



# Insights into international branch campuses: Mapping trends through a systematic review

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

International branch campus  
Offshore campuses  
Higher education  
Internationalization  
Cross-border education

## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes international branch campus (IBC) literature trends from 1960 to 2017 through a systematic review of the different research approaches, views, and positions to map the global scientific production. Over the last two decades, universities worldwide have opened branch campuses abroad, reaching a peak of 249 across thirty-three countries in January 2017. In fact, international studies and surveys have identified a 26% increase over the last five years as well as a concentration of the industry. Since 2017, the emergent field of IBC has experienced a geometric growth regarding the number of academic publications on this topic. The results of the review indicate an important amount of literature on IBC related to some of the topics studied—managerial and academic staff issues and educational hubs—and a lack of research on a wide range of areas.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization, as one of the most powerful worldwide business drivers, has turned higher education (HE) into “a global business engaging in marketing strategies to sell their knowledge-based products, attract foreign students, and establish international branches” (Spring, 2009, p.100).

The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education's (OBHE) latest definition of an international branch campus (IBC) is that of “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider” (Garrett, 2017, p. 7). However, the heterogeneity in IBC models makes the definition of IBC a moving target since, through its evolution, the term has come to include new and different offshore activities due to a changing legal background, competitive environments affecting ownership, academic governance, and financial and legal structures. Therefore, any given definition will arbitrarily include some IBCs and exclude others (Altbach, 2015; Becker, 2009; Borgos, 2016; Healey, 2014, 2015a; Healey & Michael, 2015; Kinser & Lane, 2015; Lane & Kinser, 2011a, 2013; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012; Wilkins, 2016).

IBC emerged as a popular form of transnational HE (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012) because IBC is the most tangible and high-profile form of this growing trend. IBC represents the final stage of HE

internationalization: establishing a satellite campus in another country (Healey, 2014). However, IBC is also one of the most unexplored and riskiest HE entry modes to international markets (Beecher & Streitwieser, 2017; Girdzijauskaitė & Radzeviciene, 2014; Healey, 2015b; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013).

Therefore, this study analyzes IBC literature trends from 1960 to 2017 in order to map the global scientific production on IBC through a systematic review. This systematic review identifies the major types and categories of IBC.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 portrays IBC's background and evolution. Section 3 presents the research methodology, including the selection process and study of the 173 articles. Section 4 outlines the whole scope of research on this phenomenon over a sixty-year period, disclosing publication patterns, types of articles and citation structure. Section 5 establishes nine wide-range research areas that enclose the diverse IBC perspectives that scholars follow, so as to map out IBC research. Finally, Section 6 concludes by giving a comprehensive overview of IBCs and providing directions for future research.

## 2. Background: Origins, development, and evolution of IBCs

The roots of branch campuses date back to the beginning of the 19th or even the 18th century, but HE literature usually identifies the Johns Hopkins University campus as the first IBC, established in 1950 in Italy (Becker, 2009); nevertheless, initial developments surged as early as in

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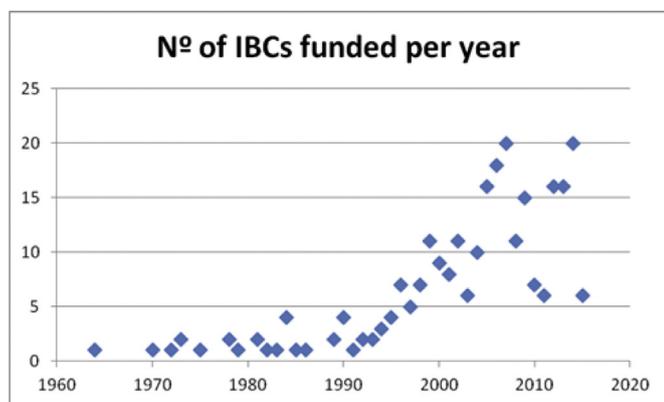


Fig. 1. International branch campus openings per year 1964–2016. Source: OBHE (analysis updated in December 2016), International branch campuses - Trends and developments.

1933, when Florida State University began offering programs in Panama. However, IBCs' further development was slow, since up to the 1970s only five IBCs had appeared. During the 1980s, IBC development experimented a significant increase (Lane, 2011). In this period, several countries experienced rapid economic growth and developing economies in particular shifted their strategic focus to find ways to align their education system with the workforce training needed in their country (Borgos, 2016).

However, not much more occurred until the late 1990s and 2000s (Knight, 2008; Kosmützky, 2014; Lane & Kinser, 2011b) as Fig. 1 shows; since the late 1990s, these entities began to proliferate internationally, as many colleges and universities established physically in foreign countries. Advances in technology, infrastructure, and transportation are some of the factors enabling the physical movement of institutions across geopolitical borders at an unprecedented rate (Knight, 2008). Between 2006 and 2011, the number of IBCs grew from 85 to around 200, which represents a 144% increase during this period and one of the most striking developments in the internationalization of HE (Healey, 2015a; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012; Verbik & Merkley, 2006).

Since 2012, IBCs have undergone a growth and diversification phase, reaching 249 operating IBCs worldwide in January 2017. The founders were universities or colleges from thirty-three countries (home countries) and they are operating in seventy-six importing or host countries, which accounts for a 26% increase over the last five years. Interestingly, according to the last published data, 22 new IBCs were planning to open, whereas 42 had closed or changed their status during that time. In absolute terms, growth is steady: 66 new IBCs appeared between 2011 and 2015, and 67 between 2006 and 2010 (OBHE, 2016).

The OBHE and the C-BERT reported that the largest countries exporting BCs—home countries—are mostly developed countries located in the West, which represents 73% of all IBCs worldwide; in addition, the United States represents a third of the total (Table 1).

On the other hand, China ranks first among the top five BC largest

Table 1  
Countries exporting BC.  
Source: OBHE (updated in January 2017)

Countries exporting branch campuses	Number of branches
United States of America	77
United Kingdom	38
France	28
Russia	21
Australia	14
Others	71

Table 2  
Top 5 host countries according to the total number of IBC.  
Source OBHE (updated in January 2017)

Host countries	Number of operating IBC
China	32
United Arab Emirates, Dubai	24
Malaysia	12
Qatar	11
Singapore	11

importers (host countries) and represents 39% of the world's total number of IBCs. Over the last five years, China has become the largest host country due mainly to the substantial support from the Chinese government, thus surpassing the United Arab Emirates (Table 2).

In absolute terms, IBC has experienced a steady growth between 2011 and 2015, including 66 new IBCs, in contrast with 67 new IBCs established in the previous period, from 2006 to 2010 (Garrett, Kinser, Lane, & Merola, 2016). This striking growth in the number of offshore campuses has motivated the exploration of previous research on the topic through a systematic review that allows to conceptualize the existing literature.

To conclude this section, the results show a parallelism between Figs. 1 and 2, hence the number of publications related to IBC matches the tendency of IBC physical openings.

### 3. Method

With the objective to understand the IBC expansion, this study presents a systematic review to map and analyze the existing literature on the subject. Regarding the method and data, the general trend is in favor of a qualitative approach with statistical analysis, such as regression analysis and multi-level modelling. Nevertheless, this study follows the standard approach used in Jormanainen and Koveshnikov (2012) and Surdu and Mellahi (2016) to review international business studies.

Taking the OBHE and C-BERT surveys and reports as a starting point, an Internet search was conducted through all publications in the following search engines: Web of Science, The Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Google Scholar using the following search terms: “international branch campus,” “transnational education,” “foreign branch campus,” and some other terms such as “off-shore campuses,” “cross-border education,” or “borderless education.”

Once the bibliographic search was conducted, titles and abstracts were reviewed in order to narrow down the results to only those items directly related to the IBC. Therefore, the final sample results from the filtering process explained above, yielding a final selection of 173 documents closely linked to IBC.

### 4. Publication patterns, types of articles, and general citation structure

As previously mentioned, since 2002, IBCs had been steadily growing, but research began to focus on the topic in 2010 (Figs. 1 and 2). The final 173 documents date mainly from the period 2000–2017. This section shows the grouping of the documents by structure and other criteria.

In general, the results reveal that earlier literature on internationalization in HE tended to be more conceptual and theoretical, full of unclear demarcations of concepts (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). On the other hand, more recent research has offered insights into isolated thematic islands by reviewing research only on particular themes and geographic areas of transnational and cross-border HE (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Waterval, Frambach, Driessen, & Scherpbier, 2015). However, this analysis identifies the following five thematic sections:

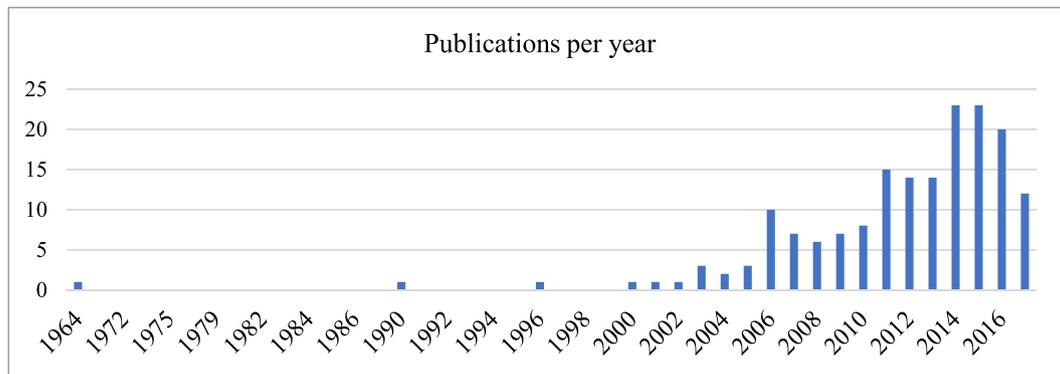


Fig. 2. Number of publications per year 1964–2017.

Table 3  
Number of publications per type of document.

Type of publications	Number of publications	% Total
Journal articles	113	65.32%
Book section	16	9.25%
Books	13	6.94%
Web pages	11	6.36%
Thesis	8	4.62%
Reports	7	4.05%
Conference paper	3	1.73%
Research paper	2	1.16%
Essay	1	0.58%
Total	173	

4.1. By publication year

Fig. 2 describes publications per year, revealing that the IBC phenomenon has attracted scholars' interest especially over the last five years.

4.2. By type of document

The 113 journal articles published account for 65% of the output from 2000 to 2017; while book sections, books and web pages rank second, third, and fourth respectively (16, 12, and 11 items respectively). Finally, the group of items comprising theses, reports, conference papers, and essays represent 11% of the total (Table 3).

Table 4  
Number of publications per journal title.

Title of journals	Namely	Number of publications	% Total
The Journal of Studies on International Education	JSIE	18	21.95%
International Higher Education	IHE	13	15.85%
The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education	OBHE	7	8.54%
Higher Education	HE	9	10.98%
Higher Education Policy	HEP	4	4.88%
New Directions for Higher Education	NDHE	4	4.88%
International Journal of Educational Management	IJEM	5	6.10%
Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	JHEPM	3	3.66%
Asia Pacific Education Review	APER	3	3.66%
Quality in Higher Education	QHE	3	3.66%
Studies in Higher Education	SRHE	3	3.66%
Journal of Research of International Education	JRIE	2	2.44%
Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education	PPP	2	2.44%
Studies in Higher Education	SRHE	2	2.44%
The Journal of Continuing Higher Education	JCHE	2	2.44%
Higher Education Quarterly	HEQ	2	2.44%
Total		82	

Table 5  
The most prolific researchers.

Researchers	Number of publications
Knight, J.	18
Wilkins, S.	16
Lane, J. E.	12
Healey, N.	9
Huisman, J.	8
Altbach, P. G.	6

4.3. By journal title

Despite the wide range of publications dealing with the topic, four journals garner most of the research. Table 4 lists all the journals with more than two IBC publications. 16 journals published 53.5% of these articles, and JSIE holds 21.95% of the total publications related to the topic. The list includes specialized journals on international higher education, some of the major international academic journals, academic books, and magazines for professional international educators.

4.4. By author

Table 5 shows the most relevant scholars regarding the number of publications they have on IBCs. The remaining of the authors have six publications or fewer.

4.5. By citations

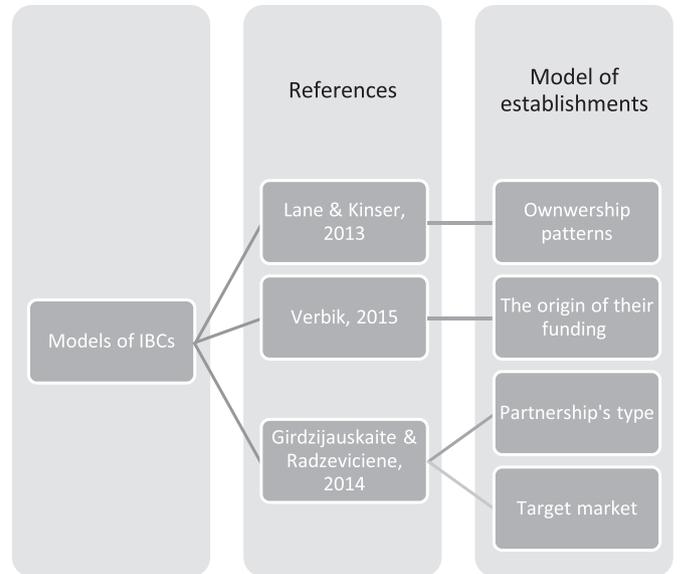
Taking into consideration the whole search scope, Table 6 shows the

**Table 6**  
Most influential IBC studies. Over 100 citations per study.

No.	Year	Author(s)	Type of item	Journal	Theory	Methodology	No. citations
1	2007	Albach, P.G. & Knight, J.	Journal article	JSIE	Institutional theory	Case Studies on the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, North America	2125
2	2004	Knight, J.	Journal article	JSIE	Institutional theory	Conceptual	1626
3	2003	Bartel, M.	Journal article	HE	Institutional theory	Conceptual (Sporn's, 1996) organizational culture typology)	552
4	2001	Van Damme, D.	Journal article	HE	Institutional theory	Conceptual	316
5	2006	Mc Burnie & Ziguras	Book	Transnational education: issues and trends in Offshore Higher Education			286
6	2007	Albach, P.G.	Book section	International handbook of Higher Education		Conceptual	260
8	2011	Knight, J.	Journal article	JSIE	Case Study: UAE, Qatar, Malaysia, Singapore, Botswana, Hong Kong	Conceptual	217
9	2007	Knight, J.	Book section	International handbook of Higher Education	Institutional theory	Conceptual	204
10	2003	Mazzarol et al.	Journal article	IJEM	Entry mode theory/institutional theory	Case study Asia	198
11	2006	Knight, J.	Book	Commonwealth of learning, Vancouver and UNESCO	Institutional theory	Case study: Trinidad/Tobago, Sierra Leona, India	196
12	2009	Becker, R.	Web Page	OBHE	Institutional theory		151
13	2012	Wilkins, S. & Huisman, J.	Journal Article	HE	Institutional theory	Literature review	143
14	2008	Knight, J.	Book	The changing world of internationalisation.		Conceptual	134
15	2015	Verbik, L.	Journal article	IHE	Institutional theory	Case study	124
16	2005	Harman, G.	Book section	Internationalizing Higher Education		Literature review	123
17	2006	Caruana, V. & Spurling, N.	Journal article	HEA		Literature review	117
18	2006	Naidoo, V.	Journal article	JRIE	Institutional	literature review	104

**Table 7**  
Research areas and number of publications related to IBC.

Research areas to analyze IBC	Number of publications
Institutional reasons to establish an IBC	9
Models of International Branch Campus	3
Students issues	9
Academic staff issues	15
Managerial issues	26
Educational hubs	15
Sustainability	9
Language. English as lingua franca	6
Parallelism with a subsidiary of a multinational corporation	10



**Fig. 3.** Models of IBC foundations.

most cited authors, with a threshold of 100 citations per article.

**5. Thematic structure**

Given that scholars are drawing on very diverse perspectives to analyze offshore campuses; a framework of interconnected thematic groups serves to categorize the findings of the systematic review. Table 7 shows the nine areas that include these thematic groups.

**5.1. Institutional reasons to establish an IBC**

The literature renders a wide range of reasons behind the idea of setting up an international campus abroad. First of all, competing for reputation and academic prestige could be the main reason to establish foreign operations through offshore campuses (Mazzarol, Norman Soutar, & Sim Yaw Seng, 2003; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006). However, some critics state that these establishments may be a new form of colonialism (Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2009) because, on one the hand, transnational HE often flows from more developed to less developed nations (Naidoo, 2006) and, on the other hand, Anglo Saxon countries—United States, United Kingdom, and Australia—have been the dominant exporting countries (Zhang, Kinser, & Shi, 2014).

As for the main triggers of IBC internationalization, authors such as Altbach (2007a) and McBurnie and Ziguras (2006) argue that the main variables are politics, ideologies, profit and market-driven policies, and demand for transnational education, that is, the student's desire to engage in educational and social experiences.

Although empirical research is scarce, the most common reason

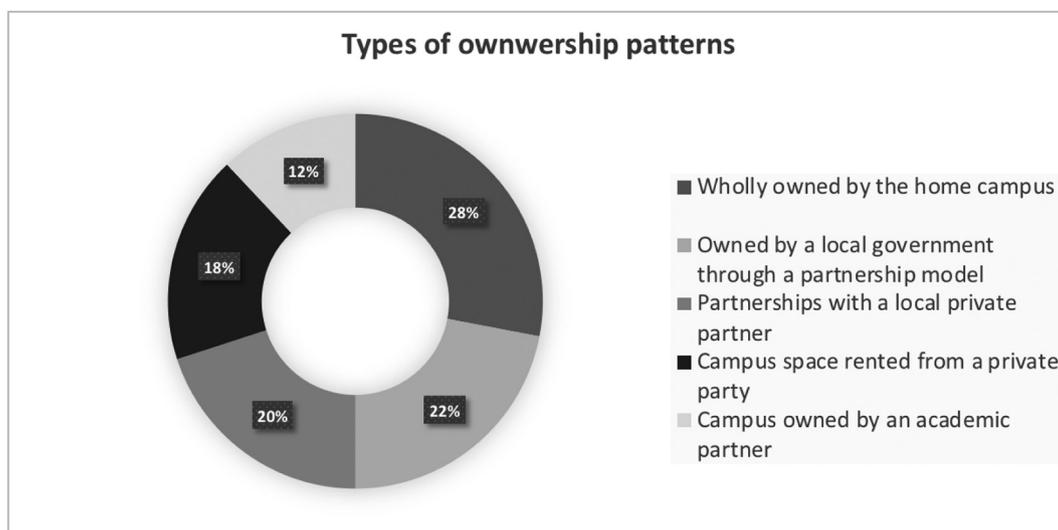


Fig. 4. Types of ownership patterns on IBC.  
Source: Lane and Kinser (2013)

cited in the literature is financial opportunities. Home universities look for new revenue streams, new sources of additional income as well as the advantages of the monetary incentives that local host governments offer (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006; Naidoo, 2006; Verbik & Merkley, 2006; Wilkins, 2012; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Other reasons refer to global brand recognition for a university seeking prestige and enhanced reputation as an educational quality institution (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006; Naidoo, 2006; Harding & Lammey, 2011), as well as the willingness of home countries to open up a range of student and faculty research and exchange opportunities (Garrett & Verbik, 2004).

On the other hand, host governments search foreign universities to establish offshore campuses because their countries and national economies benefit in a multitude of ways (Lane & Kinser, 2011b; Lee, 2015; Wilkins, 2013).

## 5.2. Models of IBCs

Once the decision to open an offshore IBC has been made, HE institutions can choose among a series of models to establish their “physical plant” (Girdzijauskaitė & Radzeviciene, 2014; Lane & Kinser, 2013; Verbik, 2015). Fig. 3 presents these models.

A survey of 50 BCs conducted by CBERT in 2011 (Lane & Kinser, 2013) reveals five types of ownership patterns (Fig. 4).

Verbik (2015) provides three different models of IBC depending on the source of funding. The first model involves funding by the institution and is the least common because institutions seek more collaborative approaches. The second model involves external funding from either the host government or private companies. In the third model, a company or a national government provides the facilities.

On the other hand, Shams and Huisman (2012) compare a university to a business firm entering new markets. In the same vein, Girdzijauskaitė and Radzeviciene (2014) classify the modes of branch campus into two groups according to the partnership form and the target market. Regarding the partnership form, the authors divide BCs into three groups: (1) a subsidiary with certain operations individually offshored to a foreign country; (2) a joint venture in which a bilateral or multilateral merge of HE institutions takes place; and (3) a university-business venture. Regarding the target market, IBC may involve the following kinds of campuses: (1) education campus, which has undergraduate students as the only target; (2) graduate, post graduate and PhD students; and (3) students and research campus. Fig. 5 displays the complete map.

## 5.3. Students issues

The motivations behind students' preferences are those of convenience, such as keeping their present job, avoiding the time and cost of international traveling, being able to live with their family, and others such as campus location, entry requirements, tuition fees, comparatively low cost of living, safe country for living, stable government, modern amenities, proximity in culture and religion and freedom from discrimination, quality reputation, or the international recognition of education qualifications (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Healey, 2015a; Hoyt & Howell, 2012; Mazzarol et al., 2003; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015).

## 5.4. Academic staff issues

The success of an offshore campus depends, first, on attracting and retaining high quality academic staff (Altbach, 2004). In fact, staffing will continue as the biggest strategic challenge offshore campuses face (Edwards, Crosling, & Lim, 2014; Hughes, 2011; McDonald, 2006; Salt & Wood, 2014; Shams & Huisman, 2012, 2014). In addition, some other factors related to academic staff that may be a major influence are the adaptation of the curriculum to local norms and regulations (Shams & Huisman, 2012, 2016), a good relationship between the home campus and the local educational and political context, and between home and host academic staff (Crosling, 2011; Edwards et al., 2014; Hughes, 2011; Smith, 2009) and, finally, the intercultural competence, which is essential for faculty members to understand a transnational classroom (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2009; Sia, 2015; Wallace & Dunn, 2013; Ziguras, 2013).

## 5.5. Managerial issues

Given that most recent IBCs aim at generating revenue, research on this topic focuses on business strategies. Thus, the business literature provides insights that shed light on the tensions resulting from the participation of HE institutions in transnational education (Edwards et al., 2014) and on different approaches relating BCs management to strategic management and international business literature (Table 8).

## 5.6. Sustainability

IBC's sustainability draws on their ability to adapt different local

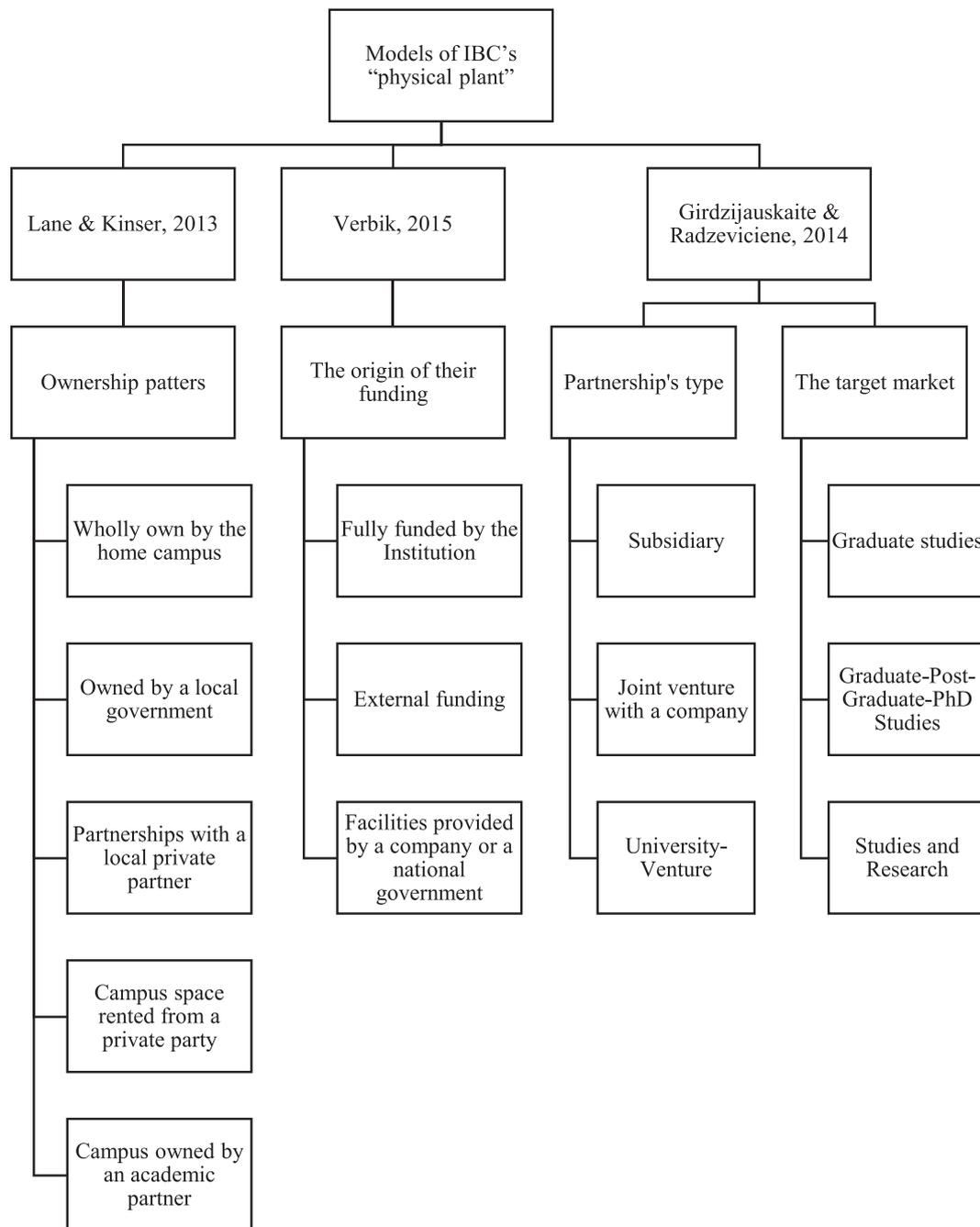


Fig. 5. Models to establish an IBC as “physical plant”.

Table 8

Managerial issues criteria: Relating BCs management to strategic management and international business literature.

Criteria	Reference
Strategic leadership	Healey, 2016; Hughes, 2011; Lane, 2011; Lane and Kinser, 2011a, b; Schuman, 2009
Corporate risk	Beecher & Streitwieser, 2017; Healey, 2015b; Lim and Saner, 2011; McBurnie and Pollock, 2000
Institutional strategies	Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007; Phillips, Tracey, and Karra, 2009; Shams & Huisman, 2012, 2014; Wilkins, 2016
Quality assurance	Wilkins, 2010; Datta and Vardhan, 2017
Marketing or branding	Wilkins & Huisman, 2014, 2015
Organizational culture	Bartell, 2003; Golkowska, 2016; Tierney and Lanford, 2015
Market entry strategies	Girdzijauskaite and Radzeviciene, 2014; Harding & Lammey, 2011; Jiang, and Carpenter, 2011
Cross-cultural challenges	Eldridge and Cranston, 2009; Gopal, 2011; Knight, 2015; Lane, 2013, 2015; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007
Stakeholders	Healey, 2015a; Healey, 2016; Wilkins, 2011

environments—social, cultural, and educational—to the respective host country as regards enrolment numbers, sources of revenue, quality of curriculum, academic freedom, availability of faculty, and adaptation to local conditions (Bhuan, 2016; Borgos, 2016; Crombie-Borgos, 2013; Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014; Knight, 2014b; Kosmützky, 2014; Wilkins, 2017; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

### 5.7. Language: English as lingua franca

The general assumption is that the language of transnational HE programs should be English in order to obtain recognition as legitimate “international” programs (Altbach, 2007b; Wilkins & Urbanovic, 2014).

English as a science and international HE lingua franca undoubtedly benefits countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia, but this status has also benefited institutions in non-English speaking countries such as the Netherlands, a country that is establishing branches overseas with programs delivered in English (Wilkins, 2012). Therefore, the supremacy of English as teaching and research medium creates a clear advantage for the countries that use English on a regular basis.

In addition, students in host countries believe that English fluency skills are essential to be competitive in the labor market, especially among multinational employers. Regardless of this trend, scholars argue that in ten or twenty years' time, languages such as Spanish and Chinese could become alternative languages commonly used in transnational HE (Wilkins, 2012; Wilkins & Urbanovic, 2014). Nevertheless, all these elements mean that developing countries depend on the major academic superpowers (Altbach, 2015).

### 5.8. Parallelism with a subsidiary of a multinational corporation

Scholars argue that as some universities become more global, they will act as multinational businesses, as they outsource their management and workforce globally. The literature review has shown that nearly all the studies explore the motives behind the multinational university through the lens of the eclectic paradigm. The results explain how IBCs benefit from their competitive advantage and internalization costs in order to offshore HE (Bhanji, 2008; Edwards et al., 2014; Gallagher & Garrett, 2012; Guimon, 2016; Healey & Bordogna, 2014; Lane & Kinser, 2011a; Salt & Wood, 2014; Shams & Huisman, 2012; van Rooijen, 2006; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014).

### 5.9. Educational hubs as business hubs

In general, host economies, particularly in small countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia—mainly in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Botswana—have established several international HE hubs, offering foreign campuses favorable conditions or incentives such as cash and land grants or tax breaks (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Knight, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Knight & Lee, 2014; Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Kosmützky, 2014; Lane & Kinser, 2011b; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012; Singh, 2014; Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015).

Regarding the advantages for a host country or city to serve as an education hub, scholars determine three aspects (Cheng, Cheung, & Yeun, 2011) that can contribute jointly to the formation of an education industry: economic growth, internationalization of HE as academic institutions' response to a globalized world and global branding (Altbach & Knight, 2007), and a means to attract foreign students to study in local tertiary institutions while enhancing the international capacity of these institutions.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Research on IBCs is a recent trend and a consequence of the latest initiatives by some HE institutions to establish campuses offshore. A

review of the existing literature has allowed to obtain the conceptual map of this topic and to build an integrated and up-to-date description of IBC's theoretical framework through a systematic review. Research on this area can help policymakers and university managers in their decision-making processes.

This review draws on an overarching framework that groups a large and varied number of publications on IBC published over the past sixty years. This framework allows the identification of nine different thematic research areas in which academics have shown interest: institutional reasons to establish an IBC, models of IBC, student issues, academic staff issues, sustainability, English as a lingua franca, parallelism with a subsidiary of a multinational corporation, and educational and business hubs.

The results suggest several current research trends on IBC and identify some different and interesting gaps in the literature related to three theoretical perspectives: international migration flows, universities, and host and home countries. First, the relevance of international flows of skilled migrants between HE institutions lies on their effect on students' behavior and on professors, researchers and university managers' performance. Second, from the university's perspective, the literature suggests that as universities become more global, they will act as multinational corporations. The most important gap refers to the variables in the decision-making process to establish an IBC. In fact, few studies focus on how universities select and value the effects of their different entry modes. Third, this literature review reveals that IBCs have economic effects on the university's home and host countries, but future studies should address the research gaps regarding those effects. Finally, research may also delve into the economic determinants of IBCs in both countries, foreign direct investment, and other variables such as knowledge transfer processes or the effect of an IBC on the development and quality of employment in the host country. All in all, the findings will allow managers and host countries to design the most suitable programs for IBCs in order to foster economic development and knowledge transfer from the home countries to the host countries and to meet students' demands.

## Acknowledgements

The authors appreciate the anonymous reviewers' constructive comments. The authors thank professor Rosa Curras Móstoles, Universidad Católica de Valencia (San Vicente Mártir), and Jordi Paniagua, University of Valencia, for their useful comments and suggestions. Send correspondence to María Escrivá-Beltrán, Faculty of Economics. C/ Corona 34, 46003 Valencia (Spain) Universidad Católica de Valencia (San Vicente Mártir) ([maria.escriva@ucv.es](mailto:maria.escriva@ucv.es)); Javier Muñoz-de-Prat, Faculty of Economics. C/ Corona 34, 46003 Valencia (Spain) Escuela de Doctorado de la Universidad Católica de Valencia (San Vicente Mártir) ([javier.munoz@ucv.es](mailto:javier.munoz@ucv.es)); Cristina Villó, Escuela de Doctorado de la Universidad Católica de Valencia (San Vicente Mártir). C/ Guillem de Castro, 65, 46008 Valencia (Spain) ([cristinavillo@gmail.com](mailto:cristinavillo@gmail.com)).

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