

Why International Branch Campuses Stutter and Stall and How to Fix Them

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Introduction

Over a quarter of a century, international higher education initiatives have evolved from being the exception to being essential. A substantial number of European, North American and Australian institutions have set up new ventures either as satellite campuses or as new initiatives over which they have academic supervision. I term these initiatives Expeditionary Education, bringing established educational models and enmeshing them effectively with local settings and priorities.

They vary in size but are usually small to medium institutions (<5000 students). They vary in longevity, but few are older than 25 years. They vary in research impact but usually are heavily teaching-focused. However, all have a recognised, larger, older and successful institution supporting them in name and deed.

Some succeed. Some do not. I've led such institutions in provost or presidential roles for 20 years. Some have been great successes, some have reached a stable state, and others failed spectacularly. Looking back on these two decades, I suggest there are three elements where challenges manifest and crises emerge distinct to such institutions. These may be of use to others contemplating such expeditions.

Despite all the LinkedIn Woo-Woo around leadership, small to medium educational institutions are mostly not overly complex to lead. However, there are three particular areas within Expeditionary Education where even exceptional leaders can struggle:

1. Governance: There's no crisis like a governance crisis, and the international perspective brings its own issues to bear.
2. Finance: hardly a challenge unique to expeditionary education, but it's all too easily a place where cupidity, credulity and culture collide.
3. Cognitive Dissonance: What people want from the university, what they say they want and what happens in practice can be very different. Of course, higher education has always had to accommodate different perspectives, but the issues in expeditionary institutions are magnified and merged in a way most unlike settled institutions.

Governance

Failures of governance often result in institutional catastrophes. Examples include the London Metropolitan University in the UK, where a lack of board-level expertise and oversight led to issuing immigration visas to students who never arrived, leading to new leadership and reduced autonomy. At the University of Bath in the UK, an etiolated remuneration committee resulted in the President of a modestly sized and modestly ranked institution being paid more than the equivalent roles in Oxford and Cambridge. Again highly-publicised departures and firm regulatory intervention cast a shadow on an institution that, in other aspects, had performed well.

Expeditionary education often requires a partnership involving the home institution, a local agency or other HE provider, and governmental assistance. In securing this support, the different entities will have different priorities and interpret things through their context and aspirations. There's nothing unusual about this. So it's understandable for each of these partners to have a distinctive voice in the institution's governance. The problems arise when the governing body's political, strategic and academic responsibilities conflict, as they sometimes do.

The challenge of effectively governing expeditionary institutions has additional issues of nascence and shared understanding of the role and operation of governance. These include very different ideas about accountability, structures, authority, and not distinguishing between the powers associated with the post and the postholder.

An example would be enrolment quotas for different regions of the host nation, perhaps reflecting linguistic, ethnic and political characteristics conflicting with the importance of admitting the best-qualified students. Another example would be the board wishing to define specific research areas to support the region's development, clashing with the prized academic freedom of faculty. At the heart of this are the very different ideas the partners have as to the scope and demeanour of the institution and how influence and authority are exercised.

When governance goes wrong, the institution suffers arrhythmia, and little progress can be made. At worst, it can result in the closure or merger of the institution. Even in non-acute circumstances, reputations are lost, autonomy diminished, and leaders replaced.

The cleanest solution I have encountered to these challenges is a two-level board. Typically, the lower board chair would be the Chancellor, and the chair of the higher board would be a senior political figure. The lower-level board is responsible for warranting the discharge of the university's mission per its constitution and strategy.

The lower-level board approves the institutional strategic plan and significant academic developments. Membership would be of senior academic figures and local industry and government representatives.

The higher board ensures the institution aligns with political priorities and deals with constitutional amendments. Membership of this board comprises senior political figures, wealthy benefactors, Heads of large corporations and local rulers.

The chair of the lower board needs to be an ex-officio member of the higher board, although there should not be too much overlap in board membership. They will undoubtedly have to defend the lower board's decisions vigorously from time to time and have the acumen to handle encroachment by the higher board on the lower. A great deal will depend on this chair's resilience, determination and persuasiveness.

Finance

It's not unheard of for the originating institution to overestimate the revenue and underestimate the expenditure in setting up an expeditionary institution. Indeed, sometimes being hopeful about both is necessary to gain approval for the project. However, typically after around two years of operation, seed funds start to dwindle, and the reality of the situation reaches the senior leadership and beyond.

As a result, some institutions may resile from, downsize, teach out, or even abandon the fledgling. Others will invest further resources into the institution, often accompanied by renewed leadership and a new strategic plan. Sometimes recapitalisation reoccurs in a groundhog day fashion every few years. Expeditionary education is particularly prone to these issues for the following reasons:

- Higher Education is a business of scale. Therefore, the minimum staffing required to run an institution is significant for small enrollment institutions. For example, our Medical School has 41 administrators/technicians for 35 Faculty. So fixed costs are high for nascent institutions.
- In a small institution, it is not possible to offset losses in one area with surpluses in others.
- Experience has shown that most expeditionary institutions' revenue comes from student fees. There's usually only a tiny amount, if any, from an endowment and research income never covers the costs of research. This orients institutions towards non-laboratory programs and high faculty-student ratios. That can impact the student experience and brand or result in unmet expectations.
- Startup funds usually provide the necessary facilities for initial operations. However, infrastructure ages, student facilities require refresh, and market demand require new investments. If subventions are unavailable from the home institution or elsewhere, things can quickly start to look dowdy.
- While local faculty may be cheaper, ex-pat faculty are usually much more expensive (typically 50-75%) than they were at the home institution. Frequently, regulatory approval requires a proportion (typically 25%) of all teaching by faculty connected with the home institution.

- Travel costs are higher, too, and the home institution's leadership demonstrates commitment by regularly visiting their expeditionary initiative. This is especially true if located in an agreeable part of the world. For example, at my current institution, the entire board (all Europe based) visit South East Asia in person every three months for board meetings.

I am unaware of any expeditionary institution where enrollment exceeded expectations and costs were lower than anticipated. And if you've worked in the public sector, you'd know the pressure to present start-up costs as low as possible. Otherwise, you would not get the project approved. So almost certainly, a financial crisis will ensue. The questions are how big and when, not whether.

There are two elements to an expeditionary financial crisis. The first is given the lead time in increasing revenue, costs must be contained. Furthermore, the small size of most expeditionary institutions means there is little resource internally to fall back on, exacerbating the need for rapid cost control.

The painful process of adjusting outcomes, delaying developments or, in the worst cases downsizing/closedown comes to the forefront of the institution's considerations. While this process is always complicated and sometimes highly personalised, the local regulatory framework and employment laws may make this easier. In addition, if the region you are based in has a well-behaved press, the local publicity will be alright, at least, compared to the social media arger.

The second element is that expeditionary education will have its critics in-country. This may be from opposition parties (if there are any) or from local institutions who are well aware that the support you have received from the government, foundations or large corporations is in excess of their receipts. When this happens, you will realise you can't spend too much time cultivating good relationships with opinion formers; it's more than just honorary degrees, vital though they are. If your board likes visiting often, they should spend as much time as possible with local opinion formers and facilitate return visits.

The senior administration needs to be assiduous, systematic and deliberate in their engagement with their local stakeholders and the facilities of the expeditionary institution made available to the community.

Financial crises almost always happen. They almost always result in a change of mission and demeanour and frequently result in changes in leadership and governance. The palliative for this is growth in student enrollment. Institutions that can grow rapidly may survive. Others rarely do.

The indicators for sustainability are how much of the original vibrance and flair that the host institution brought is sustained in the reconfigured institution and whether income and expenditure are now accurately aligned.

Cognitive Dissonance

Broadly speaking, this is the difference between what you believe, what you say you believe and what you do. It can impact the expeditionary institute in a vexing manner. For example.

- The home institution might be seeking agency in a strategically important region. Or it could be wanting to fill empty seats at home in the final years of a Baccalaureate program.
- The local investors or stakeholders might seek skilled labour to help grow the economy. Or they might seek sufficient students to provide a return on their investment.
- The senior administration of the expeditionary institute may see it as a satellite campus embodying the traditional values of the home institution in a novel setting. Or they might see themselves as the founders of a new university emerging from, but increasingly independent of, the home institution.

Cognitive dissonance becomes apparent when you try to operationalise these things. Without a clear and widely agreed vision, progress is hither and thither in a way that, at best, partially meets all goals but, more often, misses some, if not all, of them in practice. As a result, targets don't get met, progress lacks clarity and often passionate, sometimes anguished discussions about the institution's purpose occur, one that too rarely results in newfound agreement.

The Brechtian narcissism of minor differences can become points of principle far too quickly. This needs careful management by discussion as your stakeholders may split into two camps *The One True Path*, who see their view as being to recreate their university on foreign shores and *Whatever Works*, who take a pragmatic approach to things. Both directions have drawbacks. A better terminus is *Traditional Values in a Modern Setting*, but they won't arrive there unchaperoned.

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

This is the most challenging aspect of any expeditionary institution. Like good, cheap healthcare or solving world hunger, it belongs to the class of wicked problems. There's no end point, all solutions come with disadvantages, and achievable improvements seem to take longer or cost more than stakeholders will tolerate. The internal dissonances between collective and individual stakeholders may create and compound all this.

This problem won't go away but can't be ignored as it can result in institutional failure. Wicked problems don't have easy answers. However, focusing on short-term deliverables can maintain a sense of progress and achievement even if the strategic debates continue in person and online.

There's no long-term without the short-term, and expeditionary education shows that focusing on the short term and letting the long term take care of itself (something of a leap of faith) represents a practical, if risky, approach to progress. However, you may end up in an institutional profile unanticipated at commencement, as some have experienced.

Conclusions

It may seem self-evident to state that expeditionary education is qualitatively different. However, it needs to be stated clearly as often it is not considered as such. Too often, they are viewed as a Schrodinger's institution, if you like, simultaneously an integral part yet not belonging to the host institution. Simultaneously mission-critical and optional; simultaneously valuable and impoverishing.

They may be started for stated reasons of Agency and Reputation but may be motivated by Impact and Revenue. They will encounter Governance, Finance and Dissonance issues that must be fully appreciated, assessed and managed.

Experience has shown that addressing Expeditionary Education's Governance, Financial and Dissonance challenges are the prerequisites for successful operation. They always will be problems, but solutions almost always exist. If you do solve them, your other problems won't matter much. And if you don't, your other problems won't matter at all.