

Student attitudes to the physical environment and shared facilities of purpose-built transnational education hubs

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Abstract

Purpose – Since the early 2000s, a number of purpose-built education hubs have been established globally, where students from different higher education institutions may share sports and recreational facilities, food courts, student accommodation, and health services. The purpose of this study is to assess, from the students' perspective, the effectiveness of the shared campus concept.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted an inductive qualitative research design that involved a non-generalisable purposive sample. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 38 undergraduate students who studied in a purpose-built transnational education hub in Malaysia or the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Findings – It was found that students were largely satisfied with their experience of studying at a shared campus. In some cases, students' preference for a solely-owned university campus appeared to be more of a psychological desire, rather than being based on any failure of the hub to provide the necessary facilities, resources, and activities.

Originality/value – To our knowledge, this is the first study that has explored the theoretical concept of a three-level nested servicescape (institution/purpose-built hub/town) in a higher education context, and specifically in relation to student attitudes and experiences at purpose-built education hubs.

Practical implications – The findings of the research suggest that, within a three-level nested servicescape, purpose-built education hubs may provide a viable solution for institutions to successfully establish a branch campus in a foreign country.

Keywords Transnational education, Higher education hubs, International branch campuses, Servicescape, University facilities, Campus experience

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

An international branch campus is a satellite bricks-and-mortar entity established in a foreign country by a higher education institution that provides curricula and external quality assurance, and which awards the qualifications (Knight and Motala-Timol, 2021). At the end of 2025, 384 were operating globally (C-BERT, 2025). They are the riskiest form of transnational education in terms of potential financial losses and reputational damage, particularly if student enrolments fail to materialise (Healey, 2015). In this research, transnational education is recognised as education providers that cross national borders to establish and operate a campus in a foreign country.

To minimise the risk of financial losses, many international branch campuses start life on a small scale, often operating from a few rooms in an office block. Alternatively, international branches may be established in a purpose-built education hub, where a number of different institutions are located. These hubs are owned and managed by organisations that act as infrastructure providers, selling or renting space to higher education institutions. For example, George Mason University Korea, Middlesex University Dubai, Northwestern University in Qatar, and the University of Reading Malaysia are each located in a purpose-built education hub that is owned and managed by the hub developer. Often, the students at these institutions share facilities such as dining halls, student housing and sports facilities with students from other institutions.

Higher education institutions that want to establish an international branch campus must decide whether to construct their own campus, establish a campus in partnership with a local individual or organisation, or move into ready-made premises provided by an educational infrastructure provider. The last option refers to the purpose-built education hub, which is a managed educational space, with shared facilities, that is occupied by multiple educational providers. The findings of this research provide valuable information for institutions that want to develop international branch campuses, as it reveals what students who are studying at a purpose-built hub think about the shared campus concept. Further, in our discussion, we identify some of the criteria that institutions may use to evaluate purpose-built hubs.

Research purpose and research questions

Relatively little research has investigated the product offering and operation of purpose-built education hubs that are owned and managed by specialist infrastructure providers. The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of purpose-built education hubs, and specifically the shared aspects of these, and how these perceptions affect students' behaviours and feelings. The research is *not* concerned with programme delivery or students' in-class experiences, as these occur within the institution at which the student is primarily enrolled. Rather, the research is interested in how, and the extent to which, students interact with the wider hub environment, including other institutions located in the hub. The research seeks to identify the main benefits and opportunities offered by the shared campus concept in transnational education settings, as well as the common challenges and issues.

By conducting a survey of students who study in a purpose-built education hub (we refer here to the premises, not the geographic area), we fill a much needed gap in the literature, to gain a deeper understanding about the experience that may be enjoyed by students at such campuses, where certain facilities and common areas are shared with students from other institutions. Specifically, the research answers three questions: How does the shared campus environment of a purpose-built education hub influence students' (1) choice of institution, (2) perceived campus experience, and (3) overall satisfaction? The findings of this research may inform institution decision makers about the key factors they should consider when undertaking strategic planning related to the establishment and operation of international branch campuses.

Theoretical frame

In some higher education markets, *purpose-built* education hubs have been developed by specialist infrastructure providers. A purpose-built hub supplies premises and facilities to multiple educational institutions. In such hubs, each individual institution is usually responsible for its own teaching/learning servicescape (lecture rooms, labs, resources for teaching etc.), while the non-academic servicescape – such as the sports and recreational provision, food courts, and retail outlets – is developed and managed by the hub developer.

This research draws on the concept of nested servicescapes as its theoretical frame (Sheng *et al.*, 2017; Siguaw *et al.*, 2019). A servicescape may be regarded as the environment that facilitates service delivery, and which activates internal cognitive, emotional and physiological responses in individuals that influence their sense of well-being and satisfaction (Pareigis *et al.*, 2012). A nested servicescape exists when one servicescape exists within another. For example, a student's decision of where to enrol, their study and life experiences, and their overall satisfaction, may be influenced by the servicescapes of both the institution and town in which the university is located. The 'town servicescape' refers to the infrastructure, facilities and landscape of the geographic area in which the institution is located (Siguaw *et al.*, 2019).

A number of studies have revealed that an institution's location and town servicescape may have an impact on student access (Christie *et al.*, 2005), students' choice of institution (Briggs, 2007), student experience and overall satisfaction (Biswas *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, a campus's physical environment and facilities may influence students' choice of institution (Price *et al.*, 2003; Stephenson *et al.*, 2016), experience and satisfaction (Hanssen and Solvoll, 2015; Wilkins *et al.*, 2024a). However, little research has investigated whether nested servicescapes influence consumer choices.

Researchers have shown a lot of interest in servicescapes in marketing and consumer behaviour research. For example, a search of the Scopus database identified 1,190 documents related to servicescapes. However, only three documents were identified for the term 'nested servicescape*'. Therefore, this is likely the first study to explore a three-level nested servicescape (institution/purpose-built hub/town) in a higher education context (Figure 1). The institution servicescape refers to the premises and areas that are accessed regularly only by students enrolled at the institution. This includes the teaching rooms, library, computer labs, private study

rooms/areas, staff rooms and possibly a café and games/recreation room (Wilkins *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b). If the institution is located in a purpose-built hub, the education hub servicescape refers to the land and facilities (such as the food court and sports halls) that may be accessed or used by any student in the hub, regardless of the institution at which they are enrolled.

If a student enrolled at University X attends a careers or music event held at University Y, which is also located in the hub, it could be considered that the student is interacting with the hub servicescape, as they would be outside their own institution's servicescape. Shops, restaurants, cinemas, leisure centres and parks located outside the education hub boundary, but within easy travel distance of the hub, would be in the town servicescape.

This research considers, in a higher education setting, how the education hub servicescape in a three-level nested servicescape may influence students' choice of institution, perceived campus experience and overall satisfaction.

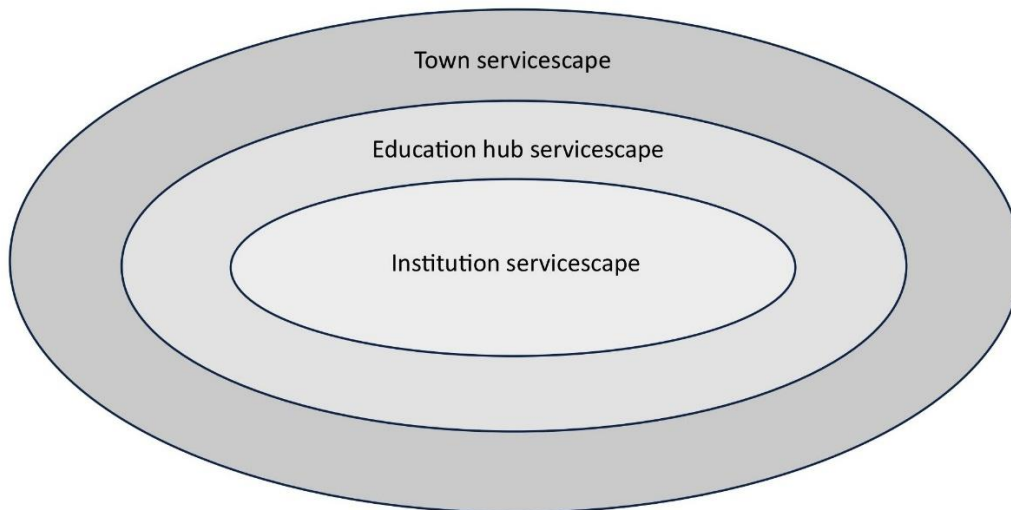


Figure 1. Conceptualisation of a three-level nested servicescape in transnational education.

Source: Authors' own work.

Purpose-built education hubs

Knight (2011, p. 233) defines an education hub as 'a planned effort to build a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaged in education, training, knowledge production and innovation initiatives'. It is important to recognise that these education hubs are planned (e.g., by governments and/or profit-seeking property or investment companies) and that they involve international actors, such as foreign universities that establish international branch campuses. In practice, the term 'education hub' may refer to a country, city, region or zone within a country or a purpose-built managed facility.

This research is concerned only with the purpose-built managed type of education hub, where a hub developer acts as a provider of managed educational infrastructure, supplying premises and facilities to multiple educational institutions. Thus, we define a purpose-built education hub as follows:

A purpose-built education hub refers to the land, premises and facilities that an infrastructure developer/manager provides to multiple educational institutions, usually with specific areas and facilities that are shared by students of different institutions.

In purpose-built hubs that are owned and managed by a hub developer, institutions are typically located on adjoining plots of land, and in some cases, several different institutions are located in the same building. For example, Figure 2 shows pictures of two purpose-built education hubs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The first picture shows a view of the academic zone within the Ras Al Khaimah Economic Zone (RAKEZ), where three institutions are located side-by-side in a row, sharing the same car parking area (Bath Spa University, Munnar Catering College and the University of West London). The second picture, taken at Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), shows a building in which five education institutions are located (The British University in Dubai, Curtin University, NEST Academy of Management Education, SZABIST University, and the UK College of Business and Computing).

Purpose-built education hubs are developed by specialist infrastructure providers, which own and manage the whole development, with particular focus on the communal areas. For example, EduCity in Malaysia is managed by Iskandar Investment Berhad, while Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) and Dubai Knowledge Park (DKP) in the UAE are managed by the TECOM Group. Once established in a managed education hub, most institutions tend to remain there. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, as EduCity does not allow institutions to compete for students in the same discipline areas, the University of Southampton decided to leave EduCity, and it constructed its own state-of-the-art campus outside the hub's official boundary in order to expand and introduce new programmes.

Institutions that are located in a purpose-built education hub may offer their students access to superior leisure, recreational and professional development opportunities. For example, a policy at Education City in Qatar allows cross-registration, whereby a student at any institution in the hub may enrol for a minor course at any other institution in the hub. An institution's location and its campus environment may have considerable influence on students' choice of institution, and their subsequent campus experience and satisfaction (Wilkins *et al.*, 2024a).

While the Scopus database identified 322 documents related to education hubs, the vast majority of these publications were concerned with city-based hubs or special designated zones in which education institutions locate. Using search terms such as 'planned education hub' and 'purpose-built education hub' returned no results. Little is currently known about the purpose-built education hub and specifically students' attitudes and perceptions toward the shared campus concept, from the perspective of having to share facilities, resources, and events with students from

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other institutions. Therefore, the findings of this research may be useful to institutions that want to establish international branch campuses, to aid the evaluation of alternative operating models, specifically with regard to premises and facilities.



The sign at RAKEZ Academic Zone says 'University of Stirling' but the three educational institutions that can be seen in the background (from left to right) are Bath Spa University, Munnar Catering College and the University of West London.



Block 10 of Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), where five higher education institutions are located.

Figure 2. Two of the purpose-built education hubs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Both photographs were taken by Stephen Wilkins.

Physical environment and facilities

Previous research has indicated that the physical environment and facilities of a university's campus may influence students' institution choice, perceived teaching and learning quality, student experience, and student satisfaction (e.g., Brink *et al.*, 2024; Griffiths and Dickinson, 2025; Huesman Jr. *et al.*, 2009; Kärnä and Julin, 2015; Winter and Chapleo, 2017). In purpose-built education hubs, student housing, food courts, medical centres, and facilities for sports and recreation may be shared by the students of different institutions. These services are entirely or mostly developed and overseen by the hub management company. Although institutions may avoid the financial expenses and risks associated with developing the non-academic facilities, they may have minimal control over the breadth and quality of provision, and how facilities and resources are used by different institutions in the hub.

In discovering the extent to which students perceive they have a good campus experience, institutions can determine whether the shared campus format is delivering the expected outcomes for both students and the institution, or whether it would be better to develop a sole-owned and occupied campus that provides all non-academic facilities, resources, and activities in addition to those associated with teaching and learning.

Campus experience

This research focuses on campus experience, which is one component of the individual's overall student experience. We use the term 'campus experience' to refer to the physical campus environment as a place to study, socialise, participate in sports and recreational activities, and possibly live. Therefore, the campus experience is concerned with the student's life that is *not* directly connected with programme delivery and classroom experiences. We differentiate campus experience from general student experience because international branch campuses in a managed education hub maintain direct control over most matters related to teaching and learning – which contributes toward overall student experience – but it is the hub manager that controls many of the non-academic facilities and activities that determine a student's campus experience.

In purpose-built education hubs, institutions typically share certain facilities and services. This may enable small institutions, and those lacking the finance necessary for institution-specific infrastructure investment, to offer students a relatively high quality campus experience. Some hub management companies also organise sports competitions, careers fairs, and cultural events, which may be attended by students from any institution in the hub. The student-to-student interaction promoted by such events may result in higher levels of student satisfaction with their campus experience and university life in general (Wong and Chapman, 2023).

To our knowledge, this is the first study to consider students' attitudes towards the shared campus concept at purpose-built education hubs in the context of institutions' decisions about branch campus location, infrastructure, and facilities. By comparing the feedback of students at EduCity with that of students at two hubs in the Emirate of Dubai (DIAC and DKP), this research aims to discover the extent to which students in these three case example hubs perceive that they

are receiving a positive campus experience. Specifically, this research is interested in discovering the extent to which the shared campus concept is successful in satisfying the needs of both students and (implicitly) institutions.

Method

The study used Elliot and Timulak's (2021) descriptive-interpretative qualitative research method. This generic approach to qualitative research may be ideal for applied research that seeks to gain a deep understanding of a relatively non-complex subject (Kahlke, 2014). Furthermore, Lim (2011) argues that generic qualitative research approaches are particularly suitable, even inevitable, when a research topic or area has few theories or empirical studies. While studies on the physical environment in higher education exist (e.g., Wells and Daunt, 2016; Wilkins *et al.*, 2024b; Winter and Chapleo, 2017), the psychological and emotional responses of students to the shared campus concept are unknown.

The descriptive-interpretative method requires that the study's research questions are answered through a systematic process of description and interpretation. Exploratory, open-ended questions were used to obtain rich descriptive responses from students on their attitudes, perceptions, actions and experiences. Then, these descriptions were subjected to a process of interpretation and analysis. Throughout the research process, we focused on students' responses (descriptions) that explain how the shared campus environment of the purpose-built education hub had influenced their choice of institution, perceived campus experience and overall satisfaction.

The inductive qualitative research design involved semi-structured interviews with 38 undergraduate students in Malaysia and the UAE. The study population was full-time undergraduate students enrolled at a higher education institution that is located in a purpose-built education hub. Our participants studied at one of our five sample institutions, which are located in three different education hubs (one in Malaysia and two in the UAE). We limited our purposive sample to full-time undergraduate students, as these individuals are likely to interact with, and be more concerned with, the shared campus environment compared to part-time and graduate students. Thus, our student sample possessed the specific characteristics, knowledge and experiences that were relevant to answering our research question. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the research ethics committee of the lead author's institution. Each participant gave their informed consent before the interview commenced and this was audio or video recorded.

An interview guide was developed, which was informed by the literature (e.g., Ahmad and Buchanan, 2017; Kärnä and Julin, 2015; Merola *et al.*, 2022; Wilkins *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b; Winter and Chapleo, 2017). In addition to the demographic questions, we asked 13 open questions, some of which had additional prompt or sub-questions. Examples of questions include, 'To what extent did your university being located in [name of hub] influence your decision to study at this university?'; 'Have you used any of [name of hub] facilities, and if so, how satisfied are you with these?'; 'What are the best and worst things about being a student at [name of hub]?' and 'Overall, how satisfied are you being a student at [name of hub] in terms of your educational experience, social experience, sports/leisure/recreational experience, and needs for food, shops/banks, and

doctor/health services?’ (asked separately as sub questions related to satisfaction). Interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, so that they could offer detailed answers, which included the reasons that justify or explain their answers. The follow-up questions that were asked sought clarification or elaboration on the interviewee’s initial responses, as well as examples to support their narratives.

The study participants were recruited using a variety of means; some students were currently or previously taught by a member of the research team (who were recruited in class or via email/class-based WhatsApp groups), some were referred by another participant (chain referral/snowballing method), while others responded to calls for research participants that were publicised by the institution. We believe that biases resulting from power imbalance or social desirability were unlikely since the students were providing information on an external phenomenon that was not directly related to their teacher, institution or classroom experiences. Similarly, as educators in the sample institutions, the researchers (interviewers) had no particular interest in achieving any particular responses or outcomes.

Our samples are considered broadly representative of each institution’s student profile in terms of students’ gender (55 per cent female in our sample) and nationality. In Malaysia, all students were citizens; in the UAE over 95 per cent of the sample were expatriates, about half being Indian or Pakistani and the remainder Arab (e.g., Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese and Syrian). It should be noted that expatriates in the UAE often reside in the country semi-permanently, so it is likely that more than a third of our UAE sample were actually born in the UAE and have never lived elsewhere. About two-thirds of our sample studied a business-related subject and the remainder studied computer science, engineering, psychology or design/communication. No notable differences in responses were observed among students studying different subjects. As is common in most transnational education settings, the vast majority of our participants lived outside of the hub, mainly with family members. Only three students in Malaysia were living in housing located within the hub boundary.

The students were interviewed online by one of three researchers, using the Zoom platform. The 38 interviews undertaken had a mean duration of 28 minutes. We are confident that data saturation was achieved because after about 25 interviews we learnt little that was new and we were satisfied that we had obtained sufficient data to answer our research questions. However, we continued interviewing for a while, to obtain a greater diversity of participants in terms of their demographic categorisations. All of the interviews were audio or video recorded and transcribed.

A systematic process of interpretation and analysis was used to analyse the data, as recommended by Elliot and Timulak (2021). One of the researchers undertook the initial data analysis, to identify the key ideas and patterns in the data, and the interpretations and conclusions of this researcher were later confirmed in consensus discussions by the other two researchers, thus ensuring inter-rater reliability.

Being critically aware of the information we were seeking, any text (word or short phrase) that was recognised as offering an insight or explanation of the interviewee’s institution choice, perceived campus experience and overall satisfaction was coded. For example, related to campus

experience, codes were allocated for things like an environment that encourages study; the availability of prepared meals; the availability of a convenience store or supermarket; the quality of sports facilities; and the availability and quality of student housing. Codes could be based on the interviewee's thoughts, actions or experiences.

Rather than attempting to interpret and understand each line of the transcribed text, we sought to gain a broad understanding of the data (Hunt, 2009), so that we could identify the key factors that had influenced students' institution choices, perceived campus experience and overall satisfaction. When a cluster of similar descriptions were observed, the coded items were grouped into themes that represented categories of explanation that answered our research questions. In the iterative rounds of data analysis, provisional themes were refined and sometimes renamed.

For example, when evaluating students' choice of institution, the coded items were grouped into themes that were related to perceived education quality (e.g., EQ1 institution ranking, EQ2 institution reputation, EQ3 professors, EQ4 resources, EQ6 personal recommendations from others); convenience and individual factors (e.g., CI distance from home, CI5 sibling studied in the hub); financial issues (e.g., FN1 level of tuition fees, FN2 financial aid); and hub-related attributes (e.g., HB1 hub scale/appearance; HB2 hub infrastructure/facilities, HB3 events/student life, H5 links to learning – academic atmosphere, quiet with less distractions, etc.). Examples of student quotes related to HB1 include “the campus is large and impressive”, “everything looks new and up-to-date” and “it's an attractive environment in which to study”.

Similarly, the codes for campus experience were categorised into themes related to basic everyday needs (e.g., BA1 food, BA2 accommodation, BA4 laundry service); learning (e.g., LN1 special events, LN4 quiet places to study); safety (e.g., SA1 gated campus, SA2 security guards); and recreation/leisure (e.g., RL1 sports facilities, RL3 games rooms). No notable issues of inter-rater reliability were observed between the researchers, who collectively perceived that data saturation had been achieved and that there was sufficient data to support each of the themes identified.

Findings

Students' choice of institution

The most popular reasons offered by our study's participants for their institution choice were the institution's reputation or ranking, perceived quality of education, likely career benefits, level of tuition fees, and the availability of high-value scholarships. Some individuals considered the institution's specialist equipment and resources that could support learning, while others were influenced by siblings who had previously studied at the institution. The most popular reason offered that was associated with the hub was its location, i.e., being an easy daily commute from the individual's home.

Our participants only offered specific comments about the education hub as a factor that had influenced their institution choice after being prompted to discuss these influences. Many students mentioned that they wanted to study somewhere that was attractive, well-designed, and well-equipped, and which had an 'academic atmosphere'. Particularly at DIAC and EduCity, several

students mentioned that the quiet and peaceful environment would be good for studying. An example from a student in Malaysia:

EduCity is a quiet place, with a good atmosphere, where I can focus on study and not be distracted, like I would be in KL [Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia], where there is much more entertainment and things to do. (3rd year business student, EduCity)

The students' interview responses with regard to the influence of the hub in their institution choice may be classified as having mostly a neutral or small influence; no participant mentioned the shared aspect of the campus as being a strong negative factor, but similarly, no participant viewed it as a strong positive factor either. Some students were impressed with the scale of the entire hub while others were not, as the following two quotes illustrate:

I did visit the campus before choosing to study at my university and I was impressed, not just by the institution, but by the whole environment of EduCity. I was impressed to see so many universities in one area, because in other places, to my knowledge, there is just one university in one area. (3rd year business student, EduCity)

Before I visited my university for the first time, I was expecting it to have its own big campus. I did not know that a university could exist on just two floors in a building. I was not really impressed with the campus, even the shared parts, but I came for the education, not the place. But, overall, I have what I need, so everything is fine. (4th year business student, DIAC)

Some of the students at Dubai Knowledge Park said that they wanted to study at a campus that was easy to access by public transport, that was close to major businesses (for internships and future employment) and retail/leisure facilities, e.g., to visit a mall at the end of the college day or in free periods. In conclusion, it was clear that the servicescape of each level in the three-level nested servicescape (institution/ purpose-built hub/ town or surrounding area) had the potential to influence students' choices of institution.

Campus experience

Each of the hubs featured in this study offer sports facilities, such as football pitches, cricket fields, and basketball/badminton courts, either on the site of the main shared campus, or near to the hub. For example, EduCity has a sports complex that includes a 6,000-seat stadium, suitable for football and athletics, a 1,500-seat indoor arena, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and several outdoor courts that can be used for a range of sports. In each of the hubs, the sports facilities are available free of charge or at a low price, which is appreciated by students, but if the prices are perceived by students as high, this acts as a barrier to them using the facilities.

I am very keen on sports and the facilities at Educity are impressive, like the swimming pool, stadium and gym. The other universities that I considered studying at didn't have such good facilities. (2nd year business student, EduCity)

Every hub provides food and retail outlets, as well as student housing. The food and retail outlets sometimes offer part-time employment to students. The hubs featured in this study do not have cinemas, nightclubs, or other such entertainments, which might be found on many Western university campuses. Therefore, students need to leave the hub for such entertainment. Anyhow, since most undergraduate students in the hubs live off-campus, they are generally only on campus during the day.

Almost half of our participants had previously attended an event that was organised either by the hub's management company or another institution in the hub. For example, EduCity regularly organises seminars that have a professional development or careers focus, which are open to students from any institution in the hub. In each of our sample hubs, some institutions organise educational events, workshops and careers fairs, to which students from other institutions are invited. Two examples of students interacting with institutions other than the one where they are registered:

I went to AUE [American University in the Emirates] for an animation course. I saw and used their computers, powerful PCs [personal computers], designed to model and animate 3D [three-dimensional] characters. The set-up was different to our uni. It was really cool to see the designers working, doing things like character design, which helped me understand better how game design works. (3rd year computer science student, DIAC)

The shared campus is good for making connections. For example, next to us we have the UK College of Business and Computing. We knew a group of third year students who were working on a very big project, and they managed to get funding from KHDA [Knowledge and Human Development Authority], which is located in one of the other buildings close to us. This made us very aware of the opportunities that could exist as a student at DIAC. (2nd year computer science student, DIAC)

The two examples above illustrate the possible opportunities for students to benefit from other institutions in the hub for educational purposes. Some students also welcomed the opportunity to meet students from other institutions in social contexts. This is especially true of individuals that welcome meeting new people that have different backgrounds in terms of their nationality or subject studied. Expatriate children in particular are often adventurous and open to such social and cultural experiences (Pollock *et al.*, 2017). Some institutions organise music festivals, sports competitions, and cultural events, to which students from other institutions are invited, as the example below illustrates:

There are lots of opportunities at EduCity to boost your network. Apart from going to the food court, sometimes there are events we can go to. For example, Newcastle University organised an international music festival. There was a great atmosphere, and I met some new people from the other unis, and I even met some people from the back stage crew, and learnt about that as well. (3rd year business student, EduCity)

All of our participants perceived their campus as a safe environment in which to study, and each of the hubs has plenty of security staff and cameras. At EduCity, some students have to pass through two security checkpoints, first to enter EduCity and then to enter the premises of their institution. However, some institutions have fenced off their premises, making them inaccessible to students from other institutions, which reduces the feeling among students that they are part of one big educational community.

None of our UAE sample students lived in hub or institution-provided housing, but the EduCity students who lived on campus were largely satisfied with the provision. For example, EduCity's Village provides various accommodation options to satisfy different budgets, which come with cooking facilities, a games room, a lounge/reading area, basketball and badminton courts, a laundry room, and free Wi-Fi. There is also a cafeteria and convenience store on site, as well as car parking and facilities for electric scooters. However, it is the social interaction that is most valued by some students, who commented that they would likely be very lonely if they lived off-campus. An example from a student in the Malaysian hub:

Living in the hostel is very nice. We have everything that we need, a kitchen for cooking and a room with washing machines that we can use. I learnt to be independent living on campus, and it improved my communication and interpersonal skills. It is great to have friends from other unis, with different backgrounds, as I learnt many new things. (3rd year business student, EduCity)

The students at EduCity were generally more positive about their student experience than the students at DIAC and DKP, which reflects the fact that EduCity has superior student housing and facilities for sports, leisure and recreation.

Student satisfaction

First, it should be recognised that each of our participants was sufficiently satisfied to stay enrolled at their institution in the purpose-built hub. Overall, students appeared largely satisfied with their experience of studying in a purpose-built hub that has shared facilities, as the following example illustrates:

DIAC gives me everything that I need. A shared campus is nothing less than a university that has its own campus, in terms of all the education stuff. It's open 24/7, security guards are everywhere to protect us, and there are always events going on that we can go to. The sports facilities are fine, and the social life has been amazing. Even a student who was not very sociable will turn to be very sociable. (2nd year engineering student, DIAC)

No individual was perceived by the researchers as being strongly dissatisfied with the shared campus concept. It was found that for many students, their level of overall satisfaction increased with the length of time they had been at the campus. First year students were sometimes surprised or a bit overwhelmed to discover that they were sharing facilities, resources, activities, and events with students from other institutions, but over time, they came to recognise the benefits that this

presented. However, about two-thirds of our participants revealed that, given a free choice, they would prefer to study at an institution that had its own non-shared campus, if they were not limited by the constraints of programme availability, level of tuition fees/availability of scholarships, or location (distance from home). An example of an individual's preference to study at a university that has its own (non-academic) facilities:

The only thing I like about studying at a shared campus is the interaction I get with students from other universities and organisations like the Dubai Statistics Centre, which provided me with information and support for a project. But I would still prefer to study at a university that has its own campus, where the facilities are complete. I think it's human psychology that people would like to have a sense of 'this is my university and we have this, we have that, and it's not shared with anyone'. (4th year business student, DIAC)

In summary, we found that the quality of education, lecturers, and learning resources were more important to the vast majority of students, compared to factors related to the campus environment and student life. However, it was clear that the hub's facilities, activities, and events do also contribute to overall student satisfaction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of purpose-built education hubs, and specifically the shared aspects of these hubs, and how these perceptions affect students' behaviours and feelings. Our findings reveal the extent to which the purpose-built hub format is successful in satisfying the needs and desires of students. Not surprisingly, almost every student considered their institution's servicescape as the most important, compared to the hub and town servicescapes, as this is where they receive the majority of their teaching and formal learning. However, the findings also indicate that the servicescape at each of the three nested levels may, to some extent, influence students' choice of institution, perceived campus experience and overall satisfaction.

As a theoretical contribution, this research highlights the need for an expanded servicescape framework. As suggested by Sheng *et al.* (2017), there is evidence in our data to suggest that when servicescapes are nested, one servicescape may influence another. For example, students at EduCity and DIAC may have perceived the quieter and safer town servicescape as having an effect on the hub servicescape, perceiving this as quieter and more conducive to effective study than other locations. This example illustrates how one servicescape may support and interact with another servicescape. More research is needed to explore the impacts of nested servicescapes on student attitudes, experiences and decision-making, and these may be explored in terms of physical spaces, ambient conditions, social interactions or perceived safety (Siguaw *et al.* 2019).

The findings identify some of the main benefits and opportunities offered by the shared campus concept in transnational settings, as well as the common challenges and issues. In general, our participants were largely satisfied with their experience of studying at the shared campus of a

purpose-built education hub. No individual was perceived by the researchers as being strongly dissatisfied with the shared campus concept. This finding may be welcomed by institutions that would like to expand abroad, particularly those that lack the finance to construct their own campus from scratch.

Working with an education hub developer may offer foreign higher education institutions a number of benefits, including the provision of local market information, advice and support with regulatory requirements, ready-made premises, facilities for student recreation and life, and promotional support at the hub level. The findings of this study suggest that purpose-built education hubs may provide a viable solution to help institutions successfully enter a foreign country, as these hubs appear to provide a good or acceptable level of infrastructure, resources, support, and activities related to most of the non-academic needs of students and institutions.

By conducting a survey of students who study in a purpose-built education hub, this research fills a much needed gap in the literature, to gain a deeper understanding about the experience that may be enjoyed by students at such shared campuses, where certain facilities and common areas are shared with students from other institutions. A key finding of the study is that although many students initially had reservations about joining a university located in a shared campus, particularly if the institution was small (i.e., having less than 1,000 students), their experiences once enrolled were in fact perceived as largely positive, with the hub providing everything, or most things, that the individual needed.

Despite most students being satisfied with their campus experience, about two-thirds of our participants would still have preferred to study at an institution that has its own non-shared campus. Therefore, students' preference for a solely-owned university campus appears more of a psychological desire, rather than being based on any failure of the hub to provide the necessary facilities, resources, and activities. However, particularly at the two Dubai hubs, the management company could do more to make students aware of the facilities that are available. For example, several students did not know if their hub has a medical centre, or whether careers fairs are held in the hub.

Conclusion

The research findings shed light on the possible sustainability of the purpose-built shared campus model, and provide valuable insights for institutions that seek to develop foreign branches. In the context of institutions' transnational education location decision making, this research is, to our knowledge, the first to investigate students' campus experiences in purpose-built education hubs. A campus's location is important because it may strongly influence a student's choice of institution, as well as the individual's campus experience and overall satisfaction. The research findings suggest that students may derive considerable benefits from the institution being located in a purpose-built education hub. For risk averse institutions, or those with limited financial resources, the ready-made shared campus model may facilitate the establishment of viable international branch campuses.

Many institutions recognise that collaboration and cooperation with other institutions can be mutually beneficial for each institution and the students of each institution. The findings of this research show that the purpose-built hub format can promote such collaboration and cooperation. Therefore, institutions that are evaluating a specific hub as a place to establish a branch campus may consider which other institutions are already located in the hub, and what benefits may be derived from the presence of these institutions. Institutions that develop and offer innovative, well-resourced and in-demand courses may benefit from additional revenue streams if students from other institutions enrol in these courses. It should be noted that purpose-built hubs often have policies that restrict unhealthy competition between providers – such as multiple institutions not being allowed to offer the same subjects – and that promote cooperation, such as students being able to cross-register and take courses at multiple institutions.

In summary, factors that institutions can consider when evaluating different purpose-built education hubs as a potential location for their international branch campus include the range and quality of communal facilities, e.g., for sports and leisure; the availability, quality and price of student accommodation; the range and quality of events for students organised or coordinated by the hub manager; the extent to which the institution may cooperate with and forge links with other institutions in the hub; as well as the hub's location and accessibility. Of course, institutions will also consider costs, e.g., the levels of rents and service charges, and the terms for future increases; and the lengths of agreements/leases. In most cases, locating in a purpose-built hub that already exists will be the cheaper option compared to building a new campus independently. On the other hand, institutions based in hubs may experience reputational 'costs' or disadvantages, and constraints in strategic and operational decision-making, e.g., concerning which programmes may be delivered, and policies on recognition and credit transfer between other institutions in the hub.

As with any study, this research is not without limitations. The study was undertaken in three education hubs that are located in two countries, and we do not know the extent to which the findings may be generalised globally, for example, to purpose-built hubs in Egypt, Mauritius, Qatar and South Korea. The cross-sectional research design may not have accurately captured students' changing attitudes, experiences, and feelings over time, during their entire period of enrolment. To overcome these limitations, future research could be undertaken at different hubs, perhaps adopting a longitudinal research design. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate institutions' decision-making processes with regard to setting up in a hub as a foreign market entry strategy, and then later, their decision about whether to stay in or leave the hub when it becomes viable to expand capacity and programme provision, as well as investment in laboratories, specialist equipment and recreational facilities.

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Ethics approval

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