

Information & Insights No. 2

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How to... use marketing effectively when establishing an international campus

1. Who is this guide aimed at and what will it provide?

This guide is aimed at anybody involved in an international campus development project – whether it is still at the concept stage or a bit further advanced.

It is for those working at strategy level in leadership roles and for those engaged in implementation – including project managers, planning and business development teams, finance / HR specialists and those developing the academic portfolio. It is particularly useful to staff in communications, marketing, student recruitment and international relations roles.

This guide provides:

- Information on key stages in the development of an international campus when marketing considerations are important
- Recommendations on **how to** use marketing effectively throughout the development process.

Insights are derived from original research into the marketing of international campuses (published in *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 2015*¹, and disseminated at conferences and workshops²). The research included interviews with relevant senior staff (involved in establishing UK campuses in Malaysia) which highlighted good practice and lessons learned. Recommendations also draw on personal experience of advising HEIs in a consultancy capacity on effective international campus marketing.

2. Context

There are currently 235 international campuses (also referred to as international branch campuses [IBCs], offshore or overseas campuses) across the globe. After a 'growth spurt' in the early 2000s, the rate of international campus launches has slowed. It has been recognised that they require long-term commitment, high investment of time and resources, robust risk management and an understanding that financial returns may be a long time coming. Opening a new campus is not a project to be embarked on lightly (and this is now much better understood).

¹ Lewis, V. (2015) Embedding marketing in international campus development: lessons from UK universities. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* (DOI:10.1080/13603108.2015.1060273)

² Going Global 2015, London (poster); Universities UK Transnational Education Conference 2015, London (workshop)

3. The challenge

International campuses are often criticised. They can be depicted as expensive ‘pet projects’ (draining resources from the home campus and distracting from ‘core business’), as imperialistically motivated schemes or as compromising the values of academic freedom. If they don’t achieve student enrolment targets they are quickly branded failures.

So, why would any institution go down this road at all? Most consider the risks too high – and that is a good thing. The home campus must be crystal clear about its motivations and about the volume and quality of work (at development stage and on an ongoing basis) that will be needed to ensure it is a success. It must also be clear about how that success will be measured.

Whatever the measures of success, one key ingredient will be effective use of marketing (to inform strategy as well as promotion). Sometimes those with marketing expertise are brought to the table too late and expected to work miracles with a portfolio or delivery model that don’t quite map onto market needs. It is important to embed a marketing dimension into discussions from the very earliest stage. Here’s how to do that.

4. How to... use marketing effectively at different stages of the international campus project

There are four (often overlapping) stages of an international campus project (pre-launch) when marketing expertise needs to be applied:

- Concept and positioning
- Strategy formulation (including business case and business plan)
- Resource allocation, staff appointments and infrastructure
- Marketing and student recruitment planning

Internal and external communications also need to be tightly planned and implemented throughout this period.

The sections that follow show why marketing and related disciplines are important at each stage and how to use them effectively. The illustrative quotations are drawn from the interviews undertaken during my research.

The **Appendix** suggests some questions that institutions should be asking (themselves and others) at key stages of the development process.

Stage 1: concept and positioning

1a: Test motivations, commitment and position within institutional strategy

The proposition of a new international campus must fit with existing organisational values and mission. It should feel like a natural next step in the fulfilment of institutional vision and strategy (not just internationalisation strategy, but broader institutional strategy). There should be also compatibility with the host country's national objectives.

Establishing an international campus involves long-term collaboration with the host government and relevant in-country organisations / partners: the implications (eg. in terms of power relationships) need to be thought through.

The rationale for embarking on the project should stack up **independently** of any financial expectations.

The position of the new campus in relation to the home campus (initially and in the longer term) should be discussed and intentions agreed.

Make your international campus a part of the corporate university, not a 'spin-out'. This will help to focus resource on building institutional reputation in the region.

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Recommendation 1:

Involve in-house marketing, communications and international relations professionals in initial 'concept stage' discussions.

- Communications and PR experts will be equipped to communicate the rationale for the development and explain it in the context of wider strategy.
- Marketing and international relations staff can provide valuable expertise and ask challenging questions to test the initial proposition.

If we'd [Director of Marketing & Communications and Director of International] been brought in at initial concept stage, we could have addressed issues of being demand-led (not driven by existing products) and determining the right level of market research.

1b: Communicate rationale for development and build staff support

Building internal staff support and buy-in for the proposed campus development at an early stage is essential. When the project runs into challenges, staff criticism is more likely if there is little understanding about how it fits into wider institutional mission and strategy.

The seeds of staff engagement need to be sown early in order to avoid the international campus being seen as a senior management whim or a costly experiment. The same goes for engaging the governing body whose challenge and support are critical.

Strong, credible leadership from the very top of the organisation, coupled with a culture of communicating clearly and addressing staff (and external stakeholder) concerns, will provide a firm foundation.

Senior management have to show absolute commitment. They need to explain why the campus is being developed – in the context of the university strategy... Without that, an international campus can be a “woolly” concept.

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Recommendation 2:

Involve internal communications and PR staff – and those with expertise in brand development – to help get key messages about the proposed campus across.

- Internal communications experts can play a major role in helping to engage UK campus staff.
- PR experts can help to pre-empt (and deal effectively with) challenging questions – both internally and externally.
- Brand development experts can start to consider the impact of a new campus on university branding and how best to articulate the relationship between home and international campuses.

Stage 2: strategy formulation

2a: Develop a business case built on market intelligence

This is the point at which viability needs to be demonstrated. In order to do this, the local operating environment should be evaluated, evidence of market demand gathered, competitor activity scrutinised.

This intelligence should directly inform the campus proposition and portfolio and is a crucial element of the business case. Overestimating demand is a common mistake and can cause problems further downstream.

Understand the whole environment – including government and legal processes... You need to engage with the right people locally.

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Recommendation 3:

Balance traditional market research approaches (eg. surveys) with more qualitative market intelligence gathering - and triangulate findings by using more than one independent source.

- Work with market research experts (internal or external) to ensure you are asking the right questions and targeting the right stakeholders.
- Consider whether to use a local in-country research agency or a multi-national one with a global presence – or both.
- Gather your own intelligence by sending a senior member of the university to talk to key stakeholders including government, quality agencies, regional employers; this doubles as a relationship-building exercise.

We used a[n in-country] agency before establishing the campus, mainly to establish markets for different types of programme... If doing this again..., I'd pay more attention to exploratory, qualitative work than quantitative survey-based work.

The market research... was undertaken by the British Council... and a commercial company. I [also] got out and about talking to CEOs... to check out regional employer demand etc.

2b: Develop an outline marketing strategy which links to the business plan

The marketing strategy and business plan should be developed hand in hand via an iterative process. If they are developed in parallel (or if the marketing strategy is an afterthought), the business (and financial) plan may not stack up.

The marketing strategy... was put to the people putting the business plan together but was cut back because it was too rich. Then two years later this toning down came back to haunt us.

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Recommendation 4:

Capture the benefits of the campus proposition in a (costed) marketing strategy which is informed by robust data and intelligence, includes all elements of the marketing mix and feeds into the campus business and financial plans.

- Identify the academic portfolio you will launch with, target enrolment numbers and a timetable for expansion.
- Determine pricing and entry requirements.
- Identify each target market and strategies to reach it – and forecast the proportion of students expected from each market segment.
- Test key messages (including how your campus differs from competitor institutions) with target audiences.
- Attach clear costs to the delivery of the marketing strategy and ensure these are included within business and financial plans.

You must know the market and listen to data from the market – to influence the portfolio, entry requirements etc.

Try to strengthen the strategic elements of your marketing (positioning, selling points, key messages) and ensure they are embedded at an early stage.

The original business plan did not really budget for marketing costs in the way that we need to operate in today's market.

Stage 3: resource allocation, staff appointments and infrastructure

3a: Agree the marketing budget and resource base

The new campus is effectively a start-up business in an unfamiliar market context. Marketing budgets – and staffing – should reflect this.

However well-known your institution is at home, brand awareness is likely to be low in your host country. Profile-raising and marketing cannot be done from a distance or squeezed into existing staff workloads. There will need to be marketing and student recruitment staff on-the-ground, potentially supported by a local supplier infrastructure for particular marketing services.

Take the advice of marketing professionals about the level of investment needed and do not constrain the university's ambition within an excessively tight financial straightjacket.

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Recommendation 5:

Agree a realistic marketing budget and a schedule for appointing staff to key marketing and student recruitment roles.

- Decide who has ownership of the marketing budget and coordinate accounting processes and reporting mechanisms so that oversight can be achieved regardless of whether spend is incurred in the home or host country.
- Determine which in-country posts are needed first and how quickly the team should be built up.
- Decide which marketing services (PR, media buying, photography / video, web development, design, printing etc.) will be undertaken or sourced locally and which provided from the home country (either by the in-house team or existing suppliers).

In the UK we had no legacy experience of competitive markets, private providers etc. at the time. We didn't really appreciate that [students] don't just 'turn up'. Lay members of Council spotted this ahead of the academics. We have a tendency to underestimate the resources necessary and are still looking at this.

We started off by saying that we would outsource a lot more than we do in the UK. This gives us greater flexibility, agility and speed.

3b: Appoint in-country marketing staff to be part of your global marketing team

It is important to have in-country marketing and student recruitment staff in place at an early stage, with a senior marketing lead recruited soon after the Head of Campus. Student recruiters should be in place a good six months before the **start** of the recruitment cycle for your first intake. Even if you are working with an in-country partner, keep a firm handle on marketing and recruitment.

You may not find staff with exactly the right skills and experience so look at your home and international campus marketing staff as a single distributed team, clarifying roles and responsibilities, addressing induction and training needs, and fostering a cross-campus team culture from the outset. Ultimately you will need expertise in marketing strategy and leadership; corporate communications and PR; marketing communications (including copywriting); student recruitment (domestic and international); client relationship management and process improvement (eg. for enquiry-handling and conversion).

If you can get a really good strategic marketer on the ground early enough, it will pay dividends. For example, assuming the Provost and Vice-Provost are in place around three years before the 'big bang' (launch), the strategic marketing person should be in place not long after this.

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Recommendation 6:

Start recruiting to key in-country posts earlier than you think, working back from the start of the first recruitment cycle.

- Determine the skills you need, the most appropriate location for each post, reporting lines, induction and training arrangements, secondment opportunities.
- Where the home campus marketing team is providing a service to the international campus, have a service level agreement and appoint a single home campus liaison person.

Local market knowledge is hugely important...Then there are a whole series of skills around... being able to predict how the market is likely to develop...; being able to source the right types of student for different products; being able to plan effectively; ...being able to communicate and influence internally and work with a diverse range of stakeholders.

Stage 4: marketing and student recruitment planning

4a: Work on reputation and profile

In-country relationship-building (which should start as early as possible) is the foundation for strong student recruitment. It is important to factor in enough time to do this 'soft marketing' properly and to involve the right people from both campuses.

Develop a key stakeholder engagement plan to build reputation, raise profile and gather market intelligence on an ongoing basis.

We have learned that there are no “global brands” in HE and significant effort is needed to establish one’s credentials. My advice would be “don’t fool yourself into thinking everyone knows who you are – and ensure your business plan reflects this”.

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Recommendation 7:

Identify your key stakeholders and develop a plan to engage them.

- Include employers, potential sponsors, school and college leaders, government officials and agencies.
- Offer public lectures, guest lectures at schools and colleges, alumni events; invite local employers to join an industrial advisory group.
- Involve senior leaders and academic staff from home and international campuses (you need to raise the profile of the institution as a whole, not just the new campus).
- Feed the intelligence you gather into future planning.

You need the right people to do your off-campus outreach work.

The [in-country marketing / student recruitment] team can’t and shouldn’t be expected to do this on their own. Everyone is now more open to working together.

Set aside time to build relationships with in-market stakeholders.

4b: Draw up and implement a marketing and student recruitment activity plan

A (fully costed) marketing and student recruitment plan needs to be in place well before the start of the first student recruitment cycle. It should include actions driven by home campus staff and those driven locally – and should be more than just a list of planned student recruitment activities. It should be jointly owned by all those involved in delivering it. It must fully acknowledge the local context and, like any good marketing plan, should include mechanisms for measuring progress. Channels for reporting and monitoring progress should also be in place.

There is always the danger of assuming that, because something works well in the UK, then it transfers. And the local response feels a bit like a stuck record: “but it’s different here.”...There should be an effort to work across boundaries and take a global approach, but it’s important to be prepared to adapt to the local context when required.

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Recommendation 8:

Drawing on expertise across both campuses, develop a comprehensive and jointly owned operational marketing and student recruitment plan.

- Include within this: marketing communications (including website and social media), profile-raising and PR, market intelligence gathering, enquiry-handling and conversion, international and domestic student recruitment.
- Clarify who is responsible for each element and how progress / success will be measured.
- Listen to local experts when determining the appropriate mix of activities and the approach to be taken.

Given the budget, they were trying to include everything they could but it was all very recruitment-led.

Someone with a UK perspective might say they think press advertising is not very good value. However, it is something that is expected in the Malaysian context.

5. Top-level recommendations and timescales

The top-level recommendations which emerge are:

- The campus proposition should be demand-led, requiring a deep understanding of local market and operating context.
- Sufficient resources (human and financial) should be allocated to profile-raising, marketing and student recruitment.
- Local and home campus marketing expertise should be harnessed and collaborative working facilitated.
- Relationship-building, marketing and recruitment activity should be rigorously planned and start early enough to generate the required momentum.

It may take longer than you expect to reach the point when you can formally launch your new campus. Although rushing things through is counter-productive, it's important to keep up the momentum.

Timescales will vary depending on the scale of the venture, your institution's existing experience of transnational education (and of the market it's entering), and other issues relating to market context (eg. speed of approval procedures; involvement of partners).

In the Malaysia context, establishing a UK university campus tends to follow the timescales below:

- Concept and positioning – 4 years before launch
- Strategy formulation – 3-4 years before launch
- Resource allocation and set-up – 2-3 years before launch
- Marketing and student recruitment planning – 1-2 years before launch

It is recognised that the way this guide is structured and the suggested timescales above make the development process look neat and linear, which it is not. There will be unexpected challenges and hold-ups. However, having clarity on what needs to happen when from a marketing perspective helps to keep things on track.

6. Information and resources

TNE facts, figures and forecasts

C-BERT Global Higher Education website (<http://www.globalhighered.org/index.php>) and database (<http://www.globalhighered.org/branchcampuses.php>)

BIS (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) (2014) *The value of Transnational Education to the UK*. BIS Research Paper No. 194
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/387910/bis-14-1202-the-value-of-transnational-education-to-the-uk.pdf

British Council (2013) *The shape of things to come – The evolution of transnational education: data, definitions, opportunities and impacts analysis*.
http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/the_shape_of_things_to_come_2.pdf

Leadership of major TNE projects

Emery, V. and Worton, M. (2014) *Challenges for the leadership of transnational education in higher education: balancing risk and innovation*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education Stimulus Paper

Howlett, L. and Cussons, M. (2011) *Developing Capacity for Leading International Projects in Higher Education*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Both available from Leadership Foundation website:

<https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/>

Healey, N. (2015) Managing International Branch Campuses: What Do We Know? *Higher Education Quarterly* (DOI: 10.1111/hequ.12082)

Healey, N. (2015) The Challenges of Leading an International Branch Campus: The 'Lived Experience' of In-Country Senior Managers. *Journal of Studies in International Education* (DOI: 10.1177/1028315315602928)

International campus marketing

Lewis, V. (2014) Branch Campus Development: marketing expertise required. *Forum*. Summer 2014: 14-16. Amsterdam: European Association for International Education

Lewis, V. (2015) Embedding marketing in international campus development: lessons from UK universities. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* (DOI:10.1080/13603108.2015.1060273)

Both downloadable from:

<http://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/new-practical-guide.php?s=183>

7. Further advice

Future **Information & Insights** guides by Vicky Lewis Consulting will provide additional detail on integrating marketing expertise into the individual stages of the international campus development process. These will be published over the course of 2016.

They will explore some of the key questions highlighted in the Appendix and, where relevant, will include marketing-related templates and tools.

These guides will be posted on the Vicky Lewis Consulting website (www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk) and emailed directly to anyone who signs up for my regular updates.

If you would like to explore other ways in which I could support your international campus (or other internationalisation) development plans, please email me on: vickylewisconsulting@gmail.com

Appendix

Some questions institutions should ask themselves (or others) at each stage.....

Stage 1: concept and positioning

- Why are we considering this option? What is the rationale?
- How does it fit with organisational values and mission?
- Is it a natural next step in institutional strategy? What has been done to prepare the ground for this step?
- How are our objectives compatible with host country objectives?
- Which in-country relationships and partnerships need to be built or nurtured?
- What is the relationship between the home campus and international campus: parent-child, equal partner, member of a network?
- Will the home campus be hands-on or hands-off? How will this work if a partner is involved? Who makes key decisions and how are these communicated?
- How will this relationship change over time?
- How should the relationship be presented to the local market? And to staff and students at both campuses?
- Will the international campus have a brand identity in its own right, be incorporated within the wider university brand or be pitched as a subsidiary?
- How can we avoid those attached to the international campus feeling isolated?
- How can we engage home campus staff – including those not directly involved?
- How should we involve the governing body?
- What are the challenging questions we're likely to face about the proposed development?
- What are the questions we still have, to which we need answers before we progress?

Stage 2: strategy formulation

- Do we understand the local operating environment? Who are the key influencers and opinion-formers? What processes do we need to go through? Where are the potential stumbling blocks?
- How do we obtain robust, independent market research and intelligence? Which stakeholders do we need to survey or talk to? Do the results demonstrate sufficient market demand for what we propose to offer? If there are gaps in knowledge, how can we fill them?
- Who are our competitors? How will we differentiate our campus from theirs? What are our key strengths and messages? How can we test these with target audiences?
- Is the academic portfolio informed by the needs of the target market? Do our entry requirements give us access to the right (quality and quantity of) students?
- Does the programme offer match host government priorities? Have we considered the needs of employers in the host region?
- Which programmes should be offered in year 1 and which rolled out in later years?
- Are enrolment targets achievable? Are planned timescales realistic? Has sufficient modelling taken place of the consequences of recruiting below target?
- How long is the process for validating programmes (in home and host country)? Does this leave time to promote them effectively?
- Which are our target markets – local students from host country, ex-patriates, those from the wider region, other international students, students from the home campus?
- What proportion of each should we aim to recruit?
- Are all these markets accessible from the start? Do students from any of our target segments need academic or linguistic preparation? If so, can we provide this as a 'feeder' to our main provision?

- How are other international campuses faring in this country? Is there scope for collaboration?
- What market intelligence, relationship-building, communications, promotion and student recruitment activity will be needed before we launch? What is a realistic staff and operating budget for this? Has this been built into the business / financial plan?
- Who 'owns' the marketing strategy for the campus?

Stage 3: resource allocation, staff appointments and relationship-building

- Does investment in marketing reflect the international campus's status as a 'start-up business'?
- How is the marketing budget split between home and international campus? Who manages the marketing budget?
- What staff roles are required for marketing (at both home and international campus)?
- Which skillsets are needed (eg. marketing strategy and leadership; corporate communications and PR; marketing communications; student recruitment – domestic and international; relationship management, process improvement, admin support)?
- Where are these roles best located? How should any gaps in expertise be filled?
- Who line manages marketing and student recruitment staff?
- How will cooperation between international and home campus marketing staff be facilitated? What induction, training, secondment opportunities are envisaged? Has sufficient 'inter-campus' travel budget been included?
- What is the optimum timing for appointments? Which roles need to be filled first?
- How will the marketing staff profile change over time (eg. gradual migration of responsibilities to international campus)?
- What local supplier infrastructure is needed (eg. photographers, video producers, design agency, web developer, PR agency, media buying agency, printers)?
- How are suppliers recruited, selected, trained and briefed?
- If the home campus marketing team is providing a service to the international campus, will there be a single point of contact, agreed service levels and turnaround times?

Stage 4: marketing and student recruitment planning

- Who are the key stakeholders for the international campus?
- Who owns the relationships with key stakeholders?
- What support is needed (eg. from the home campus) to develop and maintain those relationships? Who needs to be involved? Has enough time been allocated to this? What 'soft marketing' activities need to be planned in?
- Does the marketing and student recruitment plan include all of the following: marketing communications (including website and social media), profile-raising and PR, market intelligence gathering, enquiry-handling and conversion, international and domestic student recruitment?
- Who is responsible for planning and implementing specific strands of the plan?
- How will progress / success be measured for each activity strand? What are the channels for reporting, monitoring and evaluation?
- Which systems exist at the home campus that could be used by the international campus (eg. student enquiry and application tracking)?
- Which systems are better developed afresh to address specific international campus needs (eg. local / regional media planning, buying and monitoring)?
- How do marketing and student recruitment tactics need to be adapted for the local context? What do local experts advise?
- Which tactics do target audiences respond best to and are there any 'must haves' or 'no-nos'?