions which follow the status quo approach and stay small may benefit from the ability to respond quickly and appropriately to environmental changes, and students at small institutions typically benefit from smaller class sizes, more personalised attention, stronger community bonds among students and superior opportunities for involvement in community and extracurricular activities. These things can have a positive impact on student satisfaction, which in turn may lead to positive word of mouth and reputational benefits for the institution.

## FINDINGS FROM SECONDARY RESEARCH

By analysing institution websites and documents, regulatory body/quality assurance reports and information reported in the media, our desk research was in most cases able to distinguish between IBCs that were *actively* pursuing a growth strategy and those that were not. Growth tends to be a key objective of an IBC when (i) the institution seeks to generate

profits that can be returned to the home country; (ii) the IBC's 'parent' is an elite institution, e.g., one that is placed in the top 100 of global rankings; and/or (iii) if the host country has a large undersupply of higher education places, which is unable to satisfy the potential student demand. For example, in 2022, less than 4 years after starting programme delivery in Dubai, the University of Birmingham—a UK Russell Group university that is placed in the top 100 of several global rankings—opened a new, purpose-built campus that can cater for 3000 students.

Pursuing the status quo strategy is most likely when the IBC's funder is not interested in increasing student numbers. Some IBCs are created specifically to satisfy the needs of a specific national or ethnic group. SZABIST Dubai is a Pakistani institution that seeks to serve the Pakistani expatriate community in the UAE. Such institutions may have only a limited pool of suitable candidates from which to recruit. It is common for small IBCs to specialise in one discipline area, e.g., health or fashion design, and it is not practical or feasible for the institution to grow beyond a particular size. It may not be cost-effective to invest in more specialist equipment, or there may not be more applicants that meet the entry requirements or can afford the tuition fees. Examples of such institutions include ESMOD Dubai, a French-based institution that specialises in fashion design, and BIMM University Berlin, a UK-based institution that specialises in creative arts such as music, film and performing arts. In 2025, BIMM university reported focusing on initiatives that further improve student experience, quality of teaching, and overall efficiency (BIMM University, 2025). To improve the student experience, investments were made in campus infrastructure and resources, but competition in the sector and the cost of living crisis led to lower student enrolments. BIMM university expects student enrolments to increase when it introduces new programmes and improves existing programmes.

The enrolments of specialist business schools also tend to plateau several years after establishment, usually because of market saturation caused by an oversupply of business/management programmes and a limit on the applicants that meet the entry requirements and who can afford the tuition fees. Also, graduate programmes in business/management need to be perceived by students as being somewhat exclusive in order to be desirable and command advantages in labour markets. In the 15 years since its establishment in 2010, HEC Paris Doha has graduated a modest 1300 students, but each year, over 600 executives participate in custom-designed professional/practice-focused programmes delivered to leading firms across Qatar and the region (Qatar Foundation, 2024). A key focus of the institution is now on research and knowledge creation that addresses real-world business challenges, and which contributes to the long-term growth of Qatar and the region.

Our desk research revealed three further strategic options that have been chosen by, or for, IBCs: transforming, selling or closing the campus (see Figure 1). The following sections provide examples of these strategic options and, where appropriate, we identify the associated strategies adopted.

## Transforming the IBC

Governments that adopt a prospector-type strategy may establish and fund a small IBC as part of a long-term plan to achieve some greater objectives. IBC transformation occurs when the host country government, funder or partner decides to cease licencing and/or funding support for the IBC and instead determines that the institution should adopt a new organisational form. In such transformations, the original IBC does not need to develop or implement longer-term strategies since the institution will no longer exist. The new institution will likely have new objectives and will therefore need a new set of strategies to achieve these.

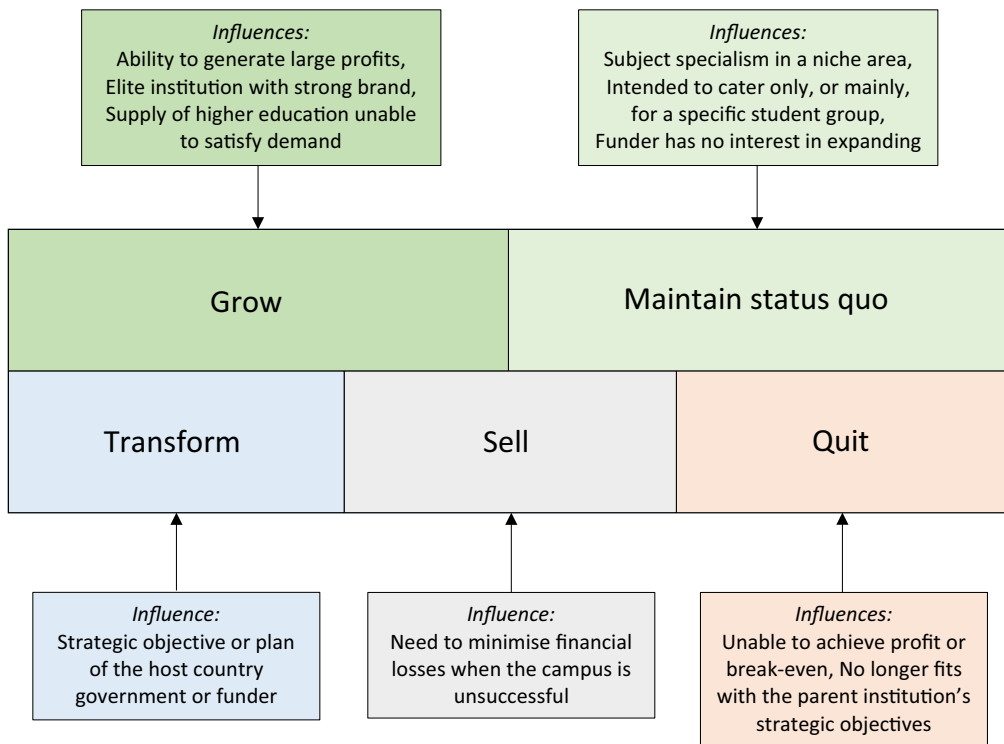


FIGURE 1 Strategic options available to small international branch campuses.

As an example of IBC transformation, the College of the North Atlantic—Qatar opened in 2002 to provide high-quality technical education and training, mainly for Qatari nationals. It was the first coeducational institution in Qatar. The partnership agreement between the State of Qatar and the College of the North Atlantic, worth US \$500 million, was the largest international education contract ever awarded to a Canadian educational institution. Three years after opening, the institution moved to a purpose-built state-of-the-art campus, and by 2020 it had more than 2500 full-time students. In 2022, the State of Qatar announced that it would not renew the service agreement and that the IBC would be renamed as the University of Doha for Science and Technology, which would operate as an independent Qatari institution that specialises in applied, technical and professional education. The College of the North Atlantic stated that its mission in Qatar was always to help establish an autonomous, nationally-led college (Kamel, 2022).

Mohammed V University—Abu Dhabi, an institution based in Morocco, serves as a second similar example of IBC transformation. The campus was established in the UAE in 2009 to provide programmes in Islamic Studies and the social and human sciences. While the vast majority of IBCs use English as the language of instruction, Mohammed V University—Abu Dhabi taught programmes in Arabic. The university transformed into the Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities in 2020 when, in his capacity as Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan issued a law to establish the new institution (ADMO, 2020). Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities is a public, state-owned university that continues to use Arabic as the primary language of instruction, as a key aim of the institution is to promote the Arabic language and culture. The university became the first in the world to offer a bachelor's degree in tolerance and coexistence (ADMO, 2021).

The third example of transformation is the Yale-NUS College in Singapore, which was established in 2011 as a liberal arts college. The institution was founded by Yale University

and the National University of Singapore (NUS), and the Singaporean government funded the college's construction and subsidised most of its costs in the first decade of its existence. With an average acceptance rate of 5.2%, it was among the most selective higher education institutions in the world. In 2021, the NUS announced that it would withdraw from the partnership to run Yale-NUS College, and that it would instead establish a new college. Adopting an entrepreneurial and innovative prospector-type strategy, the Singaporean government perceived that a new college would give a higher proportion of places to Singaporean students and also allow students to take courses in all of NUS's majors. Yale University was not consulted on the decision to close Yale-NUS College (Horowitch, 2021).

## Selling the IBC

Many IBCs are owned by wealthy entrepreneurs, businesses and investment companies and as such they are bought and sold as any other commodity. An investment company may establish or buy an IBC to make profits, and it may sell an IBC to realise a capital gain or to escape losses or performance that turns out to be weaker than expected. For example, Amanat Holdings, a Dubai-based investment company, bought Middlesex University Dubai in 2018 for about \$100 million from the liquidators of private equity firm Abraaj. Just 2 years later, it was rumoured that Amanat would sell Middlesex University Dubai to Study World, another Dubai-based company that has previously had partnerships with Heriot-Watt University Dubai and De Montfort University Dubai (Rahman, 2020). However, the sale to Study World did not materialise, and in 2025, Amanat announced that it would sell shares in its education division, which includes Middlesex University Dubai, in Saudi Arabia's main stock market (Varghese, 2025).

Institutions following a reactor-type strategy often establish an IBC without performing sufficient due diligence and then they respond to the problems as they arise. Although some institutions establish IBCs hoping to make a financial return, most institutions now budget for between 5 and 10 years to achieve break-even, and until this occurs, the losses can be substantial (Wilkins, 2020). Research has found that at the investment appraisal stage, consultants and partners have a tendency to underestimate risks and produce inaccurate and overly optimistic forecasts (Wilkins, 2020). When student enrolments are lower than forecast, IBCs may make significant losses. If managers are not confident that they can turn around an underperforming IBC, selling the campus may be the most attractive option to recoup some of the initial outlay and escape further losses. For example, in 2024, Glasgow Caledonian University sold its campus in New York to IE University, a private institution based in Spain. Despite Glasgow Caledonian University having invested £26.5 million in the campus, it graduated only around 100 students in its first 8 years of operation (Havergal, 2024).

## Closing the IBC

A high proportion of new IBCs underperform and make financial losses that are greater than anticipated (Wilkins, 2020). It is possible for institutions to experience financial losses regardless of their strategic type. Most IBCs do not receive external funding from the host country government or a partner and therefore they depend on tuition fee income as the main or sole source of revenue (Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012); if student numbers are lower than forecast, financial losses are likely to be higher than forecast. In most cases, it would not make financial sense for another institution to buy a failing campus, so closing the IBC may be the only realistic option. Around 10% of the IBCs that were established since the

mid-1990s have failed (Wilkins, 2016). There are many examples of IBCs that have closed due to low student enrolments and/or financial underperformance (e.g., the University of East London's campus in Cyprus recruited just 17 students in its first year of operation; Morgan, 2013), and Aberystwyth University's campus in Mauritius enrolled only 106 students in its first 2 years (Bothwell, 2018). However, low student enrolments and financial losses are not the only reasons for IBC closures.

The commonly perceived association between campus closure and operational failure poses a significant risk to an institution's reputation and brand (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2014; Healey, 2015b). Nevertheless, sometimes, a parent institution's decision to close an IBC occurs because of revised institutional objectives or strategic approach. In 2015, to support the institution's shift in approach to global engagement to focus on partnerships of equivalence rather than bricks and mortar campuses, University College London decided to close its campus in Qatar. The campus was research-focused and it received more than £11 million for research, conducted 100 research projects, attracted 30 internationally-renowned visiting scholars from 19 countries, and conserved over 500 historical objects in world-class laboratories (UCL Global, 2020). In 2024, Texas A&M University announced that it would close its campus in Qatar, as the university's board (at the main US campus) decided that the core mission of Texas A&M should be advanced primarily within Texas and the US, and that it was no longer necessary to have a campus 8000 miles away to support education and research collaborations (Texas A&M University at Qatar, 2024). The board was also influenced by increased instability in the Middle East.

Sometimes, it can make operational sense to close an IBC. For example, although Suffolk University's campus in Madrid offered a handful of degree programmes, the focus of the campus was on study abroad. The university concluded that it did not need an IBC in order to provide students with an effective study abroad programme in Spain. In 2024, Suffolk University closed its campus in Spain stating, 'it has become clear that in order to compete in this [competitive] environment, the university would need to make significant investments in a range of areas to provide the educational experience Madrid students demand and deserve, including a dramatic expansion of 4-year degree programmes in Spain, facilities and personnel, which does not align with our larger institutional goals' (The Suffolk Journal, 2023).

Many IBCs rely strongly on partners for funding, physical infrastructure, staff and support systems, but problems and disagreements between partners are common. For example, a Russian IBC in Uzbekistan experienced difficulties when an Uzbek Ministry reneged on their promise to provide funding for specialist laboratory equipment (Muratov & Wilkins, 2024). In 2024, just months after enrolling its first students, Harrisburg University decided to close its campus in Dubai when two major funders withdrew their support for the venture (Moody, 2024). This closure came only 1 year after Harrisburg University closed its campus in Panama, which had low student enrolments and a relatively high financial burden of US\$1.5 million a year for operating expenses (Moody, 2024). The university concluded that it was better to focus on its home areas of the state of Pennsylvania and the mid-Atlantic region and to attract international students to the US rather than engaging in transnational education.

Modul University Dubai faced a huge problem in 2019 when the parent institution in Austria terminated its co-operation agreement with the Dubai-based partner, citing academic breaches and refusal of the UAE institution to provide them with student admission records (Rizvi, 2019). This resulted in students who had completed their programmes not receiving their degrees. In 2020, the UAE Ministry of Education revoked Modul University Dubai's licence, citing failure to meet quality and accreditation standards. Clearly, if a host (or home) country ministry revokes an IBC's licence, then the institution will likely have no strategic options other than to make the arrangements for closure. The strategies of IBCs are often affected by political influences and the relationships between the home and host countries. For example, recent state laws in the US make it difficult for public universities to partner with or accept funding from 'countries of concern', such as China and Russia.

Figure 2 shows some of the case examples discussed in our secondary research findings.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to identify the organisational level strategies adopted by small IBCs, and the pull and push factors that have an influence on the choice of these strategies. Small institutions experience a common set of weaknesses and disadvantages compared to their larger counterparts, which include having access to fewer resources, lack of economies of scale, and weaker brand reputations. Despite the constraints facing them, small IBCs can be successful, as recognised by our research participant at an IBC in Bangladesh:

Small higher education institutions can survive and potentially prosper in the future, but their success hinges on adapting to changing landscapes, focusing on niche strengths, and leveraging technology and partnerships to enhance their value proposition.

The decisions of institutions to establish a new IBC are influenced by a range of push factors (e.g., insufficient funding at home, and the home country government encouraging institutions to be more entrepreneurial), and pull factors (e.g., the ability to generate new sources of income, and offers from foreign governments to fully fund the establishment and ongoing expenses of the IBC) (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Although institutions have diverse motivations for establishing IBCs, it was found that institutional growth objectives serve as a primary driver of strategic direction, with entrepreneurial and innovative prospector-type institutions often achieving the highest success. In most cases, the sample institutions could not be allocated to only one strategic-type category, as most participants provided some answers that could match an alternative strategy type. This suggests that, at least to some extent, institutions may be applying a hybrid strategic approach.

Transnational education can provide soft power benefits for both sending and receiving countries. For host countries, successful IBCs can deliver political legitimacy, internal stability and modernisation, as well as enhancing the nation's international standing and reputation. Some of our participants mentioned the need to address host country requirements, interests and expectations, and they were aware of contributing to the host country's soft power through the provision of 'world-class' education, knowledge transfer, research partnerships and improved diplomatic relationships with the IBC's home country. Surprisingly, none of our participants mentioned the soft power desired or expected by their home countries. Rather, IBCs implement strategies that fit with their own objectives and operating context, e.g., growth based on whether they are a single or multi-discipline institution and according to the expectations of the key funder. This aligns with the results of a study undertaken by He and Wilkins (2019), which found that the managers of Chinese IBCs have only limited interest and capability to project or contribute toward China's soft power.

For IBCs already in operation, we identified two broad strategic options, both of which are associated with student enrolments: achieving growth or maintaining the status quo. Our desk research revealed three further strategic options that have been chosen by, or for, IBCs: transforming, selling or closing the campus. In our sample, 11 of the 14 IBCs include growth as a strategic institutional objective and they set targets for increasing student enrolments. In most cases, institutions achieve growth by expanding organically, which could correspond to the strategies known as 'market penetration' and 'market development' in Ansoff's Growth Matrix (Ansoff, 1957). Market penetration involves attracting new students, e.g., through improved marketing, or 'selling' more to existing students, e.g., persuading bachelor graduates to stay at the institution for a master's degree. To achieve increased



University of Birmingham Dubai, original campus, 2018  
(grow)



University of Birmingham Dubai, new campus, 2022  
(grow)



BIMM University Berlin, which specialises in creative arts  
(maintain status quo)



HEC Paris Doha, a French business school in Qatar  
(maintain status quo)



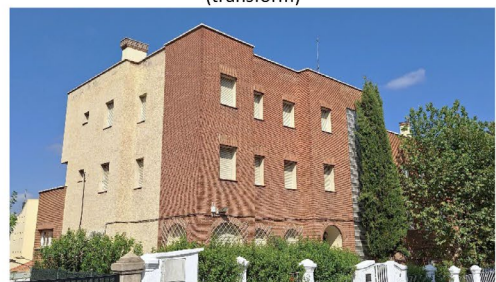
University of Doha for Science and Technology, which was  
previously the College of the North Atlantic – Qatar  
(transform)



Mohammed V University Abu Dhabi transformed into  
Mohamed bin Zayed University for Humanities  
(transform)



Middlesex University Dubai changed ownership  
(sell)



Suffolk University, Madrid Campus for study abroad  
(quit)

FIGURE 2 The strategic options chosen by a selection of small international branch campuses.

student numbers, our participants mentioned the need to expand premises and to invest in more resources and equipment.

Our research participants reported that the market development approach most commonly involved introducing new programmes, either in new discipline areas or at a different level, i.e., bachelor, master and doctoral. Although five of our participants mentioned that

their institution had ambitions to undertake more research in the future, the introduction of graduate research programmes appeared to be the main strategy mentioned to achieve this. Only the IBC in China had established a research centre, with the expectation that this would encourage and support academic staff to do more research. Except for a very few specialist institutions, small IBCs generally have no, or very little, access to research funding, either in the host or home country.

Occasionally, IBCs expand through inorganic growth. For example, in 2020, the UAE Ministry of Education withdrew the licences of six institutions because they failed to achieve the required quality standards, which resulted in each of the institutions closing. Some of the closed institutions agreed to transfer cohorts of students to other institutions that gave full credit for previous courses taken, adapted the students' future programmes to fit with what had already been taken, or that offered tuition fee discounts.

The pull factors that encourage prospector type IBCs to pursue a growth strategy include having revenue generation as an institutional objective, possessing a strong reputation (e.g., high ranking institutions) and operating in markets with a substantial undersupply of higher education places. The push factors that encourage a growth strategy include encouragement or pressure from the home or host country government, and the need to generate funds for survival/break-even, or for needed investment in facilities and resources. The best students and professors likely prefer to go to an institution that is growing and appears successful. The strongest push factor influencing institutions to sell or close campuses is financial losses and the perception that sufficient financial improvement is not possible within a reasonable timescale. New strategic objectives and external political/economic influences can influence institutions to sell or close an IBC. In a few rare cases, the opportunity to realise a capital gain may serve as the principal pull factor to sell a campus.

Understanding an organisation's strategic direction is crucial for aligning routine activities with long-term goals, maximising resource efficiency and navigating changes in the business environment. It serves as a roadmap that ensures all departments move in the same direction, preventing disjointed efforts and fostering a shared, forward-focused vision. Specifying its strategic direction may help an IBC to achieve first-mover advantages in growth scenarios, and when closure is inevitable or necessary, organisational members can take the actions that minimise financial losses and disruption to operations.

Our findings provide valuable information for practitioners, as strategic decision makers will better understand the factors that can impact upon the performance of a newly established or small IBC, and the strategic options that may be available to them. The information gained may assist institution managers with investment appraisal of potential IBC opportunities, as well as operational and contingency planning. Strategy decision-makers should remember that for optimal organisational performance they will need to apply the optimal mix of planned and emergent strategy decision-making (how the strategy is formed), to implement the optimal mix of proactive and reactive strategy (how the strategy responds to the environment). Although a planned approach is generally needed for well-organised long-term growth, a reactive approach is also necessary to effectively deal with unforeseen environmental changes and crises. Many of the research findings are applicable to small higher education institutions in domestic as well as foreign settings, e.g., small private for-profit providers can gain insights about strategies for growth or better understand the rationales and advantages of staying a small niche institution.

Our substantial use of secondary data sources offered a degree of triangulation to complement our relatively modest primary data sample. We believe that there is sufficient evidence to support the five strategic options that we have identified. However, replication studies could further support our findings and conclusions. We recognise that IBC managers, also our research participants, may in rare cases not have complete information regarding the plans for their campus. For example, it appears that Texas A&M University's

decision in 2024 to close its campus in Qatar came somewhat as a surprise to the IBC managers (Nash, 2024). We stress that such occurrences are quite rare, so they are unlikely to have had a negative effect on the validity or reliability of our findings and conclusions. Nevertheless, some IBCs operate like franchise operations, and the IBC's objectives and strategies are often chosen largely by the partner organisation. Examples of IBC managers being excluded from strategic decision-making can be found.

For example, although the time horizon for the transformation of the College of the North Atlantic—Qatar into the University of Doha for Science and Technology was determined by the Qatari State to occur 20 years after establishment, the IBC managers were never aware of the exact planned transformation date, and they did not play an active part in the decision-making regarding transformation. Also, in 2025, Yale-NUS College in Singapore was closed and then made part of the NUS University Scholars Programme, creating a new institution named simply as 'New College'. Yale University's management were not consulted on the decision to end its partnership with the National University of Singapore (Cobb, 2022).

This research did not consider how decisions were made. A further avenue for future research would be to examine the strategy decision-making process, to examine the consultation and negotiation practices, and the extent to which IBC managers pursue self-interests rather than being constrained by external pressures. We acknowledge that we considered institutional objectives and strategies over the standard textbook 5-year time frame, but in transnational education, where the initial and ongoing financial outlays can be huge and the time taken to achieve financial break-even lengthy, a longer time horizon may have been more appropriate. For example, when announcing in 2025 that it would invest £499 million to develop a second campus in Malaysia, the vice-chancellor of Monash University explained that this investment was considered as part of a plan for the next 30–50 years (Ross, 2025). Future research could adopt a longitudinal research design to discover how institutional strategies change over time and to explore the outcomes of different implemented strategies.

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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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