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Reflections on the value of insider research as a qualitative research methodology

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Project Overview and Context

The project was a study of the challenges of managing an international branch campus (IBC) of a UK university, as seen through the eyes of the senior managers of the IBC. There has been an increase in the number of IBCs being established by UK universities in recent years. The Universities of Nottingham, Liverpool, Southampton, Reading, Newcastle, Middlesex and Heriot-Watt are the best-known examples, with campuses in the United Arab Emirates, China, Malaysia and Mauritius.

The international strategy literature provides a valuable conceptual framework within which to organize these challenges. The globalization of business is far more advanced than that of higher education and the management models are much better understood. Multinational corporations (MNCs) have developed sophisticated techniques for managing extensive networks of overseas subsidiaries and have dedicated functional departments to oversee the movement of labor, goods, services and capital across national borders.

A fundamental challenge for MNCs is to determine how much to localize their product or service to meet the needs of each national market. Universities face the same dilemma with their IBCs. Should IBCs be ‘clones’ of the home campus, providing an educational experience which is identical to that on the home campus? Or should IBCs localize the curriculum and pedagogy to adapt to the learning styles and context of the host market?

Unlike MNCs, however, UK universities are not huge corporations with human resource (HR) and finance departments accustomed to dealing with transfer pricing, international tax issues and managing internationally-mobile staff. They are stolid, UK-based organizations with a public sector ethos and a tradition of being managed by academics, rather than professional career managers. They are characterized by arcane governance structures, discordant internal politics and glacial decision-making. More than half the UK universities (ie, the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education) have been independent of local government control for less than 25 years and many still operate on the basis of employment contracts and working practices from this era. The scale of the IBCs relative to their UK campuses is, moreover, generally so small that the organizational ‘center of gravity’ is overwhelmingly the UK-based operation.

A second difference between MNCs’ subsidiaries and IBCs is that, despite the advent of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), higher education remains a highly regulated and politicized sector. UK universities are subject to oversight by the national Higher Education Funding Councils, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). When they establish IBCs which provide UK degrees, the IBCs are subject to the same scrutiny by the QAA.

At the same time, IBCs are regulated by the equivalent bodies in the host country, either arms-length organizations like the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) or the host Ministry of Education. Governments in many countries subsidize higher education or operate universities as part of the public sector. To control the cost to the taxpayer, they often impose enrolment caps; to meet public good objectives, governments may use a range of levers from moral suasion to purpose-specific grants to 'steer' universities. At the very least, IBCs must compete with subsidized, regulated local universities, but often they themselves are subject to local regulation and control.

Because of these two important differences between MNCs and universities, the focus of the project was on the challenges of managing an IBC *as perceived by the IBC managers*. While there is a well-developed literature on principal-agent theory, much of the international strategy literature on localization approaches the problem from an organizational perspective; that is, it couches the challenge to the MNC *as an entity* of determining the optimal degree of localization. In the case of an IBC, the senior management of the home university may similarly take a view, in principle, of the optimal degree of localization of the curriculum. But because the management systems of a UK university are so underdeveloped in terms of controlling a small IBC thousands of kilometers away, and because there are other powerful stakeholders in the host country involved, it is the IBC manager *in situ* who has to balance these competing demands.

The study used critical realism as the conceptual framework. This is because IBC managers are operating in the context of hard objective, external facts (government regulations, enrolment targets, financial budgets), but they nevertheless have to construct their own understanding of stakeholders' objectives within the context of the wider social structures and power relations. For IBC managers, they are working in an alien culture where they may not speak the local language or fully comprehend the social norms and conventions. They have to work out what they think are the agendas of the host government, their joint venture partner and their competitors and what they believe their students want. They also have to interpret the home university's objectives, which may be vague or ambiguous given the differing objectives of the most senior leaders (eg, the pro vice-chancellor teaching and learning is likely to take a radically different view about the objectives of the IBC from the chief financial officer) and the shifting political alliances in the senior management team.

There were three central research questions:

1. What are the key dimensions of the IBC that managers feel under pressure to localize?
2. What are the main factors that influence their chosen degree of localization for each dimension?
3. How do these factors, and so the optimal degree of localization, change over time?

Research Practicalities

The research design used a qualitative research methodology. The original plan was to gather data from 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior managers of UK IBCs, undertaking the interviews and background data collection at the overseas location of the branch campus. The research practicalities were daunting at first sight. They involved scheduling 90-120 minute interviews with senior managers (provosts and vice-provosts) in four host countries. The interviewees are not only very busy executives with full calendars, but they are often travelling on business. On the other side of the coin, as a pro-vice-chancellor (international), I had the advantage of travelling for work to the countries involved, but operating on the basis of a similarly constrained time frame to the intended participants.

Research Design

The research design used a qualitative research methodology, adopting an 'insider researcher' approach. I have been a senior university manager for almost 20 years, as a business school dean in two universities (one in the UK and one in New Zealand) and a pro-vice-chancellor (international). This experience has two crucial advantages for this type of qualitative research: first, I have a good understanding of the politics and economics of managing a large organizational unit within a university; and secondly, I have the credibility and the extensive personal networks, developed over a career in higher education, to help me gain access to senior managers in IBCs.

Hannabus (2000) explains the benefits of insider research is terms of the researcher's implicit knowledge in the following terms: 'The [insider] researcher knows his/her environment well, knows by instinct what can be done and how far old friendships and favours can be pressed, just when and where to meet up for interviews, what the power structures and the moral mazes and subtexts of the company are and so what taboos to avoid, what shibboleths to mumble and bureaucrats to placate. They are familiar with the organisational culture, the routines and the scripts of the workplaces' (p.103).

Hockey (1993) notes the additional benefits for an insider researcher in terms of credibility and peer respect: 'In effect, because the wider social structure classifies the researcher and informants in a similar or identical fashion, this creates greater confidence between the parties... One of the results of this trust and exposure to the most intimate of details is that the insider researcher is able to appreciate the full complexity of the social world at hand. The result is a potentially accurate portrayal, rather than a simplistic caricature' (pp.204-205).

My original plan was to gather data from 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior managers in the IBCs of UK universities. Despite the recent growth in IBCs, there are still relatively few UK universities with fully-functioning satellite campuses abroad. To make the study as representative as possible, I planned to use 'purposive sampling' to identify six IBCs (case studies) on which to focus. As Sarantakos (2005) argues, qualitative research uses such small samples that random sampling, a common approach in large-scale quantitative studies, is meaningless. Rather, the researcher should purposefully select a sample that makes the findings as representative (and so as robust) as possible. In this case, the 'sampling frame' used had two main dimensions:
1. The host environment (inward focus – outward focus)
2. International ranking of UK university (high – medium – low)

The first sampling dimension relates to the host environment and whether the IBCs are primarily 'capacity absorbing', in the sense of supplementing supply in the face of excess demand for university places in the host country, or export-oriented, in the sense of being located in a 'education hub' intended to attract foreign students from across the surrounding geographic region (Verbik and Merkley, 2006; Knight, 2011). The rationale for this sampling dimension is that the regulatory environment is likely to be fundamentally different if the host country is seeking foreign IBCs to strengthen and broaden its domestic higher education sector (capacity absorbing) as opposed to attracting foreign students and export revenues (export-oriented).

Some countries like Hong Kong SAR, China, India and Uzbekistan have considerable unsatisfied demand for university places and the IBCs they host can be seen as primarily capacity-absorbing. In contrast, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and more recently Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Mauritius have encouraged foreign universities to establish IBCs to attract foreign students and promote their countries as regional education hubs.

The second sampling dimension relates to the international profile of the UK university, in terms of its ranking in the 2014/15 QS World University Rankings. The rationale for the second dimension is that there is a consensus in the literature that the purpose of IBCs is related to the status of the home university (Wilkins and Huisman, 2012). For high status universities, IBCs are a way of building global profile. To do this, their IBCs are also research-intensive, allowing them to attract research funding from host governments, and there is a long-term commitment. For lower status universities with a weaker global brand, the primary focus is revenue-generation, by enabling them to reach new untapped markets through their IBCs.

For present purposes, 'high' relates to universities in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings (WUR), 'medium' to universities ranked between 101 and 850 and 'low' to universities ranked 850+. The QS WUR use a range of indicators, including academic and employer peer review, research productivity, student-staff ratios and the proportion international students and staff, to rank the world's 'top' 850 universities. Table 1 shows the sampling frame, using the QS ranking of the home university and the perceived inward/outward focus of the host country.

Table 1: The planned IBCs and the sampling frame

		Host environment	
		Inward-focus	**Outward-focus**
International profile of the UK university	**High**	IBC A	IBC B
	Medium	IBC C	IBC D
	Low	IBC E	IBC F

Source: QS World University Rankings® 2014/15

For each IBC, my original research design was to interview two current senior managers and one former manager. The interviews were semi-structured and I invited participants (on condition of confidentiality and anonymity) to 'tell their own story'; that is, to provide a narrative of their experience of managing an IBC, prompting them with cues (as necessary) to encourage them to reflect on the personal and professional challenges, the strategies they used (successfully and unsuccessfully) and the key turning points in events.

This interview technique allows participants to express their subjective perspective on the way they see and interpret the world (Opie, 2004). Semi-structured interviews 'provide the opportunity to gain an account of the values and experiences of the respondent in terms meaningful to them' (Stephens, 2007, p.205). My role as interviewer is to provide a broad framework to help structure the conversation and to provide a supportive and confidential environment which encourages participants to be as relaxed and reflective as possible. The choice of semi-structured interviews was justified by the conceptual framework adopted and the inductive (theory-building) approach (Sarantakos, 2005), as well as by the fact that interviews are face-to-face (Lofland *et al*, 2005).

A face-to-face interview allows the interviewer to respond to a range of cues (facial or bodily movements, changes of tone, etc) and adapt the questioning to explore issues of particular interest to the participant more deeply than others. In this way, a semi-structured, face-to-face interview may reveal new lines of enquiry not considered at the design stage. Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe this approach as an in-depth responsive interviewing technique to 'hear data'.

Although the semi-structured format allows the interviews to develop dynamically, it is nevertheless important to keep the interviews within broad boundaries to ensure that data is captured for each of the research sub-questions. Yin (2013) stresses the importance of carrying out pilot case studies to develop the semi-structured framework. For this study, pilot interviews were carried out with former managers of IBCs of two IBCs of other UK universities, to help refine the broad questions and determine the general structure of the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The key points in the transcribed accounts of the participants were then marked with a series of codes. In a series of iterations, these codes were grouped into broad categories, to provide the basis for the creation of a theory (sometimes termed a 'reverse engineered' hypothesis). 'The intent is to develop an account of a phenomenon that identifies the major constructs or categories in grounded theory terms, their relationships, and the context and process, thus providing a theory of the phenomenon that is much more than a descriptive account' (Ovaska *et al*, 2007, p.1402)

Reliability

Reliability relates to the extent to which the data collection and analysis give results that are replicable in a broadly consistent fashion; that is, if the study were undertaken at a different time (stability), using a different sample (internal reliability) or studied by another researcher (inter-observer consistency). Because this study used a small sample to ensure richness of detail rather than statistical confidence, it clearly cannot claim the reliability of a large-scale quantitative survey.

In qualitative studies like this, reliability may be compromised if the nature of the investigation is such that participants feel they need to misrepresent information. Some participants may, consciously or subconsciously, 'self-edit' their responses to 'present themselves in a good light' (Ball, 1994, p.97). They may also suppress information about mistakes they feel they have made or decisions they took which seem foolish in retrospect (Morris, 2009).

The planned research design militates against this in three ways:

1. The data collections for each IBC was 'triangulated', by interviewing three participants associated with the IBC, with each interview carried out on the basis of confidentiality.
2. Each set of three interviews included a former manager who was no longer directly involved with the IBC and might reasonably be expected to be more detached and reflective.

3. I am an 'insider researcher', working in the same field as the interviewees. This 'emic' dimension of the study means that a greater bond of trust will exist between researcher and interviewee than in a more conventional interview-based project.

While insider research may reduce instability and internal instability, it may increase the risk of inter-observer inconsistency. This is because if these senior managers were instead interviewed by an independent researcher, there is likely to be significant power imbalance. There is an extensive literature on the difficulties of interviewing elites. Reviewing this literature, Welch *et al* (2002) note a range of consequences of the perceived power asymmetry between interviewee and a more junior interviewer, with the latter feeling grateful for having been granted an interview, intimidated by the interviewee's high status and predisposed to accept, rather than critically challenge, the views of an apparent expert.

This power asymmetry is significantly reduced by insider research. The research design, using an inside researcher and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, is designed to minimize two sources of unreliability (stability and internal reliability), but given the difficulties of interviewing elites, it must be conceded that the study may suffer from inter-observer consistency if it were to be replicated by a more junior or independent researcher.

Validity

Validity refers to whether the data measure what they are intended to measure (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The source of invalidity in this study could result from either wrongly transcribing the data provided by interviewees or misinterpreting, and so misanalysing, data that has been correctly transcribed. For example, the transcript might show that the interviewee reported her university as having '10 international students', but in fact she actually said '10% international students'. Alternatively, the correct transcription of '10% international students' might be misinterpreted by the researcher as meaning the institution had 10% non-UK students, because she did not understand that 'international students' in the UK refers to fee status (ie, students from the European Economic Area are not classified as international students for fee purposes), not country of residence.

While 'insider research' helps to minimize this second source of invalidity, it may lead to biased results for another reason. Because both the researcher and the participants share a common professional background and similar life experiences, they may bring what Cohen *et al* (2007) call their common 'biographical baggage' to the interview. This may lead to the researcher subconsciously misconstruing data, because she feels so attuned with the participants.

For example, given the focus on understanding the perceptions of the managers of IBCs about the challenges they face, there is a risk that the researcher uses her biographical baggage (sometimes called 'tacit insider knowledge') to wrongly 'fill in the blanks', misinterpreting the answers given by participants. To manage this risk, it is important to be constantly reflexive during the interviews, clarifying the meaning of responses which could be ambiguous, rather than presume as an insider that both researcher and participant always have a common understanding of an issue.

To further minimize errors of commission or omission that result from poor data gathering and interpretation, I tested the validity of the data by sending each participant a full copy of the transcript of the interview for comment and correction (Kvale, 1996).

Ethical considerations

Ethics are commonly defined as 'norms' that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable conduct. In relation to research ethics, Shamoo and Resnik (2009) review ethical policies of a range of funding and professional bodies and argue that the following norms are common:
1. honesty and integrity – do not misrepresent data or deceive people, act with sincerity;
2. objectivity – avoid bias;
3. carefulness – be diligent;
4. openness – be willing to share research outputs and accept criticism;
5. respect the intellectual property of others;
6. confidentiality – protect confidential data and the interests of human participants.

For this study, the main ethical issue related to confidentiality. Participants were asked to sign a form giving their permission to use the data obtained through interviews for the purposes of the research, on condition that the data would be anonymized and the transcripts themselves would be confidential. However, because there are relatively few UK universities with IBCs, there is a risk that readers might be able to guess the identity of the IBC and so the participants. To mitigate this ethical risk, any results that are intended for the public domain were carefully edited to ensure that anonymity is guaranteed, for example, by eliminating references to country or location.

"Method" in Action

The semi-structured interviews took place between March and September 2014. The original ambition of interviewing two current managers and one retired manager from each of six target IBCs had to be modified over time, on the grounds of access, availability and affordability. My intention had been to interview all the managers in their own offices; in the case of the incumbent IBC managers, this meant interviewing them at the IBCs. The aim was to undertake the interviews with the managers on 'their own turf', in order to set them at ease and to signal my commitment to learning as much as possible about both the IBC and the challenges they faced. I ensured that I spent some time at each IBC, including an organized tour of the facilities and building in opportunities to talk informally with staff and students to get the fullest impression.

In the absence of a dedicated research fund to support this investigation, I had to combine the interviews at the IBCs with scheduled visits to the host countries for other purposes. This minimized the travel and accommodation costs of the research, but mean that there was little room for maneuver if the senior managers were unavailable on the required dates. As noted above, the original research design was to visit six IBCs (IBCs A through F).

I experienced three early setbacks to my original plan. First, the home university of one of the IBCs declined to allow its senior staff to take part in the study on the grounds of commercial sensitivity. Second, the senior managers at another IBC were not available during my scheduled visit to the country. Third, not all the IBCs had two incumbent senior managers (in some cases, there was only a single seconded provost from the home campus) and several had been in existence for too short a period to have a former senior manager who had finished his/her term.

In order to maintain the size of the sample, I increased the number of IBCs from six to nine, which allowed me to interview 14 senior managers. In addition, a number of local experts and officials agreed to take part in meetings to provide background information on the three national markets in which the nine IBCs were located. They agreed to my taking extensive notes to assist the interpretation of the primary data gathered in the formal interviews. In terms of the original research plan to select two high, two medium and two low 'profile' UK universities, the final selection showed a broader range, with three high, four medium and two low profile universities across the three host countries (see Table 2).

Table 2: Sample IBCs by 2014/15 QS World University Ranking

International profile of the UK university	Country X	Country Y	Country Z
High (0-100)		IBC B IBC G	IBC A
Medium (101-850)	IBC D IBC L	IBC H IBC J	
Low (850+)	IBC F	IBC K	

Source: QS World University Rankings® 2014/15

In terms of the other dimension of the sampling frame, the inward-outward focus of the host market, one of the host countries was reclassified as having an inward, rather than outward, focus after in-country interviews with local experts. Despite its positioning as an educational hub, its IBCs overwhelmingly recruit the children of expatriate workers who are barred from the domestic higher education system. On this revised basis, the sample remains relatively balanced (see Table 3).

Table 3: Actual IBCs and the sampling frame

		Host environment	
		Inward-focus	**Outward-focus**
International profile of the UK university	**High**	IBC A	IBC B IBC G
	Medium	IBC D IBC L	IBC H IBC J
	Low	IBC F	IBC K

Source: QS World University Rankings® 2014/15

Practical Lessons Learned

A number of changes were made to the original research design for pragmatic reasons. Access to senior managers in the IBCs depended upon approval by the home university (which was declined in one case) and their availability at times that coincided with the researcher's travel schedule. In the end, 14 rather than the planned 18 interviews were conducted (all but two in the host country), with nine rather than six IBCs. This meant that the triangulation was more limited than planned for each IBC (in fact, it proved possible to interview two current managers and one past manager for only one IBC), but the range of the case studies turned out to be much broader. Arguably, this trade-off resulted in a more robust set of results than the original research design, but the adjustments were forced by circumstance rather than planned in advance, highlighting the importance of being flexible when carrying out qualitative research in the field.

The key feature of insider research is that the researcher is interviewing his/her peers. Although some of the interviewees were personally known to me before the study, the majority were not. To make the most of the limited interview time, I prepared for each interview in considerable detail, researching the interviewee's background and experience using their university biographies and www.linkedin.com profiles. I also carried out detailed research on the IBC itself and tried to ensure that I had briefing meetings with local experts to understand the national higher education landscape and the legislation relating to IBCs before the interviews with the IBC managers. This not only made it easier to establish a rapport with the interviewees, but it also signaled to them my commitment to understanding their lived experience and trying to see the challenges they faced through their eyes.

The extended interview times (90-120 minutes) meant that there was time for initial social pleasantries to create a relaxed atmosphere. One consequence of the length of the interviews was that the transcripts were unexpectedly long, typically 10,000-15,000 words. I employed an accomplished transcriber who quickly realized that some of the introductory social interactions were not relevant to the analysis and used 'social conversation here' instead of transcribing this part of the interview. One of the most important lessons was that, provided the parameters of the interview are reasonably clear, almost all the interviewees required few cues or interventions to keep the conversation on track. On the contrary, because the focus was on the challenges they faced, from their own perspective, they enthusiastically shared information and reflected on the events that had shaped their time leading the IBC.

The relatively low power asymmetry between me as an insider researcher and the interviewees genuinely appeared to minimize or eliminate the standard risk with interview-based studies, which is that the participants consciously or subconsciously self-edit their accounts to exaggerate their reported achievements and underplay their failures. Because the number of senior managers working in UK IBCs is so small, everyone is well-known to each other and participants in the study were extremely candid, with one person's account of a particular event invariably being confirmed by other interviewees.

Conclusions

This case study explores the strengths and weaknesses of insider research as a qualitative research methodology, as well as discussing some of the strategies for mitigating the weaknesses. It argues that insider research provides a way of gaining unique insights into senior managerial challenges, which could not be achieved by more traditional research methodologies. In the project under review, insider research allowed me to access senior managers in IBCs who are normally beyond the reach of qualitative investigators because of their geographical location, their seniority and pressures on their calendars. Moreover, many years of management experience in transnational education allowed me to more effectively build rapport with interviewees and to understand the meaning behind the responses given.

There are undoubtedly weaknesses and potential pitfalls with this methodology. By being so professionally (and personally) close to the interviewees, there is a risk that the insider researcher lacks objectivity and seeks confirmatory evidence for views and opinions already widely shared by insiders. There is also a risk that the insider researcher subconsciously 'fills in the blanks' with his/her prior experience and knowledge, so that the data is unintentionally contaminated. It is crucially important to guard against these possible sources of bias, by constantly being reflective, asking participants to confirm and clarify their responses and repeatedly testing emerging conclusions. On balance, however, insider research provides a valuable way of answering research questions that defy other, more conventional quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

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