Stream 10: Organisational Behavior

Competitive Session

"You need to sell the university": International-branch campus lecturers' orientations toward supporting marketing activities

Ms. Heather Swenddal

School of Business & Management, RMIT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: heather.swenddal@rmit.edu.vn

Assoc. Prof. Mathews Nkhoma

School of Business & Management, RMIT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: mathews.nkhoma@rmit.edu.vn

Dr. Sarah Gumbley

School of Business & Management, RMIT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: sarah.gumbley@rmit.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades several Australian universities have opened international branch campuses (IBCs) overseas (C-BERT, 2017). IBCs export international education to students in their home countries, offering an attractive alternative to studying abroad (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

IBCs depend upon student enrollments for viability, making effective marketing crucial (Lipka, 2012). IBC lecturers are often engaged to support marketing efforts. However, lecturers' perspectives on their marketing involvement is largely unknown.

This paper presents extracts from interviews with six IBC lecturers about their roles in IBC marketing activities. Our research found that IBC lecturers are generally willing to support IBC marketing activities, but may be more comfortable doing so if they can retain their academic identity and limit their "selling" behavior during this process.

Keywords: Attitudes, motivation, perception, socialisation, values.

BACKGROUND

Higher Education's Global Consumerist Turn

Higher education scholars often point to a 20th-century "academic revolution" that sparked dramatic changes in the sector (Valimma, 2014, p. 45). The decades following World War II introduced the *massification* of universities, as broad populations began to enjoy this opportunity that had previously been reserved for elites (Altbach et al., 2017, xii). Financial changes soon followed, with many countries tying financial aid to individual student enrolments, forcing universities to compete against each other for students (Naidoo et al., 2011). Naidoo et al. (2011) called this phenomenon the "consumerist turn" of higher education—a trend Slaughter and Leslie (1999) associate with "academic capitalism": higher education's focal shift from a "public good" orientation toward one that emphasized profit.

In the two decades since the first critiques of academic capitalism, the phenomenon has spread throughout the globe (Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014). In addition to universities adopting more consumerist orientations, there has also been an increase in what Kauppinen and Cantwell (2014) call

“transnational academic capitalism”: universities’ “activities, practices, networks and processes that cross nation-state borders and contribute to a transnational flow of ideas, innovations, capital, goods and people,” (p. 148). A key mechanism for this is transnational education (TNE): foreign educational offerings that students complete while remaining in their home country (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). Globalization has expanded TNE avenues, providing the context for international universities to forge efficient supply chains for mass-delivered, locally-customizable educational products—similar to practices of multinational enterprises (Kauppinen & Cantwell, 2014).

The Rise of the International Branch Campus (IBC)

Several mechanisms exist for delivering higher education across borders. Online education is a popular approach, as are partnership agreements in which local and international universities promote co-branded educational offerings. However, the model that most fully imports the home-campus experience to local students is that of the international university branch campus (IBC): a brick-and-mortar outpost of a larger university located in a separate country. The Cross-Border Educational Research Team (2017) distinguishes IBCs as entities that...

> *...[are] owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provide an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider (p. 1).*

Monash University in Malaysia, New York University Shanghai in China, and RMIT University in Vietnam are examples of this model. A full list of IBCs operating around the world can be accessed at www.cbert.org.

The opportunity to earn what is often a prestigious foreign degree without leaving one’s home country is an attractive value proposition for international students. In recent years the IBC model has proven increasingly popular. In 2002, there were 18 IBCs in existence worldwide, (C-BERT, 2011). By 2009, this number had grown to 162 (Tierney & Lanford, 2014), and today it is 253—more than ten-fold growth in 15 years (C-BERT, 2017).

Launching an IBC has obvious benefits for the parent university. High-fee-paying international students are a major income source for universities (Levent, 2016), and TNE allows universities to recruit more of them by accessing the market of international students who are unable to move overseas to study. IBCs also provide affordances for international collaboration and cross-country research (Tierney & Lanford, 2014), and generate prestige for their parent campuses, underscoring their global outlook (Tayar & Jack, 2013, p. 153). For host countries, IBCS offer capacity-expanding opportunities: meeting a gap in in-country offerings, internationalizing the academic community, and increasing education levels to build a knowledge-based economy (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Lim & Shah, 2017).

The Key to IBC Success: "Marketing, Marketing, Marketing"

Launching and successfully managing IBCs is not an easy undertaking. The 253 IBCs currently in existence do not represent the full number that have been established: others have started and closed—often due to financial problems. The University of New South Wales's short-lived "UNSW Asia" campus in Singapore is a one such example. After less than a semester of operation, UNSW announced that it would close the campus—largely due to low student enrolment (Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2007). Other common factors in IBC closure are quality challenges and disputes with local partners (Healey, 2016).

While some of these challenges mirror those of any higher-education institution, the IBC status as a kind of startup venture makes this model particularly vulnerable. As Sara Lipka (2012) notes in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on IBC viability, for IBCs "[t]o be solvent requires the steady revenue of tuition, but building a brand and recruiting students are formidable tasks," (p. 1). The title of Lipka's (2012) article contains what she sees as the key to IBC success: "marketing, marketing, marketing." Lipka (2012) cites as successful the University of Wollongong's IBC in Dubai, which raised its enrollment numbers by 39% in a single year by "chas[ing] students" via a metrics-driven, corporate-style sales team (p. 3).

Since a key value proposition of IBCs is their ties to their home universities, marketing messages to potential students stress this connection, and IBCs need to deliver on these expectations. Salt and Wood (2014) claim that "transmitting [IBC operators'] home-based 'institutional DNA' abroad… is universally regarded as the key to [IBC] success," (p. 94). This is a cultural undertaking as well as an academic one. IBC leaders must transport not only the educational offerings and standards of the home institution, but the cultural signifiers that contribute to its brand identity. They must, as Wilkins and Huisman (2013) argue, "perform the complex task of managing multiple interrelated images simultaneously," ensuring that campus facilities and academic offerings fulfill students' expectations of a legitimate parent-campus extension (p. 618).

IBC Lecturers' Roles in Promoting Their Universities

IBC lecturers play a crucial role in embodying this crucial "image" of the home campus and promoting their universities to stakeholders. As Hughes (2011) notes, "an IBC is the home of a collection of staff who represent the 'brand' of the home institution," (p. 23). Typically IBCs source staff through a combination of local and international means (Healey, 2016, p. 66), and regardless of their home country, these lecturers become avatars for the home campus and its culture. Not meeting this expectation can have dire consequences: Hughes (2011) warns that "[i]f the distance between what students expect from

the 'brand' of an institution and the teaching and learning experience they receive is too great, they will find a different institution to attend," (p. 27). IBC students want their experiences to "reflect the fundamental ethos that exists on the main campus," (Howman Wood, 2011, p. 30). Representing the university to current and potential students is therefore a unique responsibility of lecturers working in international branch-campus settings.

Whether IBC lecturers themselves see university promotion as part of their role is a question unexplored in literature to date. The limited research on IBC settings has focused primarily on IBC management decision making (see, for example, Healey, 2016) and students' expectations and enrolment decisions (see, for example, Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). Recent research by Wilkins et al. (2017) has shed some light on employee satisfaction in IBC contexts, noting lower satisfaction for IBC versus onshore university employees. The question of IBC lecturers' willingness to support university marketing efforts is not addressed in this research.

Lecturers as Marketers: Potential for Identity Conflict

The roles of university lecturer and marketer are arguably quite diverse. Academia retains a strong connection to its public good roots, with many academics viewing this work as a calling, not just a profession (Rhoades, 2014). University marketing, conversely, is associated with the rise of academic capitalism, viewing academic experiences as more of a private commodity that can be promoted and sold (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999). Asking university lecturers to assume the role of marketer has implications for their identity: their conscious and unconscious self-concept which informs their views and actions (Jenkins, 2014).

Identity research spans fields ranging from sociology to psychology to spirituality, among others. A core understanding throughout these perspectives is that identity is multiple and changeable, shifting with roles people play, contexts they occupy and experiences that shape their perspectives (Jenkins, 2014). In sociology, identity is thought to be collaboratively socially constructed by individuals and their surround, suggesting that outside influences can affect the way people see themselves and as a result impact their actions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Yet identity is also seen as somewhat durable, with deeply-ingrained allegiances to present or past groups pervading in individuals' self-concepts and behaviors (Bourdieu, 1990).

Applying these theories to the question of university branch-campus lecturers' identity challenges in promoting their universities, multiple scenarios are possible. On one hand, these lecturers' self-concept as academics may drive a personal investment in historical ideas about the commercially agnostic "life of the mind" associated with the public-good era. Lecturers' allegiances to these historical ideals may impede their willingness to perform behaviors they see as contradicting them. On the other hand,

lecturers' exposure to new influences in their context may override these allegiances, prompting them to adopt a marketing-positive identity and engage in brand-supportive behaviors. Since perspectives of IBC lecturers on the topic of university promotion are underexplored in current literature, their orientations to this possibility are unclear.

Research on University Lecturers as Brand Supporters

An emerging vein of general higher-education literature indicates growing sector-wide interest in how university lecturers support their brands. In a summary of related corporate-sector research, Sujchaphong et al. (2015) suggest that transformational leadership and internal brand-building can prompt university employees to act in brand-supportive ways. Interestingly, they draw a distinction between academic and professional staff, suggesting that while university employees "other than professors might be influenced by some top-down marketing approaches," the independent nature of academic staff raises doubts about whether "anyone could hope to influence them to act 'according to brand,'" (Sujchaphong et al, 2015, p. 231).

Sujchaphong et al's (2015) stance may represent well the situation of years past, but the consumerist turn in higher education is changing expectations of what it means to be a university lecturer. Lecturers' brand alignment and potential for ambassadorship may now be open to influence. Yu et al (2016) found that academic staff at a British university were likely to display brand-supportive behavior in contexts in which they were treated like customers, with active communication that responded to their needs and celebrated their achievements (Yu et al, 2016, p. 4). Interestingly, Yu et al (2016) found that orientations and behaviors diversified across demographic lines, with newer lecturers more likely to action their brand alignment into brand-supportive behavior, and more mature—particularly male—lecturers less likely to do so.

As academic capitalism continues to influence university management practices, representing the university brand may become more of a job expectation for lecturers. Cambra-Fierra and Cambra-Berdun (2008) suggest that university lecturers perform the role of "part-time marketers" of their institutions, and should be trained and engaged this way by their institutions. Pluta-Olearnik (2017) agrees, arguing that for universities, the classic "4Ps" marketing mix of "Price," "Product," "Promotion" and "Place" should be extended to "5Ps," with the fifth "P" referencing "Personnel" and recognising employee's role in promoting their institution. This trend toward thinking of university lecturers as marketers is likely to continue in the transnational space, where marketing and student recruitment are crucial for IBC viability, and university lecturers are seen as playing a critical role in representing their institutions to the public.

METHODS

This paper shares insights from research on lecturers working at international university branch campuses, highlighting their orientations toward representing their universities at marketing events. The data presented is part of an ongoing project examining the professional experiences and perspectives of approximately 40 lecturers working at universities based in Southeast Asia.

Data for this paper and the larger research project were collected following the practices of Constructivist Grounded Theory, which adopts a wide, emic lens to chronicle the perspectives of in-situ participants, identifying patterns and building theory "from the ground up," (Charmaz, 2014, p. 36). Constructivist Grounded Theory is a second-generation adaptation of the original Grounded Theory Method developed by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser (1967); the constructivist version differs from the original in its view of reality as socially constructed through events and discourse. Findings are not assumed to be universally generalisable, and should be considered within their source data's context—in this case, two universities in Singapore and Malaysia, in January and February 2018.

Participants in this research were recruited through an open call for volunteers. Following informed-consent procedures, they engaged one-on-one with the researcher in semi-structured interviews of roughly one hour each. In response to an open question about their official and unofficial duties at their university, several participants mentioned their involvement in supporting university marketing activities. Extracts from their responses and researcher-guided elaborations are presented below. These are analyzed using applicable concepts from literature on identity theory and organisational identification, with consideration throughout for the implications and practical take-aways relevant to transnational higher-education management and related multinational industries.

FINDINGS

Overview of marketing activity types and participation expectations

While several research participants described marketing activity participation as a component of their roles, the types of activities and participation expectations varied. The most common type of university marketing activity lecturers said they participated in was university open days, in which potential students toured the campus to meet with faculty, administrators and possibly current students, often accompanied by their parents. At open days, lecturers promoted their institutions in a range of ways, including delivering sample lessons, giving presentations, and engaging with visitors informally.

Other marketing activity formats participants mentioned included local, regional and international recruitment fairs, where lecturers hosted university-branded booths to talk to potential students and

parents; recruitment-oriented presentations, where lecturers spoke to groups of potential students and parents about the merits of their university program and disciplinary area; and soft-marketing activities where lecturers presented talks related to their disciplines with the secondary goal of promoting their program and university.

Participants who described marketing activity participation described a range of related expectations. Some said the opportunity was presented to them as an optional way they could fulfill the service aspects of their roles, while others said participation in these activities was mandatory or expected. Some took pride and enjoyment in their participation; others resented it; and others described mixed feelings—understanding the need for student recruitment efforts but feeling conflicted about directly supporting them.

This study's major findings about participants' orientations toward university marketing activities are noted below, with examples using salient interview extracts related to participants' understanding of the purpose of these activities, conceptualisation of their role in them, and willingness to participate. Data presented in this paper are from six research participants: Will, Gina, Jess and Thuy, who are lecturers at an Australian university branch campus in Singapore, and Martin and Suresh, who are lecturers at an Australian university branch campus in Malaysia (all names are pseudonyms). Participants' nationalities are noted in the text below.

Recognising the need for IBC marketing activities

In discussing the topic of IBC marketing, most participants communicated an understanding that IBCs typically operate with more tenuous fiscal security than their parent campuses, requiring them to be marketing-driven. They demonstrated awareness of their IBC's need to continuously recruit students, as noted below:

> WILL (American): *"The model [of IBCs] is about profitability. And it's about monetary or fiscal maintenance. I mean you have to maintain. In order for us to offer education, it has to be economically viable, because we're not getting any funding from the government."*

> GINA (British): *"They [the university] have to survive… They wouldn't exist if they weren't making money."*

For many participants, this focus on recruitment was concentrated locally, at the level of their program and its viability:

MARTIN (Malaysian): *"Because [our department] is so small, we have to really go all out and spend more time... in terms of recruiting, and marketing, and things like that."*

SURESH (Malaysian): *"If we have no students coming in, the faculty, the department will be disbanded and we have to go."*

IBC lecturers' apparent understanding of the need for student recruitment activities sets the stage for their willingness to participate in them—the focus discussed below.

Willingness to participate in marketing activities

Research participants who reported joining in IBC marketing activities generally described their involvement as voluntary, provided as part of the "service" expectation within the standard academic requirement triad of teaching, service and research. However, the enthusiasm of their volunteerism varied. Some, such as Will, below, were clearly comfortable with participating in direct marketing activities, even as they acknowledged that others may not be:

WILL (American): *"I think many professors would probably balk at the suggestion that you need to be part of a marketing campaign, that you need to sell the university. They would say well you know… that's not my role. But it is something that's very much expected of you at [IBC] campuses because it's so much a part the model. … That's part of your job. … I like recruiting students. And it's fun for me, to get out there and to pitch them--on their future because that's what it is."*

Other participants shared a more subdued willingness to support these marketing events:

GINA (British): *"I think it's okay. I've never resented it, I've never... I've possibly joked about doing it, but I've never been you know morally against the idea of doing it. … I guess I do see the need for it."*

THUY (Vietnamese): *"I think if my colleagues can do that so I can do that. So I mean it's a duty where everyone have to do so I have no problem with doing that."*

SURESH (Malaysian): *"Whenever we have open day, whenever we have marketing trip, all of us have to participate. No choice. So that is not to say compulsory but it's just based on our--our how do you say our conscience or whatever?"*

This framing of marketing-event involvement as a necessary "duty" or "conscience"-driven obligation was echoed in some participants' body language, with them rolling their eyes or using other nonverbal means to communicate a mild reluctance or reservation about their involvement in IBC marketing activities. At times, they expressed this verbally, such as in the case of Suresh, whose complaint about the expectation was quickly followed with acknowledgement of its goal:

> SURESH (Malaysian): *"Honestly speaking, deep down honestly, I dislike the idea of the lecturer have to participate in those things. ... I dislike the idea, okay, but since time back to my initial explanation, we are small. So we have to do anything that we can to make our department grow."*

As these examples show, lecturers generally expressed a willingness to support university marketing activities, despite some hesitations. Interestingly, however, they demonstrated significant agency in framing the terms of their involvement, conceptualizing their role in these activities in a specific way that aligns with their academic roles. This finding is discussed below.

Conceptualising their role in marketing activities

Research participants who discussed lecturer participation in university marketing activities often explained—at times unbidden—the reasons that their support was needed. While a few participants described the need as one of manpower—needing to bolster a small marketing team with additional support—many framed their involvement as complementary to that of the official university marketing staff, providing expert knowledge about the programs that these professional staff lacked:

> JESS (Australian): *"It's coming from a different angle from marketing. You're coming from a information sharing and trying to inspire [potential students] about a particular topic. So for me it's about come and do my subject area. But for [marketing staff] it would be more about just come to our university. But I can bring content and a bit more real world inspiration that they don't know. They don't know the subject, they can't do that. So together, it's good."*

> THUY (Vietnamese): "*I think the aim for the lecturer involved in this activity is to try to attract students to come to our discipline, come to our university. Because sometimes the marketing people they don't know about they don't know much about the academic activities... so that's why they need one of us to be there, maybe sometimes just to answer these kinds of questions."*

SURESH (Malaysian): *"I don't think of myself as a traditional marketing behavior trying to sell the product. Cause I feel, personally I feel like it's not ethical. I'm a teacher here. I'm not trying to sell you stuff. It contradicted what I'm I'm doing here and... I'm just helping out. Explain what the course does. I'm not trying to sell you... hard sell you, you know?"*

DISCUSSION

Rationale sharing through an IBC community of practice

IBC lecturer participants' repeated references to the need for robust marketing suggest that the challenge of ensuring IBC viability is a shared reality, understood by multiple staff at these campuses. A unique IBC community of practice is likely in place, with core members helping newcomers orient to the specific needs of this context, and community knowledge about these challenges and requirements being reinforced and maintained through dialogue (Lave & Wenger, 1995).

A key indicator that a community of practice is reinforcing lecturers understanding of marketing needs is the shared stance of Martin and Suresh, who work in the same department. Their similar orientation to the need for departmental promotion suggests that it has been developed through dialogue—with each other and perhaps others in their department. While some participants displayed some resistance to participating, they generally expressed a willingness to do so and an awareness of the reasons that such participation was necessary in the unique IBC context.

Identity formation and maintenance

Participants' self-positioning in these extracts can be interpreted through the lens of identity theory, which views personal identity as a socially-determined construct, explaining "who people are to each other" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 6). Contemporary identity theorists see identity as multiple, malleable and constantly in flux, negotiated intrapersonally and interpersonally through the subtle machinations of social interaction (Jenkins, 2014). For example, an individual might perform a claimed identity—presenting herself in a particular way through "dramatic realization" of a role (Goffman, 1959), and this candidate identity may be reinforced or undermined by her interlocutors (Jenkins, 2014). One might also be placed in a "subject position" of their interlocutors' choosing—labeled by a perceived role or attribute—forcing the individual to either accept or resist this positioning (Davies & Harre, 1990). The mirror of others' perspectives interacts with each individual's personal sense of self, creating what Jenkins (2014) calls an "internal/external dialectic"—a synthesis of how people define themselves and

how they perceive others' definitions of them (p. 42--43). Individuals are always co-constructing identity with interlocutors: negotiating an agreed-upon way of being.

The claims that each participant makes about their unique role in marketing activities are part of the process of identity maintenance. Jess frames her role in marketing events as sharing information that marketing staff would not know—inspiring students in a way they cannot. Thuy asserts something similar, saying that academic staff can answer questions that marketers cannot. Suresh goes furthest in his identity claim, drawing a sharp contrast between himself and marketing staff, suggesting that it is "not ethical" for a teacher to engage in "traditional marketing behavior." As with Jess and Thuy, he focuses his role narrowly on information sharing about his discipline area.

All of these examples showcase lecturers maintaining an academic identity even as they support marketing activities and partner with marketing staff, who they frame as playing a different role and (in Suresh's case) abiding by different ethical rules. They resist the subject position of 'marketer,' which could be reasonably attributed to an IBC staff member participating in marketing activities, and through their rationales they negotiate a way of participating in these activities and contributing to their IBC without compromising their identity and values.

CONCLUSION

This research is the first to explore international branch campus lecturers' perspectives on their roles in supporting their university's marketing activities. As demonstrated by extracts from interview data, these IBC lecturers recognise the need for marketing and student-recruitment activities and are generally willing to participate in them. They are, however, clear about the boundaries of the roles they are willing to play in these activities. They see themselves as sources of academic information and inspiration—not "hard sell" salespeople.

Transnational education forms a growing part of the Australian higher-education sector—a major revenue source for that country's national economy (Davis, 2017). IBC viability depends on strong marketing, and understanding how to engage academic staff as marketing supporters will be important for university leaders interested in growing their brands abroad. This research suggests that academics are willing to provide this support if they are made aware of the reasons it is needed. It also shows that academics prefer to maintain an academic identity while participating in marketing activities. Respecting these boundaries and framing marketing-activity participation as one of information-sharing about their disciplines may be helpful for ensuring academic support of marketing activities at international university branch campuses.

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