

# Banal nationalism and the internationalization of higher education

Promoting the University of Bolton's Ras Al-Khaimah branch campus on the streets of Ajman

The other day I was stuck in traffic in [Ajman](#), one of the smaller of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and one that has to do without Abu Dhabi's and Dubai's global glitz. Imagine my surprise when a car painted in the Union Jack came into view! I've been stuck in traffic in many parts of the world and I've got a sizable collection of pictures of cars decorated with flag stickers, images of flags or actual flags. This car, however, is, I think, the only one I've ever seen that was completely painted as a flag. The status of the little car as an island of Britishness moving in a sea of mundane Middle Eastern traffic was further enhanced by the fact that it had its steering wheel on the right-hand side: just like in Britain, but unlike every other car in the UAE.

So what do you think this car was advertising? Surely, the British state is not desperate enough for some good PR to send little cars painted with the Union Jack out onto the streets of the Middle East?

Well, the mystery was revealed when the car's rear window came into view. The car was an ad for higher education! Specifically, it was advertising for the University of Bolton and the slogan on the rear window reads "Get a UK degree/At The First British University/in Ras Al Khaimah, U.A.E."

In 2008, the University of Bolton opened a branch campus in [Ras Al-Khaimah](#), the northern-most and least-developed emirate. [Initially, the university's low ranking at home caused some raised eyebrows](#) but the branch campus now seems to be doing well and [enrollment rose from an initial 100 students to 300 in 2010](#).

Not favored with oil wealth nor tourist attractions, Ras Al-Khaimah has tried to turn itself into a higher education hub in the last couple of years by "[enticing and luring](#)" American and British colleges and institutions into opening branch campuses in their free trade zone. However, since [the spectacular failure of George Mason University's branch campus in Ras Al-Khaimah after only three years in 2009](#), the enticing and luring may have become a bit more difficult.

Despite the fact that many international branch campuses have ended in a fiasco (in addition to the George Mason University withdrawal from Ras Al-Khaimah, Australian readers will be familiar with the debacles of the [University of New South Wales in Singapore](#) or the [University of Southern Queensland in Dubai](#)), branch campuses continue to be a popular internationalization strategy and [the number of international branch campuses reached 200 in 2012, up from only 82 in 2006: a remarkable growth figure of around 150% in little more than half a decade](#).

[According to a 2012 report](#), the largest number of international branch campuses originate from the UK and about a quarter of all international branch campuses are located in the UAE. However, the scene is quickly diversifying. In addition to the UK, Australia and the USA have long tried to be big players in franchising their higher education institutions overseas. They are now joined by other European countries, particularly France and Germany, as well as emerging source countries, particularly India, Iran and Malaysia.

The destination countries of international branch campuses, too, are diversifying away from the Gulf States with the largest growth now in Asia, particularly China and Thailand. Africa, too, is starting to attract international branch campuses, with some already set up such as the Iranian Islamic Azad University in Tanzania and many others, originating particularly from China and Malaysia, in the planning stage.



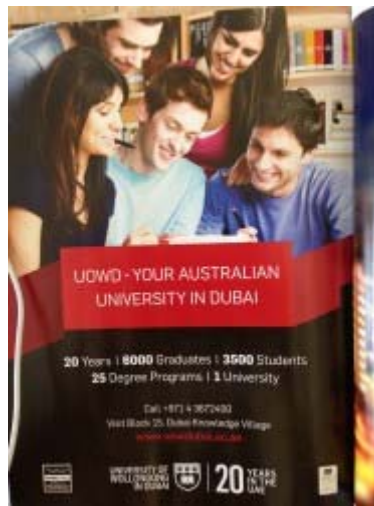
Preston University campus in China

So, what drives the extraordinary growth of international branch campuses? Sadly, it's not the search for knowledge nor the desire to provide more equitable access to higher education. According to Altbach and Knight (2007) the primary motivation to establish an international branch campus is the desire to make a profit. This is particularly obvious with for-profit universities and includes a fair number of [shady degree mills such as Preston University originating from Pakistan](#).

Making money is, of course, also attractive to traditional not-for-profit universities starved of public funding and that's obviously where institutions such as the University of Bolton come in.

As far as non-financial motives for the establishment of international branch campuses are concerned, Altbach and Knight (2007) identify access provision and demand absorption as more and more young people want to attend higher education, particularly in countries that may be ill-equipped to meet that demand. Additionally, they note that internationalization is in itself highly valued in higher education. Indeed, an international orientation has long been a central aspect of the academic habitus (see also my recent discussion [here](#)) and [university rankings have recently served as an additional incentive to internationalize](#).

Students, by contrast, are attracted to branch campuses for reasons of convenience, as Wilkins et al. (2012) argue. Based on a survey of students studying at an international branch campus in the UAE, they found that students chose to study on the branch campus rather than the main campus because it was cheaper and closer to home and because they preferred the life-style of the UAE over that in Australia, the UK or USA.



Magazine ad for the University of Wollongong's branch campus in Dubai

Wilkins et al.'s (2012) research questions did not include any that related to the motivation to study at a branch campus rather than a local university but a significant number of respondents mentioned that “foreign universities have best reputation in UAE” (p. 426). Indeed, country reputation is the unique selling proposition evident in the University-of-Bolton advertising car. Advertising for other international branch campuses in the UAE also relies heavily on the reputation of the Western country where the university is headquartered, as is evident in this magazine ad for the Dubai campus of the Australian University of Wollongong.

Like many others, I find the subjection of education to the profit motif objectionable. Indeed, senior administrators of not-for-profit British universities are loath to admit a profit motive underlying their institution's establishment of international branch campuses, as Healey (2013) discovered. The administrators this researcher interviewed preferred to talk about their non-commercial motives such as the desire to internationalize and to contribute to global development through education, etc.

However, even if profit were not the main motivation why universities set up international branch campuses, I'm still troubled by the vexing association between quality higher education and the franchised university. Isn't higher education diminished for all of us if the university becomes nothing more than yet another expression of banal nationalism and neocolonial imagery?



Altbach, P., & Knight, J. (2007). The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11 (3-4), 290-305 DOI: [10.1177/1028315307303542](https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542)

Healey, N. (2013). “Why do English Universities really Franchise Degrees to Overseas Providers?” *Higher Education Quarterly*: n/a-n/a.

Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M., & Huisman, J. (2011). Student Choice in Higher Education: Motivations for Choosing to Study at an International Branch Campus *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16 (5), 413-433 DOI: [10.1177/1028315311429002](https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311429002)