

Locally International: How Students at an American International Branch Campus in Singapore Negotiate the Spatial Dimensions of their Transnational Higher Education

Christopher William Kohler

University at Buffalo (SUNY), United States

Email: cwkohler@buffalo.edu.

Address: 489 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14223, United States

The rapid proliferation of international branch campuses (IBCs) within the last couple of decades is a relatively new phenomenon (e.g. Altbach 2016; Becker 2009; Knight 2016; Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman 2012; Wilkins and Huisman 2012). Empirical research is lacking when it comes to the social implications for both the institutions engaged in transnational higher education through the development of IBCs and the students participating in these degree programs. The domestic students studying at international branch campuses are both local and international, undertaking an international education without venturing overseas. How valuable is an international degree earned at home? How do the spatial dimensions of students' engagement with their degree-granting institution affect them both during their degree program and after completion? Research suggests that the act of engaging in a mobile international education is essential to reap the rewards that come with an overseas education, such as intercultural competence, positionality in a global workforce, and foreign language immersion (e.g. Li and Bray 2007; Mazarrol and Soutar 2002). The purpose of this study is to understand how students who have studied and are currently studying at an IBC in Singapore narrate their experiences and expectations from transnational higher education, particularly focusing on the development and manifestation of institutional social capital and students' ability to use this form of capital in their specific local context.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is guided by Agarwal and Winkler's (1985) framework developed to explain international students' motivation to leave their home countries and study in a host country. This framework explains the "push" effects motivating students to seek higher education opportunities outside of their home country and the "pull" effects drawing them to a particular host country. Without explicitly calling these factors "push" or "pull" they find that student demand for US higher education should directly vary with the perceived benefits of US higher education, the cost of higher education in the home country, and cost of education in a third country (p. 624-625). In their discussion of the "push-pull" framework, Mazarroll and Soutar (2002) find four main "push" influences: perception that an overseas university is better than a local one, barriers to entry for local universities or lack of a desired degree program, a desire to gain a better understanding of the "West," and an intention to migrate after graduation (p. 88). The "pull" factors discovered were the reputation of a particular host country, safety, family influence, cost, and local environment. This framework is used to study IBC "attractiveness" in other studies exploring student motivations (e.g. Wilkins and Huisman 2012; Yao and Garcia 2018).

Method and Preliminary Findings

Through a pilot case study using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus group interactions with current students and alumni of an American IBC in Singapore, it was found that enrollment is mostly a feature of lack of access to one of the local universities, which hold the highest status in the Singapore context. However, for some students with an interest in pursuing jobs or graduate studies overseas, earning an American degree is seen as a way to enhance their career prospects. Several informants highlighted a perception that the US curriculum, more focused on the liberal arts and development of the “whole person,” is more desirable than a curriculum more in line with the Singapore education system, known for being hyper-competitive and tracks students early in their schooling. This change of pace from the typical was highlighted as a benefit of attending a US program. Informants suggested that Singapore’s education system was a reason for their inability to access a local higher education institution, as they did not cope well with the hyper-competitive, high-stakes characteristics of their earlier schooling.

The development of a strong alumni group in Singapore was highlighted as a way to increase the value of the degree in the Singapore context. As the alumni group expands through more branch campus graduates, informants suggest that holders of the degree will be taken more seriously and will be considered the “real deal,” furthering the possibility of social mobility despite lack of access to an elite local university or other social capital through other networks. Students are able to leverage their connections to produce economic capital. Several of the alumni informants had expressed that they either obtained an employment position through a connection with a branch campus graduate or assisted another student with securing employment.

Discussion

The pilot data suggests that, at least in this specific context, there is spatial variation in institutional capacity to develop social capital between home campuses and branch campuses. However, there appears to be a sort of “grassroots” institutional social capital at work. Students have created a sort of “institution” themselves, through both being cheerleaders for the benefits of their education in their local context and being “examples” for each other in Singapore, as well as creating a strong alumni network and intentionally leveraging the connections made towards explicit economic capital gains. This “membership in a group” that provides members with “backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit” (Bourdieu 1986) is taking place on the ground in Singapore and is being concerted by graduates to further the value of their degree in their local context. In other words, this “grassroots” institutional social capital is tied to the “institution” of the American university, but with uniquely Singaporean characteristics being cultivated by the students and graduates. For my dissertation, I plan to expand this study to another non-American IBC in Southeast Asia to bring a comparative perspective to the data. Much empirical research on transnational higher education and IBCs is prescriptive and focused on administration. My research hopes to fill a gap in the literature on the students engaged in this form of transnational (non)mobility. Empirical research on the social implications of IBCs is essential to ensuring that institutions are properly serving their *locally international* students. Understanding who they are, what they seek to obtain from their experience, and how they are able to adequately leverage their degrees are important questions yet to be fully answered by the literature.

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