

**Abstract**

International branch campuses (IBCs) may be compared to the ancient Platonic Academy. In recent years, IBCs have evolved from their initial role as an instrument and medium for education aid or revenue generation, to becoming hubs of knowledge transfer and knowledge diplomacy. In the future, this new role may bring about win-win outcomes for source countries, host countries, institutions, and knowledge recipients.

## International Branch Campuses: The New Platonic Academy

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**F**ounded around 387 BC, the Platonic Academy is recognized as one of the sources of civilization and culture of our contemporary world. It began as a society of intellectuals in Athens who studied philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy, and later it became a hub of knowledge dissemination. It took thousands of years for the brilliant ideas and thoughts of the ancient philosophers to permeate every aspect of modern life.

As a new and ground-breaking trend in higher education, international branch campuses (IBCs) may greatly accelerate this process of knowledge sharing, particularly in lower-middle income economies, and promote knowledge diplomacy among nations—similar to what the Platonic Academy achieved over centuries.

**Paradigm Shift**

Knowledge diplomacy is a concept that is gaining popularity and is seen as an alternative to soft power. Knowledge diplomacy may involve the use of transnational education, research, and innovation to strengthen relationships between countries. Jane Knight's knowledge diplomacy framework highlights the values of diplomacy as understanding, compromise, mutuality, and reciprocity. In contrast, soft power approaches are adopted principally for self-interest—to achieve influence and dominance (see [Knight on knowledge diplomacy in IHE #100](#)).

Traditionally, the propagation of knowledge, technology, and innovation through IBCs has been flowing almost uniformly in one direction, from the more prosperous and advanced global North to the global South. Similar to international aid, traditional IBCs were regarded as a type of education aid for countries in urgent need of new knowledge and higher education capacity. The United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western European countries remain top sending countries of IBCs, while the top host countries are scattered throughout East Asia, South East Asia, and the Middle East. US institutions have established over 80 IBCs worldwide, while UK institutions have over 40 IBCs. By contrast, China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) host nearly a quarter of all IBCs globally.

However, there is an interesting change taking place in the current landscape of IBCs. Once a major host country, China is now ranked among the top 10 sending countries of IBCs. India, Malaysia, and Russia are also catching up. An increasing number of emerging economies that once closed their doors to foreign IBCs have now opened their arms to welcome them. In addition, high-income countries—including Canada, France, and the United Kingdom—are now listed among the top 10 host countries.

### Media for Knowledge Diplomacy

Connected by the Internet, the world is undoubtedly getting “flatter,” with rapid exchanges happening every day between different countries and cultures. In this context, IBCs have evolved from their initial role as instrument and medium for education aid—or revenue generation—to becoming hubs of knowledge transfer and knowledge diplomacy. Knowledge diplomacy has the potential to help source countries, host countries, institutions, and knowledge recipients achieve win-win outcomes.

The world today is full of conflicts and complex scenarios, a result of increasing contact between cultures. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misbeliefs are all confounding our perceptions of each other. Unfortunately, these conflicts cannot be easily resolved by “track-one diplomacy” alone. It is more effective to bring people together on the same grounds and enhance mutual trust. Knowledge and education, two of the greatest legacies of mankind, could be the best approach to enhance mutual understanding and improve international relations. In this regard, IBCs have a major role to play.

Although IBCs have often been under the scrutiny of policy makers, decision groups, academia, and mass media, their crucial function as a vehicle for knowledge diplomacy should not be downplayed. In this role, IBCs promote the exchange of students, faculty, knowledge, culture, and expertise. Students who are now developing international and intercultural competencies may help guarantee world peace in the future.

Higher education has become an important tool, utilized by nations to build and maintain favorable political, social, and economic relationships. An ex-Soviet state like Armenia has no hesitation in offering land free of charge to a Russian university, the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, to build a campus that will deliver mutual benefits. There are often no economic incentives for institutions to establish campuses in Africa, and yet an increasing number of institutions are deciding to do so.

### Knowledge Economy and Future Prospects

Already, there is evidence that IBCs can help nations to build a knowledge economy. This is evidenced by research output, patent registrations, and entrepreneurship activities. A study conducted by Pohl and Lane in 2017 found that IBCs in Qatar had accounted for as much as 38 percent of Qatar’s total scholarly publications. Amity University, an Indian university with 13 branches worldwide, has filed over 800 patents.

IBC may bring expertise, research, and innovation to a host country to address local, regional, and global issues. Several countries have been particularly keen to attract medical schools, such as Weill Cornell Medicine Qatar and Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia. From its launch in 2012, the Technical University of Berlin El Gouna was planned and built to become a hub for research, innovation, and international cooperation in Egypt. To satisfy local needs, the campus specializes in teaching and research in energy and water engineering and urban development.

Although some journalists are still suggesting that IBCs are withering or dying off, the evidence suggests instead that many IBCs are strong, successful, and growing. For example, three of the existing IBCs in Dubai (Heriot-Watt University, Rochester Institute of Technology, and the University of Wollongong) are currently constructing new, larger, purpose-built campuses. These institutions clearly expect to be thriving for many years to come.

So, is it fanciful to compare IBCs with the Platonic Academy? Only time will tell, but unlike the Platonic Academy, their positive contributions may be recognized much earlier. ▲

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