

Prospects for the Internationalization of Taiwanese and Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

The declining birth rate throughout Asia has serious consequences that require sound strategies in the business of education. This study explores ways in which Taiwanese and Chinese institutions may expand their offer abroad. The analysis of a sample of experiences in Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia suggests that successful market entry results from educational regulatory constraints of the host countries, as well as socio-cultural preferences influencing student choices. Taiwanese and Chinese private universities must plan carefully for a successful

expansion of their graduate programs towards Southeast Asian populations.

Keywords: *graduate education, Asia-Pacific, higher education*

1. The Current Market for Education in Asia

Because education entails investments in time and money from students, they carefully choose their university names and degree programs. Over the last decade, the demand for international graduate programs throughout Asia – chiefly of Western, English-speaking countries – has been expanding fast. Equipped with foreign degrees, youngsters aggressively compete for international, sexy-sounding jobs. Rumor has it that they should receive higher pay when they graduate from a foreign university, which somewhat makes sense for the most motivated of these little tigers – they are statistically more likely to land a job in a multinational company.

For academics and businessmen alike, such voracious appetite for degrees translates into incredible business opportunities. In China and Taiwan, successful alumni become models, living testimonials who emphasize the quality and integrity of international degree programs such as the MBA or the PhD. This study looks at the international expansion of graduate education through the experiences of Chinese and Taiwanese institutions. Data is collected through in-depth interviews of educational administrators, as well as the opinions of the students enrolled in the corresponding graduate programs.

2. Origins and Growth of Overseas Satellite Campuses

The declining birth rate in Asia is a matter of concern for the future of education. The resulting decline in undergraduate enrolment has led

educational institutions and the governments to focus on graduate education. With fewer students in the undergraduate age group, Asian universities remain in business by implementing a market development strategy, namely by selling more postgraduate programs.

The success of British and American overseas campuses is largely due to the establishment of English as a global *lingua franca*. These satellite campuses extend long-standing arrangements for recruiting international students and build on existing alliances. Historically, the US model of an overseas campus featured a small centre dedicated to short-stay arrangements for expatriates (CERI, 2004: 121). However, today Asia has become the focus of growth in international branch campuses after more than a decade of rapid expansion in the Middle East. Developing countries have also begun to establish international branch campuses in other developing regions (Sharma, 2012).

However, fewer than 5% of students globally travel abroad to branch campuses for their education, and this figure will probably not increase much. A major issue in building a satellite campus relates to the balance between standardisation and adaptation. How much should be identical across campuses, and how much should differ? You do not joke with education. You take it seriously. Think of your own children – would you rather have them taught by Mickey Mouse, or by Albert Einstein? Better play hard with the former outside campus, and work hard with the latter inside, right? So those institutions that provide education must accept a *responsibility* to ensure consistency in the *quality* and *standards* of their offering. Playing around with Mickey is fine, as long as you get back to work when it is time to.

The first idea is to analyse the forces of globalization that underlie the growth of branch campuses from the 1990s onwards. In fact, educational trade must be seen as a tool for soft power. You read that correctly. The central mission of overseas campuses, first and foremost,

is of cultural colonization. When Pink Floyd sang “we don’t need no education, we don’t need no thought control”, they anticipated the application of market rules to education, whereby students become customers and degrees are bought and sold. Most international branch campuses are located throughout Asia and the Middle East, in regions such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Malaysia. These moves are mostly market-driven; approximately two-thirds of new universities in the Arab Middle East are private and nearly half are branches of Western, English-speaking institutions. It is time for Taiwan, Thailand and other Asian countries to reclaim their influence on the educational world and intensify their soft power. It is also time to put an end to the brain drain and lure Asian students to stay by receiving a foreign degree at home at considerably lower cost. We all know we can make it. All we have to do is to want it badly.

3. Methodology

We have combined interviews and data collected from questionnaires circulated over the social media (Facebook and Messenger-type applications, like Line and WhatsApp) to a total of 17 managers, educators, investment advisors, potential investors, lecturers and graduate students of international partner institutions. Content analysis was carried out on most of the data thus obtained. Questionnaires specifically targeted opinions about degrees from Chinese-program universities, including (but not limited to) this kind of issues:

- How strong is a degree in Chinese?
- Do you have reservations about education programs from China or Taiwan?
- Why do you think students will choose this Taiwanese/Chinese university’s MBA in Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, rather than a

degree from another country?

- How good is a Taiwanese university's MBA training for Myanmar, Vietnamese or Cambodian students' future job?
- What part of the experience of this MBA would students remember?

4. Findings

4.1. Potential for Satellites of Taiwanese and Chinese Universities

There are opportunities to export Chinese language and culture abroad, through university education. Taiwan universities are planning to expand in Southeast Asia, particularly to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) markets. In Taiwan, regular staff visits and meetings help getting the working atmosphere right (Ennew, 2014). To demonstrate the competitiveness and excellence of Taiwan private university's educational quality, the section below introduces I-Shou University (義守大學, ISU) as an illustration of the potential of Taiwanese higher education for setting up overseas satellite campus. The case is based on three formal interviews and personal communication with top managers and senior academic staff.

Established in 1986, ISU is located in the suburban setting of the medium-sized town of Dashu (大樹區, population range: 10,000-49,999 inhabitants) in Kaohsiung 高雄. Officially accredited by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China and a sort of association of business schools (AACSB), ISU is a large higher education institution. The enrollment range last year was between 10,000 and 15,000 students. ISU offers courses and programs leading to recognized degrees such as bachelor degrees, master degrees, and doctorate degrees in several areas of study. ISU emphasizes its drastic admission policy based on students' past academic record and grades, whereby international applicants are

eligible to apply for enrollment but will only be accepted *if they demonstrate the intellectual power and creativity of the brightest minds* to impress the selection committee. ISU's stated mission is to train future business leaders and artistic geniuses, an objective with which it recruits students from Mongolia, Vietnam, Korea, France, Haiti, Honduras, Japan, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and other countries. Unfortunately, since most of these students – save the Chinese and the Malaysian – come along with an extremely poor or even inexistent level of Chinese, they are doomed to follow whatever course is taught in English. Students are said to choose the university because it had early mover advantage and competent local recruitment from a trusted source, but increasing competition is making its position less secure.

The trouble is, the majority of teachers delivering courses in English are not native speakers of English, and students have no choice but struggle to understand the poor grammar and bizarre accent of staff from all over Europe and elsewhere. With teachers who deliver a lot alright, but in poor English and strange accent, and exchange students unable to say “hello” or “thank you” in Chinese, imagine the picture ... *Where are we at here? What is going on? Is there a pedagogical algorithm of some sort to sort out this mess?*

It is quite clear that students take both the program and the school fees in consideration when applying. Experts in student recruitment have over the years refined Taiwan's strategy for attracting local and international students to the Taiwanese IMBA program, rather than alternative offers from the UK or the US. It is constantly stressed that newcomers will feel more comfortable in an English-taught program that still follows Taiwanese administrative regulations, including a denser timetable with a higher number of classes and seminars, full availability of teachers, respect of national holidays such as the Dragon Boat

Festival and the Chinese New Year (when Western institutions tend to celebrate Christmas, Halloween and other pagan events), and better care for students broadly speaking.

Full devotion to helping graduate students find the job that best suits their needs is important. For those who wish to stay in Taiwan, ISU emphasizes its solid connections with industries in the E-United group, of which the university itself is a part, and that students looking for jobs in the steel industry, entertainment business and tourism will find incredible opportunities as soon as they graduate. Those who are seeking international careers can refer to the university's International Office, which in recent years has developed relationships with 134 businesses in over 12 countries, ranging from Mongolia to Haiti and Honduras. The university also emphasizes that its IMBA's reputation transfers management and leadership skills that usually exceeds employers' expectations, whether locally or on a global scale.

Degrees from Chinese universities have been improving in the recent past, but they still cannot compare to what are offered in Taiwan. The main reason is their culture of censorship – when you cannot google information or find people on Facebook and other global networks, you leave a large part of the world in an obscure chaos, and this world will be happy to move on without you. In Taiwan, by contrast, students are encouraged to be curious and willing to learn from the world outside. The students from Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia who study in Taiwan's universities are clearly aware of this limitation in China.

From the case study above, it is evident that the road ahead is strewn with some of the toughest challenges, which include attracting and retaining host campus faculty, replicating the diversity and excellence of the student body, and countless issues related to adaptation and the management of soft power. But the opportunities are priceless, in particular for university-industry collaborations. For instance, Yao-Tsung

Chih, the Education Counselor of the Department of International and Cross-strait Education at the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan, said that the MOE offered many opportunities for overseas Chinese students to work or continue studying in Taiwan after graduation. Yes, here is just one of the benefits of establishing and maintaining branch campuses! Students are able to apply and stay in Taiwan for work as long as they pass the assessment. Su-Zhen Lu, Deputy Director of the Overseas Community Affairs Council (中華民國僑務委員會, OCAC), provided a Facebook account for the students to access event information relevant to the OCAC. Heng-Li Ho, a student from Macau, said that overseas Chinese students received great care from Asia University while they were studying in Taiwan. He regards Taiwan and Asia University as his second home and thanks Asia University for everything it did for overseas Chinese students (Chang, 2015). Now imagine this sort of feeling becomes the rule rather than the exception! The Taiwanese initiatives show that the provision of graduate education for foreign students always represents a sound strategy for consolidating university-industry collaborations independently of any ethical considerations.

4.2. Southeast Asian Students' Experience of Chinese and Taiwanese Higher Education

4.2.1. Myanmar

Sadly, Myanmar graduate students associate Chinese universities with poor English, and feel somewhat daunted by the prospect of Chinese language requirements. One of them confides:

Chinese universities [...] opened schools in Mandalay. But teaching is in Chinese, it's not for me. I'm not good enough.

Another agrees:

I'd like to study in a Chinese university, but I'm not very good at languages. Chinese is the greatest barrier for Myanmar students like me.

From another perspective however, a Chinese degree is highly desirable for Myanmar students, given the power of Chinese investments in their country. A famous British professor whose name we cannot reveal suggests that

... many students have thought about the possibility of going to China. Mandalay is flooded with Chinese people now, who control shopping centers, hotels, hospitals and many other things.

When university ranking comes into consideration, students prefer to go to China rather than attend a satellite campus at home. They usually emphasize the outstanding character of the experience:

Regarding Chinese universities, I would like to choose an MBA program from a highly ranked institution, because they are internationally recognized and are taught in English. But I am in doubt regarding the quality of other Chinese universities ... Overall, I'd rather study in China.

Unfortunately, this perception of Chinese products can also extend to Chinese education services:

Chinese universities are not as popular in Myanmar as Thai universities. Don't ask me why.

4.2.2. Cambodia

An investor in Taiwanese universities believes that MBA programs are similar across the world, and that only teachers can make a difference:

The only real difference is in the quality of the faculty delivering the courses. We have mixed levels of ability in this case, in part because of low budget for hiring faculty members where we do not have in-house capacity.

He also argues that the Thai language is still a requirement, because Cambodians focus on working for Thai companies. And even though competence in Chinese is useful when communicating with Chinese business partners and clients,

Chinese universities should also teach Thai, and use Chinese to represent Thai companies when dealing with Chinese business partners. From my experience, Cambodians are interested in learning Chinese: even my maid can speak some Chinese. But the emphasis on Thai is because Thai people do not use English. So if Cambodians can speak Chinese to Thai people, they will have more job opportunities!

4.2.3. Vietnam

Because Vietnam is historically and culturally closely linked with China, and continues to have high trade volumes with China, a Vietnamese would normally prefer a Chinese degree over a Thai degree:

Chinese Universities may be a better option than Thai ones; putting politics aside, the Chinese and the Vietnamese have excellent trade relationships. Many Vietnamese people are now learning Chinese.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted economic and geographical factors that have an impact on youngsters' decisions related to their education. While Myanmar and Cambodian students still have a preference for Thai degree programs, Vietnamese students tends to favor Chinese and Taiwanese degrees.

Notes

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