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AN INTERVIEW WITH JO RITZEN





EDUCATION HUBS:

A FAD, A BRAND OR AN INNOVATION?

*As international education continues to evolve and influence the position of countries on the educational map, new concepts develop in answer to market demands. Expert and leader in the field, **Jane Knight**, describes how education hubs are gaining momentum but questions whether they are indeed innovations worthy of investment and serious attention.*

EDUCATION HUBS ARE FULL OF LOFTY EXPECTATIONS AND FRAUGHT WITH POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Not only has internationalisation had a profound impact on and transformed higher education in the past three decades, it has undergone major changes itself. This is especially true for crossborder education. Over the last 10 years, crossborder education has grown in scope and scale. The number of branch campuses, double/joint degree programmes, franchise and twinning arrangements has increased exponentially. The recruitment of international students and academics is now treated as a national marketing and branding campaign often linked to science and technology strategies and immigration policies.

The most recent development in crossborder education relates to the positioning of a country as an education hub. Smaller countries such as Qatar, Malaysia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Hong Kong are trying to build a critical mass of local and foreign actors – including students, education institutions, companies, knowledge industries, science and technology centres – and become known as an education hub. Other countries, such as Botswana, Korea, Saudi Arabia, even Bhutan, periodically refer to themselves as a hub, but there is very little information on their plans and activities. It is understood that countries have different objectives and priorities and take different approaches to developing themselves as a reputed centre for higher education excellence, expertise and economy. But given higher education's current preoccupation with competitiveness, global branding

and rankings, one is not sure whether a country's plan to develop itself as an education hub is merely a fad, the latest branding strategy, or in fact an innovation worthy of investment and serious attention.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF AN EDUCATION HUB

To date, the concept of a hub, whether it be a communication, fashion, financial or education hub, is popular – almost trendy. Most of the information on education hubs is grey literature, such as media reports and business plans. There are few academic articles and no accepted definition yet. It is important to develop a working definition and a typology to bring some rigour to the examination of education hubs. A proposed definition, based on an analysis of existing hub countries is as follows: *“an education hub is a planned effort to build a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaged in crossborder education, training, knowledge production and innovation initiatives.”* This definition is a work in progress and attempts to capture the fundamental elements of an education hub regardless of the primary actors or in what country or region of the world it is located. The identification of driving rationales, expected outcomes, sponsors, major actors and specific types of activities is intentionally omitted to allow the definition to apply to the emerging diversity of hubs.

Key concepts in the definition include ‘planned effort’ to indicate that a hub is a deliberate project and would normally involve a strategy, policy framework and investment. The notion of ‘critical mass’

suggests that there is more than one actor and set of activities involved. This means that a single branch campus, or franchise programme, or science and technology park does not constitute a hub. The inclusion of ‘local and international actors’ indicates that both domestic and foreign players are involved. They can include local, regional and international students, scholars, institutions, companies, organisations, research centres, knowledge industries, etc. The idea of being ‘strategically engaged’ emphasises that there is a deliberate sense of interaction or relationship among the actors. While the nature of the engagement will differ from hub to hub, a fundamental principle is that there is added value when the actors are connected, collaborate, or share common facilities and resources. ‘Crossborder education, training, knowledge and innovation initiatives’ depict the broad categories of activities and outputs of hubs.

THREE TYPES OF EDUCATION HUBS

A variety of factors drive countries to prepare and position themselves as an education hub. They include income generation, soft power, modernisation of the domestic tertiary education sector, economic competitiveness, the need for a trained work force, and a desire to move to a knowledge and service based economy. In response, three different types of education hubs are being developed: the student hub, skilled workforce hub, and knowledge/innovation hub.

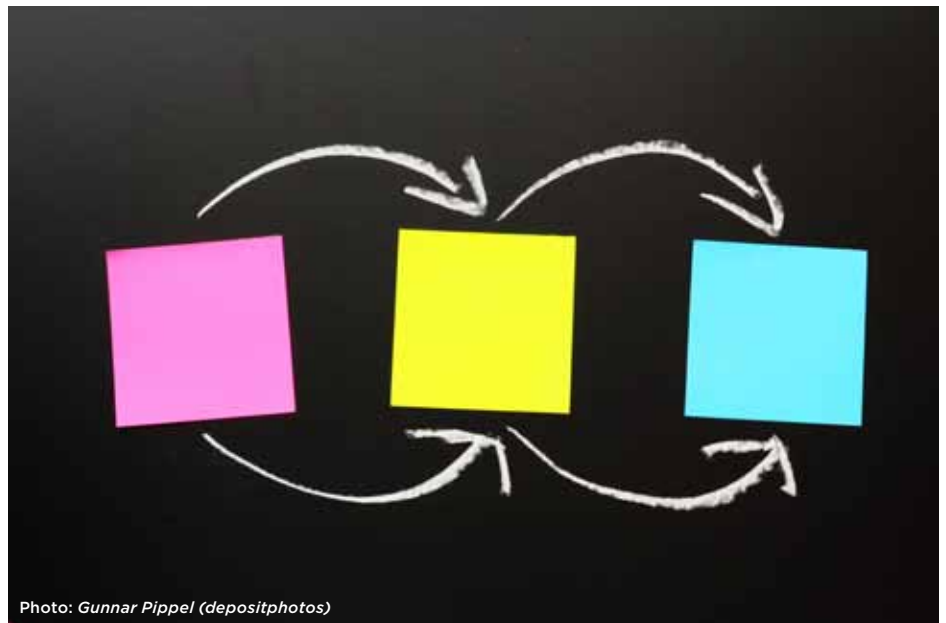
The student hub focuses on the recruitment of foreign education providers as well as international students for training and education purposes. The primary objectives are to 1) generate revenue from international student fees, 2) provide increased access for local students, 3) modernise and internationalise domestic higher education institutions, and 4) increase profile and competitiveness in the international student education market. Malaysia is an example of a student education hub.

The skilled workforce hub also focuses on education and training but differs from the student hub by encouraging foreign students to remain in the host country for employment purposes. The driving key objectives are to 1) develop skilled labour and knowledge workers to enhance the human resources pool, and 2) increase attractiveness and economic competitiveness within the region and beyond. The United Arab Emirates is an example of a skilled workforce education hub.

The knowledge/innovation hub broadens its mandate beyond education and training to include the production and distribution of knowledge and innovation. Foreign actors including universities, research institutes and R&D companies are attracted through favourable business incentives to establish a base in the country and collaborate with local and foreign partners. The primary objectives are to 1) help build a knowledge- and service-based economy, 2) educate and train skilled labour for knowledge/innovation, 3) attract foreign direct investment, and 4) increase economic competitiveness and soft power. Singapore is an example of a country trying to establish itself as a knowledge/innovation type of education hub.

Many questions emerge from this typology. For instance, is there a progressive

IS THERE A PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT FROM STUDENT HUB TO SKILLED WORKFORCE TRAINING HUB TO KNOWLEDGE/INNOVATION HUB?



development from student hub to skilled workforce training hub to knowledge/innovation hub? Or, is it possible to make a quantum leap from a student focused education hub to a knowledge hub? Is the hub phenomenon particular to smaller countries rather than the giants of cross-border education such as Australia, the UK or the USA? Is it possible to have an objective set of indicators to measure readiness, potential, output and sustainability of these education hubs?

RHETORIC OR REALITY?

Education hubs, at the country, zone or city levels, are full of lofty expectations and fraught with potential challenges. They represent a new generation of crossborder

education activities where critical mass, co-location and collaboration among international/local universities, students, research institutes and private industry are key. They can be seen as instruments of modernisation, competitiveness, knowledge economy, soft power, and other benefits. But are education hubs sustainable? Are the required plans, policies and investments in place? Is there a critical mass of local and international actors working together and committed for the long term? Or, is the notion of the education hub just a fad; more rhetoric than reality, more of a public relations campaign to gain profile and status? **E**