

# How to Lead A Branch Campus<sup>1</sup>

Simon Jones

[www.simon-jones.com](http://www.simon-jones.com)

The development of transnational education has opened up the prospect of institutional leadership to many. Whether a rising star's chance to prove mettle, a steady pair of hands adjacent to retirement or those whose financial aspirations extend beyond a modest home in a respectable suburb, international leadership offers opportunities unavailable 25 years ago.

While leadership remains leadership at home or abroad, the global perspective creates distinct professional, personal, and political demands on the postholder. This article seeks to distil 20 years of experience developing, leading, managing, and merging universities across Europe, the Middle East, and Central and Southeast Asia.

It's intended to inform prospective leaders and as a vade-mecum for the newly ensconced. It's written from the perspective of a white, cis-, late-afternoon, Northern-European male and likely has some of the preconceptions, values and virtues of one. With that out of the way, here goes:

## Your Stakeholders

### Board

Stepping up to leadership for the first time, you have most of the skills necessary to do the job. However, you won't have much experience in managing a board. Given that the board hired you and could fire you, learning to manage the board upward is not to be neglected.

I have yet to encounter a unified board. There are always factions and alliances. These may change rapidly, but there will never be a time when the board sees things as one. This applies to their view of you, too. You will have supporters, the uncommitted, the indifferent, and people who, directly or indirectly, think you are not the right person for the job. That's never going to change, and you have to understand it and, to the extent practicable, use it to advance the interests of your institution and yourself.

There's an inclination to spend time with your supporters. Teeth-gritting though it can be, you should spend more time with those who are unpersuaded of you, not your supporters. I've made it my practice to have a telephone conversation with four different board members every week. WhatsApping assiduously has much to recommend itself as long as you are not too tired, angry or unsober.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4424116>

My email system is set up to sort incoming messages into six priorities:

1. From a board member
2. Sent to me and no one else
3. Sent to me and cc others
4. Sent to me and others
5. Sent to others with me as a solitary cc
6. Sent to others with me as one of the multiple ccs

Daily attentiveness to the first three priorities and, in that sequence, keeps the institution moving forward. The latter three categories can be handled on an ad hoc basis.

## Your Home Institution

It can be a grand life as a leader of a branch campus in another country. You will get invited to many events, often appear in the media, meet the great and the good of the region and be looked after in a fine style. After that, it can be a surprise when a Vice-Provost, Pro-Vice-Chancellor or Dean from your home institution engages with you as one of their direct reports.

Your President may regard your institution as strategic and offering agency in a region of import; however, your line manager may consider you as an expensive school that exists to deliver international students. You may be thought of in less charitable moments as of uncertain fealty and generally having a better time than warranted.

There can be a temptation to try to bypass the Vice-Provost/Pro-Vice-Chancellor level and see yourself as independent, a strategic thinker and on a par with your own President. You are not. You should recognise that you are both strategic and operational to your parent institution and must manage those relationships equally and independently. At the presidential level, regular updates on progress and issues are all that are required. If they need you, they'll then be in touch.

You'll need to contact your line managers assiduously. Talking is a more effective way of maintaining distant relationships than writing. Take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate fealty. Encourage them to visit regularly and make sure they are well looked after. There is no more ardent supporter of a satellite campus than an administrator who receives regular business-class flights and 5-star hotels to visit it.

Furthermore, when they visit, you will be a tour guide, restaurant critic, host and meeting organiser as much as an institutional executive. So, brush up on your local knowledge and have a PA who can get reservations at popular locales.

## Government

Government relations are a key element in your institution's success. You will require a local on your staff to be a government relations advisor. A former senior civil servant or politician often

has the necessary network and nous to make things happen. This person will be significant to you. At times, you may feel they are more important than you. That's because, at times, they are.

My many years in the Arabian Gulf showed me that while I was treated with that region's exquisite and authentic courtesy. I was still الكفر في البدلة. All important requests were negotiated with our Government Relations staff at separate meetings. You'll need to have a strong and trusting relationship with this person, so you are *taktuf*, as the Arabs say, shoulder to shoulder.

When senior visitors arrive, they must meet the relevant politicians and senior civil servants, preferably every time they visit. Honorary degrees may cement relationships with one person, but the host of people who advise them will appreciate an invitation to the parent institution.

## Locals

A Russian phrase is *Don't go to a monastery with your own rules*. You are not there to replicate any other institution. That can't be done. The students, funding, and regional requirements are all different. You are making principles and practices operational in a different setting.

An advisory board of the local great and good is essential for insight and acting as cheerleaders in the community. They may have a very different view of what higher education is for and how it should be operated, and they must be listened to. These people will maintain support for your institution among the influential. So, acknowledge and accommodate their perspective. They must visit the institution regularly and have chances to meet with staff and students.

However, that in itself is not enough.

The goal is to get your local advisors to open doors for you. Doors that foreigners cannot get through unassisted. Therein lie opportunities your competitors cannot yoke. Work that advantage hard. When you have visitors from your home country, make sure they have a chance to meet with your local advisory board. If your budget allows, arrange for the board to visit your home institution. That will pay dividends.

## Regulatory Authorities

Regulatory bodies are a fact of life in higher education. Transnational education initiatives serve under the supervision of two sets of institutional regulations, often two sets of program regulations and the parent institution's QA/QE processes. It'll seem like 24/7 accreditation. For instance, the institution I am CEO of is undergoing a regulatory assessment every six weeks in 2023.

If you have the budget, a dedicated Regulatory Response Unit (RRU) within your IR or QA/QE units is a way to avoid distracting your administrators from operational responsibilities.

# Your People

## Administration

A properly constituted administrative structure should allow you to focus on the three things that will determine the success of your leadership: Governance, Finance, and the Cognitive Dissonance<sup>2</sup> around the purpose of your institution.

Your top-level reports should be the Provost, COO, and the Four 'Rs': Government Relations (GR), Institutional Research (IR), Public Relations (PR), and Human Resources (HR). Research via a Vice-President of Research should not be included, as you need to focus.

The Provost should have full authority over the institution's didactic and research missions. They should be supported by Vice-Provosts, at least two, namely one for Research and one for Teaching. Vice-Deans for the same topics will be an effective way of transforming institutional priorities into operational practices. Without a Vice-Provost for Research, you will become a teaching institution.

Deans have the role of turning your strategy into reality and, as such, should be involved in formulating strategy. The quality of your middle management will define the quality of your institution. Would you prefer weak students with a strong administration or strong students with a weak administration? Administration matters.

Your Presidential/Vice-Chancellor's council should include the Deans: it's too easy to miss the rapidly evolving operational challenges by being distant, especially in nascent institutions.

The Four R's should remain under your direct supervision. GR ensures your institution is heard at the highest levels. IR will give you a sense of your operations' effectiveness. HR will ensure that the people you appoint are consistent with your strategic plan and vision. PR will ensure that your institution's value and values are appreciated widely.

It's tough to find such people. While generally, I tended to a mixture of youth and experience, you often have to settle for what's available. Imports from your home institution can help, even temporarily, but you must ensure they understand there is a job to do. The better kind of executive search can help find appropriate applicants. Generally, people who have already worked abroad are preferable candidates.

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed exposition, 'Why International Branch Campukind of executive search can help identify appropriate candidatesses Stutter and Stall and How to Fix Them', Simon Jones 2023  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4436793>

## Faculty

Local faculty are, by and large, a delight to work with. Of course, you'll encounter the occasional slacker or placeman (perhaps there to keep an eye on you). Still, on the whole, they represent the best and brightest young minds of their nation, with enthusiasm for education and their relatively higher remuneration. They'll want to learn and are flexible and persistent. If properly mentored, they can lay the foundation for the institution's future success. So be sure to have a systematic mentoring system that involves academics from both your parent institution and your own. It'll pay dividends in the future.

Expat faculty fall into three categories.

1. The recently graduated, seeking adventure and a diminution of their student loans.
2. The recently retired, having served 25 years before the mast and hoping to contribute their experience and put an extension on the house.
3. The recently divorced, seeking escape, opportunity and refurbished finances.

All three have a role to play but need to be managed distinctly.

The recently graduated have energy and enthusiasm but little perspective and even fewer skills in contributing to the administrative tasks that can dominate the early years of a new institution.

At their best, the recently retired are a safe pair of hands who have seen most academic issues before and can significantly reduce the amount of firefighting senior leadership has to face.

The recently divorced can provide the most valuable employee to any institution: experienced middle managers at the Program Director, Chair, or Associate Dean level. You can't have too many of them, especially when handling your talented, driven, entitled, and highly articulate Faculty. Furthermore, their diligence can make the difference between an easy ride and harsh scrutiny when program or institutional accreditations come around.

One challenge leaders will face is that most of your faculty will have experience in just one institution, and even those with multiple institutions under their belt will likely be from the same country. The Brechtian narcissisms of minor differences can become points of principle far too quickly.

This needs careful management through discussion, as your faculty may split into two camps: The One True Path, which sees its role as recreating their university on foreign shores, and Whatever Works, which takes a more pragmatic approach. Both approaches have drawbacks. The preferred terminus is *Traditional Values in a Modern Setting*, but they won't arrive there unchaperoned.

Significant work will be needed with faculty and through the Senate before you reach a statement: This is who we are and what we believe. It can be done, but it will test your pragmatism, patience, and political skills. But you must do it to have an institution at peace with itself.

## Students

The students you have are not the students you are familiar with. They have their strengths and needs, and the institution must recognise this and structure instruction accordingly.

You'll be dealing with the sons and daughters of the local 1%, people who have invested their pensions and homes into educating their grandchildren and poor boys and girls, the grateful beneficiaries of scholarships. They will exhibit high levels of commitment. They are nuanced consumers and will know league tables and your competition better than you.

The parents, 1% or not, will value traditional, well-delivered, career-focused instruction. That usually requires a repeated explanation of the liberal arts model and dealing with not-entirely-convinced parents. Such parents will consider it natural that they take a personal interest in educating their ostensibly adult children and expect answers from you that you might not give out in other countries.

The students, by and large, are well-mannered, diffident and keen to learn. They often learn in a second language, and much research has shown that IELTS/TOEFL scores are a good predictor of GPA. So get your General Education Division focused on this, continue English language instruction throughout the program, and train your more adept faculty to teach ESP (English for Specific Purposes) within their classes. If you feel particularly bold, make IELTS/TOEFL a graduation requirement. Such well-spoken students will find favour with regional employers and maximise their chances of graduate study. Your local stakeholders will value that.

Regarding graduate study, the wealthier will often go abroad (perhaps to your parent institution) for study. The graduate market at your institution will be mostly part-time for people in the workforce who want to upskill or reskill for career development. Align your graduate provisions accordingly.

## Yourself

### You

If you want to learn about the world, watch the Discovery Channel. It's widely available and has high production values. If you want to learn about yourself, you should live and work in a different country. Leadership is said to reveal character; international leadership will also point out your shortcomings and highlight your capacity to accept criticism. It can be an experience that challenges your self-understanding. And not always in a happy way. It won't be mostly pleasure, but it can be profoundly developing.

If you engage with this experience and emerge successfully, you will have acquired a measure of self-confidence and reliance that will serve you well. Above all, remember, as the Ukrainians

say, *Work is not a wolf; it won't disappear into the forest*. It'll be there tomorrow, and so must you be; pacing yourself is the basis of enduring leadership.

## Spouse

*If Mama ain't happy, nobody happy* appears true everywhere I have lived and is likely valid if gender roles are interchanged, too. For a two-career family, there has to be a solution that works for both, or a rapid return home is all but guaranteed. You'll need to find a role for them, sometimes even creating one, where none was needed. Consider it one of the overhead costs of international hiring.

If they have a trailing spouse or one looking for a career break, many parts of the world have a demand for language instruction, often English. Indeed, many foundation programs have relied on these indelicately titled *Desperate Housewives* to meet the delivery schedule. Hosting a low-cost concurrent TOEFL-instructor/CELTA program provides a sufficient supply of native-language teachers and supports broader individual and family well-being.

Some, of course, take happily to a better climate, greater free time and enhanced prosperity. Some follow a new direction or course of study. But for sure, the institution has to play an active role in providing opportunities for spouses, as the modal reason for leaving is that their spouses feel unsettled.

## Family

There's a portability rule with children: if you can pick them up with one hand, they can quickly settle in a new location and often acquire the local languages rapidly. Increasing mass creates more complex challenges, notably around schooling, but also one's children developing into third culture kids or losing their identity, depending on how you view these things.

International schools are plentiful, which means there are good opportunities to continue in the national education systems for English and, to a lesser extent, French (e.g., Lycee Francais) and Arabic (e.g., Choueifat). Home schooling seems to defeat the purpose of taking your children abroad.

Above a certain age, the boarding schools back home may loom large, another common departure point for you or your expat faculty. This is one reason it is challenging to find mid-career faculty and administrators in international education. At that stage of life, your family's needs come first. Indeed, the scarcity of leadership for this reason often proves a persistent inhibitor to good institutional operation.

## Friends

Academia is one of the few remaining careers where people stay in the same place for a lengthy period, although admittedly, this is starting to crumble around the edges.

Nonetheless, compared to people in other professions, change of locale is not the norm. So when you move to another country, you may be out of the habit of making new friends. Combine this with culture shock and the fact that the people you meet may be of a very different background to you and perhaps not share the same first language, and you will have a very post-modern experience. For some, this is part of the excitement of international assignments; for others, it remains one of the more profound challenges.

Furthermore, the transient nature of expatriate roles means it is no one's destination; everyone is waiting for their next connection. If you come from an established community, this may test your resilience. If you have relied on your friends for counsel and support, you may receive less.

Indeed, if leadership is lonely, international leadership is lonelier still. Of course, coping skills need to be developed, but the best preparation is to recognise that these are pervasive experiences, not personal. You must get used to it to persist in such leadership positions.

## Concluding Remarks

Had I known it would be so much fun at the start, I wouldn't have worried so much. Of course, there are profound challenges, but equally profound personal, professional, and monetary rewards. It's been time well spent.

Governance, Finance and Cognitive Dissonance among stakeholders are your permanent challenges. They won't go away, and a crisis in any of them will raise questions about your competency. If you address them successfully, your other challenges won't matter much. And if you don't address them successfully, your other challenges won't matter at all.