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Developing Successful Transnational Education Hubs: Key Challenges for Policy Makers



Leibniz Institute for
Research on Society and Space

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For the quick reader

This report addresses stakeholders involved in designing and implementing policy frameworks of higher education hub projects that particularly include international branch campuses, as well as organisations involved in consulting, advertisement and support of the internationalisation of higher education. It draws on multiple field visits to transnational education hubs, and on 136 interviews with senior higher education managers and transnational education stakeholders in Europe, Asia and the Middle East conducted between 2018 and 2020. Based on this data, we identify key phases and challenges for developing a transnational education hub. From these findings we developed the following suggestions that should be taken into account for designing successful policies.

- 1) **Motivations of governments and universities can diverge.** Policy makers need to consider that, contrary to common conceptions, universities will not automatically contribute to national or regional development goals.
- 2) **Adequate frameworks for regulation and localisation of transnational higher education need to be introduced and further developed.** Too permeable systems can attract dubious providers and create incongruity with local higher education systems, negatively impacting branch campuses' quality and their effects on the economy.
- 3) **Embedding branch campuses locally requires external incentives.** Hoped-for characteristics of a transnational education hub, such as collaboration between branch campuses or with domestic universities, and synergy effects with the local economy need to be actively fostered by the hosting authorities.

Overall, we argue that policy makers need to find the right balance between, on the one hand, creating an environment in which foreign providers of higher education can invest with relative ease and, on the other hand, setting up mechanisms and regulations that integrate them and ensure their contribution to long-term strategic development.

Towards a knowledge-based economy

Today, transforming economies in an interconnected world depend more and more on high-skilled and specialized labour. As governments across the globe seek to enhance the competitiveness of their countries through advancing knowledge-intensive industries, the global demand for international higher education is growing. To satisfy this growing demand in the knowledge-based economy, some governments seek to position their countries (or particular cities) as an education hub, a centre for (higher) learning and knowledge production. Yet, the notion of the education hub itself remains fuzzy. Although it is frequently evoked not only by national, regional and urban policy makers, but also by higher education managers and scholars, it is often left open whether the term describes a building, a specific area of a city, a city itself or a whole country (see, for instance, Knight, 2014). Moreover, the term education hub is used to refer to agglomerations of various providers of education, ranging from schools to training centres to full-scale universities. Some education hubs particularly focus on (and are marketed through) the provision of transnational, often English-language, forms of tertiary education.

To establish such education hubs, some governments employ a strategy of attracting foreign universities to their territory, encouraging them to develop offshore campuses, more commonly known as international branch campuses. These campuses are one very specific form of transnational education, yet capturing strong attention among scholars, managers and policy makers (Kleibert et al., 2020).

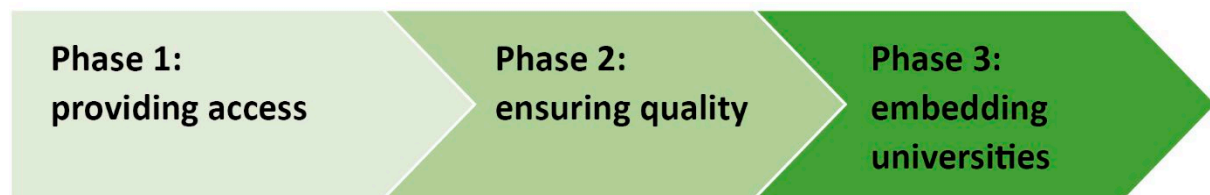
Additionally, some transnational education hub projects follow a distinctively spatial strategy, agglomerating foreign universities' offshore campuses in designated and demarcated areas. These clusters involve the provision of shared infrastructure, administrative support and often also financial and regulatory benefits for the universities. Given their resemblance to special economic zones but for higher education activities, these phenomena have also been thought of as transnational education zones (Kleibert et al., 2021a). These strategies are most visible in the Arab Gulf region today, but the idea has been adopted by governments worldwide, ranging from Mauritius to South Korea. All transnational education hubs share the common ambition to develop a knowledge-based economy. However, the concrete ways of implementation and overarching strategic approaches vary widely. As do the motivations of universities for becoming part of such projects – and even of the students who study there.

While more and more transnational education hub projects emerge worldwide, these endeavours remain risky for all stakeholders involved (Kleibert et al., 2021b). As usually significant sums of investment and long-term political commitment are involved, the question of how to design and operate sustainable and resilient transnational education hubs is absolutely crucial. This policy paper draws from extensive data that has been collected via desk and field research over the last four years. Apart from observations that were made during visits to transnational education zones and education city projects, interviews conducted with offshore campus and hub project managers on-site were taken into account. Built on this data, this policy paper is intended to shed light on the dynamics and challenges of transnational education hubs, so that stakeholders can more explicitly target common pitfalls when designing, implementing and managing these projects.

Dynamic phases of transnational education hub development

Transnational education hubs are not static structures, but they are dynamic processes. Developing an education hub thus often means aiming at a moving target. From our observations, we can analytically distinguish this process across three phases (see Figure 1). In the first phase, governments seek to increase access to higher education in their territories through inviting foreign higher education providers. In the second phase, the focus shifts towards not simply increasing student numbers but ensuring the quality of higher education offerings and its relevance to the domestic economy. In the third phase, foreign higher education providers are expected to become embedded within the domestic higher education and research landscape.

Figure 1: Phases of developing a transnational education hub.



Of course, these phases in reality are interrelated and do not necessarily follow each other neatly in chronological order. Nonetheless, they are analytically helpful to understand the different challenges that occur in different phases of development. In the following we discuss these three phases in more detail before we elaborate on the various challenges involved.

Phase 1: Providing access

At first, the key aim of governments is usually to increase a local population's access to higher education. This does not mean that the idea of the hub cannot also be tied to broader economic strategies of attracting foreign students, researchers, knowledge and prestigious universities, which should increase the visibility of the local higher education landscape, or to city branding strategies intended to generate foreign investment. Yet, a central ambition of most governments is to build local human capital. Foreign providers of higher education are usually intended to supplement the capacities of the local higher education sector and to provide a diverse range of higher education programmes to those people who cannot or will not study at a domestic university. Policy makers hope to mitigate a potential brain drain of students who would otherwise seek higher education abroad and create a local pool of graduates, who are equipped with international degrees and able to work in an internationalising economy.

The prospective students for whom higher education access shall be increased differ from context to context. While Dubai's government for example launched its first transnational education zone, *Dubai Knowledge Park*, in 2003 with the aim to provide higher education and professional training opportunities to the large number of expatriates and their families, the initial rationale of Malaysia's education hub policy was drawing in foreign universities in order to satisfy demand for (foreign) higher education among underserved parts of the domestic population, who would otherwise emigrate for higher education. We can currently observe this initial phase of providing access also in hub projects under development, for example in Egypt's *The Knowledge Hub Universities*. Currently hosting only one offshore campus (by Coventry University from the UK), the project's website claims that it "allows

you to study abroad in Egypt and pursue an international degree right in your homeland”¹, thus filling a specific (perceived) gap of access to foreign higher education in Egypt.

Phase 2: Ensuring quality

When foreign providers enter the local higher education landscape, hosting governments usually need to consider how to ensure the quality and relevance of the programmes and degrees delivered. In particular where governments such as Dubai’s or Singapore’s open up investment opportunities and market access for higher education businesses, “black sheep” are also likely to get involved, including diploma mills² and scam universities³. Such cases can not only have repercussions on the reputation of a potential international education hub but can also have serious personal consequences for the involved students and their future careers. This seems to be more likely to happen during the initial years after launching a hub project when quality assurance frameworks for foreign providers are not firmly enough established and respective authorities still gather experience.

The approaches to quality assurance vary widely and also depend on the respective political systems. In the United Arab Emirates for example, a federally organised country, the individual emirates have a relatively high degree of autonomy in some political sectors, including education. Whereas the emirate of Abu Dhabi’s quality assurance for offshore campuses involves a federal recognition scheme in accordance with the United Arab Emirates’ ministry, Dubai’s local government has introduced its own local quality assurance framework. It includes a university ranking system and offers international branch campuses the option to obtain a form of local accreditation instead of relying on the federal accreditation system. While in many ways being strongly oriented to Dubai’s approach, the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah is, in comparison to this, still at an early stage of establishing a transnational education zone. Its government does not have a similar procedural framework in place and instead relies on the quality assurance systems of the branch campuses’ respective home countries – an approach that is also common in other education hubs. In some education hubs, such as in Malaysia, it may even be the case that foreign universities’ degree programmes are accredited by regulators in both the transnational institutions’ home and host country. While this double accreditation may contribute to quality assurance for the transnational education hub project, complying with two different regulation authorities usually also comes with a substantially increased workload and higher costs for the universities.

Quality assurance and regulation of programmes also enable governments to select what type of expertise is required for their societies and economies. Some governments chose a more micro-managed approach and keep a tight control over offshore campuses’ programme range while others grant them more leeway and hope for a self-regulating system. Besides such concerns regarding the implementation of programmes, governments also need to consider instruments and mechanisms to

¹ The Knowledge Hub Universities (without date). <https://tkh.edu.eg/the-knowledge-hub-universities-about/> (accessed 11 January 2022).

² Farooqui, M., Gulf News (published 27 May 2015). *Dodgy university was at Getex*. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/crime/dodgy-university-was-at-getex-1.1522937> (accessed 11 January 2022).

³ The Strait Times (published 19 January 2016). *Business school owner sentenced to five-and-a-half years in jail for fake degree scam*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/business-school-owner-sentenced-to-five-and-a-half-years-in-jail-for-fake-degree-scam> (accessed 11 January 2022).

foster connections between the foreign universities and local industries, including for instance brokering internship opportunities, which directly relates to the next phase.

Phase 3: Embedding universities

The third phase moves beyond issues of access and quality control and relates to the broader role of higher education institutions within their host societies. This pertains to establishing connections with not only the domestic (higher) education sector, but also local industries and civil society. Especially transnational education zones are built on the idea that spatially clustering multiple offshore campuses produces synergy effects between them in terms of joint education, research and innovation output. Hence, most governments and zone operators are faced with the question of how to foster collaboration between education providers within and beyond the zone.

The level of integration of foreign higher education institutions into domestic higher education systems depends on a number of factors, including accreditation, languages of instruction, the access to research funding by foreign providers and promoting research collaborations with other domestic actors, both within higher education and industry.

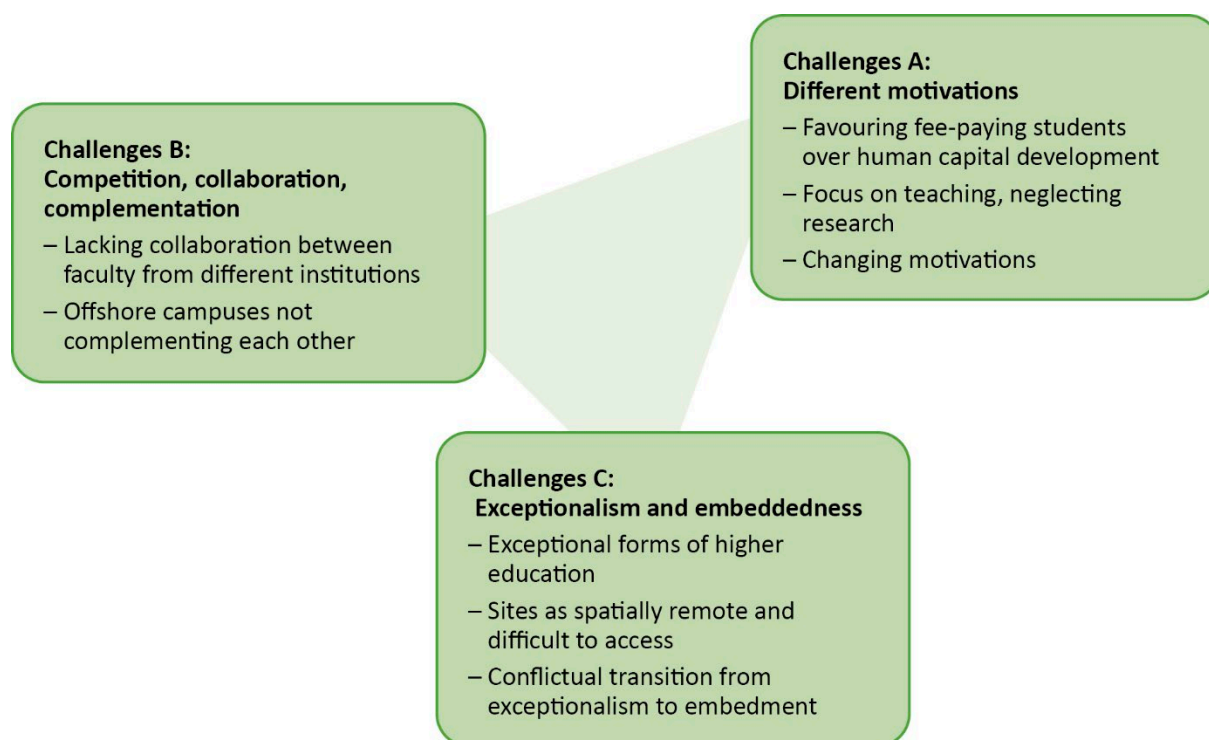
Policy makers have come up with different approaches for more firmly embedding foreign universities. Dubai's government for example tried to institutionalise regular academic exchange among its private universities – both domestic institutions and offshore campuses – through a body called the Research Steering Committee, while Ras al-Khaimah's offshore campuses are encouraged to regularly meet with local industry representatives in a round table format. In the oldest transnational education zone, Education City in Qatar, there are already various mechanisms in place, such as the possibility for offshore campuses to offer joint programmes, or various events and facilities that are organised by the branch campuses and are open to the general public. Thus, much like the overall development of an education hub, successfully embedding foreign campuses locally appears to be the result of experimenting, testing and learning on the side of the respective authorities.

Challenges for policy makers

During the three phases of developing a transnational education hub project as sketched out above, the logics engrained in the concept can produce different sets of challenges, which are loosely related to the phases in chronological order but by no means restricted to them individually (see Figure 2). The first set A) is tied to sometimes diverging motivations of governments, universities, and students. A second set of challenges B) is connected to the field of tension between universities' tendencies to compete and to collaborate. The third set C) is produced by the challenge to combine the exceptional nature of international branch campuses, in particular when located in a transnational education zone, with the need to embed these foreign providers locally.

While some of these challenges might be inherent to the development of higher education landscapes in general, others are connected to specific contradictions enmeshed in building a higher education hub that mainly consists of foreign providers. These contradictions we describe here do not necessarily mean that the different motivations and interests cannot be conciliated, but it is important to acknowledge and recognize them in order to design sustainable and resilient education hub policies.

Figure 2: Challenges for policy makers when developing a transnational education hub



Challenges A: Different motivations

Often related to long-term strategic development planning, hub projects are supposed to increase the capacities of their local higher education systems, thereby contributing to producing a local highly skilled labour pool as well as knowledge output and innovations for existing and emerging industries. Universities' short-term motivations for establishing offshore campuses, however, sometimes differ.

Universities favouring fee-paying student base over human capital development

In particular if governments' long-term planning focuses on economic diversification, they hope that branch campuses offer a diverse range of specialised degree programmes relevant for their respective economic sectors. However, universities opening a branch campus, especially if mainly for financial reasons, generally seek new student markets. Some may also mainly set up branch campuses with the goal to act as local gateways to attract students back to the main campus. While such motivations do not necessarily contradict governments' strategies per se, these universities initially often aim at maximising their student base that makes the branch profitable and operational. In order to minimize their financial risk, such universities often decide to start their branch campus with easily transferable programmes. Transnational education zones that rely on market dynamics are particularly prone to such behaviour of universities.

In Dubai, for example, more than 50 percent of students were enrolled in business-related programmes in 2017 (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2017). The advantage of such a market-oriented hub approach is that it attracts a high number of foreign providers and involves relatively limited direct costs for the hosting government. Yet, with the attracted universities bearing

the full financial risk, their offshore campuses usually will not offer more specialised programmes requiring for example expensive laboratory equipment or special facilities, at the beginning of their existence or at all. In contrast to this, the case of Singapore has shown that linking foreign branch campuses with domestic public universities, which then develop joint degree programmes that are oriented towards the local need for skilled workers, may be a promising way of diversifying the range of offered programmes in a transnational education hub.

Finally, governments need to consider that many graduates of branch campuses aim to utilise their international degrees by seeking career opportunities abroad rather than staying in the branch campus' host country.

Universities' bias on teaching, neglecting research

Related to this dynamic, many branch campuses focus on undergraduate education, matriculating relatively few research-oriented PhD students. In addition, few faculty of branch campuses engage in research activities and are instead required to focus their resources on teaching. Such a situation can produce a rather homogenous landscape of undergraduate degree programmes rather than a diverse range of disciplines that produce innovative research output as is usually envisioned for a knowledge economy. There are approaches by hosting governments to countermand this dynamic, for example by directly funding offshore campuses and thus decreasing financial pressures, but this is very cost intensive as we can observe in Qatar or Abu Dhabi.

Universities' changing motivations

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that motivations of universities can change over time. Our interviews with university managers revealed that quite some offshore campus projects were originally launched on the basis of the motivation of a few key individuals in the university's governance structure rather than on the basis of fully developed long-term strategies. Once these individuals change jobs, their "pet project" needs to be continued by others who might not share the same conviction. Moreover, as markets can fluctuate or original agreements lose their appeal, universities might decide to close their campus. Thus, it is crucial to anticipate such behaviour in establishing a transnational education hub, for example by diversifying risks and avoiding over-reliance on single foreign universities' branch campuses.

Challenges B: Competition, collaboration, complementation

Not only do education hubs compete with each other, they are also often characterised by competition between the foreign universities within a hub itself. With governments expecting education hubs to produce synergy effects between offshore campuses, the second set of challenges we identified is related to integrating these institutions in the education hubs. Foreign branch campuses need to be brought into accordance not only with the overall higher education and research landscape but also with each other.

Lacking collaboration between faculty from different institutions

Anticipating collaboration between spatially agglomerated international branch campuses and their faculty is inherent in the very concept of a transnational education hub. By bringing academics from different fields and national backgrounds together in space, policy makers hope that innovative ideas and interdisciplinary research is developed, which ultimately contributes to the knowledge-based

economy. However, even if branch campus faculty do engage in research activities, actually very few collaborate with colleagues from nearby offshore campuses and domestic universities. Academic collaboration is thus not an automatic result from an organic process induced by spatial proximity. Some existing transnational education hub projects have shown that external incentives make inter-campus and interdisciplinary collaboration between offshore campuses' faculty more likely, such as host governments' financial support for the operation of shared research infrastructure or through special cross-institutional research funding mechanisms.

Branch campuses not complementing each other

Moreover, by attracting multiple foreign universities into a transnational education hub, governments hope to create a higher education landscape with a diverse set of providers and a broad range of offered programmes. Yet, today's global higher education landscape is guided by market logics and characterised by competition between universities which, when left unchecked, can lead to providers cannibalising each other in their competition for a limited local student market, and offering only a small selection of programmes that require fewer starting capital on the side of the universities. Education hub concepts choosing a more curated approach – Qatar's *Education City*, for example, consists of various offshore campuses, which offer only a small but specialized set of programmes – can neutralize the international higher education market's tendency for competition to a certain degree but require much more extensive financial resources and regulation. A similar, yet less cost-intensive, approach has been taken by *EduCity Iskandar Malaysia*. All universities inside this hub zone signed exclusivity clauses that prevent the offshore campuses from offering similar, competing degree programmes. Instead, the programmes should complement each other effectively and graduates' skills should be tailored to the local specialised industries' needs.

Challenges C: Exceptionalism and embeddedness

While all types of transnational education hubs will face challenges related to providing foreign higher education, in particular transnational education zones are usually designed as exceptional spaces. While providing various benefits can increase the attractiveness of a zone for universities seeking a favourable location for an offshore campus investment, such features can also cause challenges. Ultimately, the challenges deriving from an education hub's exceptionality touch upon the question of whether policy makers should regard offshore campuses as different from domestic universities.

Exceptional forms of higher education

Most transnational education zones are designed to make the transfer of programmes for universities fast and easy. In some zones, branch campuses are exempted from local accreditation schemes, enjoy greater levels of academic freedom than domestic universities might be used to, or are offered financial benefits in the form of tax exemptions or direct funding. Moreover, foreign universities often follow modes of teaching that are different from the universities in the domestic higher education system, such as co-education of male and female students or English language programmes. Such exceptions make it not only easier for universities to transfer their programmes into their host context – instead of spending money and time to localise their programmes for example – but also to target segments of students that particularly seek this form of international higher education.

However, if the degrees of these offshore campuses are not widely accepted domestically or local job markets lack the capacities to absorb offshore campuses' graduates and their particular skills, they

might search for jobs elsewhere. This may run counter to a government's intention to increase the local labour force.

Sites spatially remote and difficult to access

The remote location of most transnational education zones can amplify the zones' exceptional character. As these projects are usually thought of as education "cities" and include multiple university buildings along with shared facilities such as sports fields, student accommodation, libraries etc., they tend to require a fairly large area to develop. Zone developers usually do not find adequate sites for such developments in city centres and thus mostly locate them at the fringe of cities. Although some branch campus managers appreciate that this seclusion contributes to a university campus atmosphere, they also criticised a lack of public transport connections and an enclave-like feeling created by many zones' spatial seclusion. Far from being a matter of taste, this remoteness can have a serious impact on the hosted university's success in recruiting students, who might want to choose a more centrally located university instead. It should thus be imperative that transnational education zones are well connected to their surrounding cities.

Conflictual transition from exceptionalism to embedment

Most governments plan to eventually reduce the exceptional character of hosted international branch campuses over time and to integrate them more strongly into their local higher education system. The exceptional character engrained in the very idea of transnational education zones has the potential to jeopardize such endeavours. For example, providers may reject the regulation of adhering to an additional local accreditation framework and the administrative efforts involved. Moreover, as the recent development concerning Texas A&M's Qatar campus⁴ shows, attempts by governments to further embed international branch campuses locally and to enrol them more deeply in local development agendas can produce unexpected tensions. This not only puts under pressure the very core promise of transnational universities to provide the same education at each of their campuses, but it also touches upon broader issues such as faculty's expectations for academic independence or the branch's role in the universities' internationalisation strategy.

Developing successful transnational education hubs

To summarize the above, transnational education hubs are usually developed throughout three different phases. These relate to increasing local access to higher education, ensuring the quality of foreign higher education providers' services and their relevance to local industries, and embedding them within the host country context. We have sketched out how, during these phases, policy makers are faced with various sets of challenges related to sometimes diverging motivations of the various actors involved, the tension between tendencies of competition and collaboration, and the contradictions engrained in the exceptional character of the transnational education hubs.

⁴ Redden, E. Inside Higher Ed (published 7 December 2021). *Elevating Engineering Over the Liberal Arts and Sciences*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/12/07/proposal-would-give-liberal-arts-faculty-second-class-status> (accessed 11 January 2022).

There is no one-fits-all blueprint for building up transnational education hubs. Successful policies rather consider their particular social, cultural, political and economic contexts for overcoming the challenges involved. In addition, capacities and resources of the governments that develop a hub project need to be carefully weighted with capacities, motivations and expectations of potential external actors involved.

Overall, we argue that successful transnational education hubs find the right balance between exceptional features that attract international branch campuses and let them operate locally with relative ease, on the one hand, and features that require them to connect with each other and with the domestic higher education landscape, on the other. Therefore, our analysis offers the following key take-aways for policy makers:

- As motivations of governments and universities can diverge, policy makers need to consider that universities will not automatically contribute to national or regional development goals. Their successful contribution in the form of relevant programmes and research activities depends on incentives provided by the host government.
- Similarly, to ensure relevant and high-quality education, branch campuses need to be adequately regulated and localised through quality assurance frameworks. Systems that are too permeable for profit-seeking actors can attract dubious providers and negatively impact branch campuses' effects on the local economy and the reputation of the hub project.
- Embedding branch campuses locally is not an organic process, but similarly requires incentives. Hosting authorities need to clearly articulate their expectations and hoped-for characteristics of a transnational education hub, such as collaboration between branch campuses and with domestic universities, or synergy effects with the local economy, need to be encouraged and fostered as competing universities are less likely to collaborate.

Most transnational education hubs, at least in the form of transnational education zones, are relatively young government projects, and it might well be that a more generalisable and less context dependent policy design for them has yet to emerge. However, our advice for greater levels of strategic regulation and quality assurance geared towards transnational providers on the side of governments acts as guidance into this direction and resonates with recommendations for more collaborative partnership models by other transnational education policy makers (see for example DAAD, 2014).

With regard to the future of transnational education in general, education hub projects and branch campus development, the Covid-19 pandemic has sent ambiguous signals. Both digital and in-presence education formats seem to have gained importance and appreciation among students, staff and other stakeholders. It can be expected that in a post-pandemic world demand for higher education will continue to grow globally. This will necessarily entail the need to think about forms of universities that are both locally anchored and globally connected. Moreover, with more and more governments facing the challenges related to transnational higher education, more multilateral and international forms of regulation and quality assurance frameworks might be required. Further developing and progressing the idea of the transnational education hub is likely to remain highly relevant for this.

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Annex: Methodology

This paper is based on data from desk-top research and mapping of offshore campuses worldwide (see Kleibert et al., 2020), as well as on 136 interviews. We conducted the interviews with senior higher education managers and transnational education stakeholders in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, including representatives of the authorities that implement education hub policies in Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah, Malaysia, and Singapore. The interviews took place between 2018 and 2020 and were on average about one hour each. We voice-recorded and transcribed the interviews or, if permission to do so was not granted, took notes by hand and made memory protocols. Key themes addressed were rationales and motivations for setting up offshore campuses, location choices and the manifold challenges experienced in operating offshore campuses within an education hub context. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, supplemented by online interviews following travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic.