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Germany's international branch campuses: neoliberalising the Humboldtian university through the backdoor?

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ABSTRACT

While comprehensive research exists on transnational strategies of universities from the Anglosphere, little is known about why institutions from less marketised higher education systems engage in transnational education provision abroad. Based on semi-structured interviews with decision-makers, we investigate why German public universities have established international branch campuses, and explore the underlying rationales and the consequences for university governance. We contribute to interdisciplinary transnational higher education literature by conceptualising the wider socio-political implications and spatialities of arguably non-market-driven transnational education. By analysing German branch campus projects against the backdrop of Anglosphere branch development, we show that although neoliberalisation has been subtle in German higher education, decision-making processes in university leadership are nonetheless strongly pervaded by a neoliberal paradigm. We argue that German branch campuses both reflect the specific form of German higher education's neoliberalisation and further accelerate their parent institutions' neoliberal reconfigurations by exposing them to commercialised higher education landscapes abroad.

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Introduction

Although the global COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary stop to many transnational education (TNE) projects, international branch campuses (IBCs) are a globally growing phenomenon (Paniagua, Villó, and Escrivà-Beltran 2022). In worldwide comparison, most of these campuses are exported from countries in the Anglosphere where higher education systems have been subjected to processes of neoliberalisation. For universities, neoliberalisation has entailed strong marketisation, competition, and pressure to secure new revenue streams. Yet, also in more subtly neoliberalised systems publicly funded universities seek to enter new student markets abroad. France, e.g. has become one of the main exporting countries of IBCs in terms of campus numbers (Kleibert et al. 2020). The German higher

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education landscape stems from a Humboldtian tradition that promotes pursuing knowledge for the sake of itself and fosters academic freedom – freedom from both government interference and commercial pressures. While rarely developing campuses abroad (Sam and van der Sijde 2014), universities in Germany attract many international students (Waters and Brooks 2021). In the academic year 2022/23, the country was only outranked by the USA and the UK as a destination for international students (DAAD and DZHW 2023). Despite IBCs being a relatively small phenomenon among German universities, the existing IBCs provide a vantage point for investigating how a marketising and internationalising higher education landscape worldwide is reconfiguring German universities.

Comprehensive research exists on TNE strategies of universities from the Anglosphere. Scholars have shown how public spending cuts have locked universities in competition for recruiting fee-paying students, by both tapping into the flows of international student mobilities (Glass and Cruz 2023; Waters and Brooks 2021) and becoming transnationally mobile themselves (Kosmützky 2018; Wilkins and Huisman 2012). Some research exists on TNE strategies in other countries of the Global North, including France (Bobée and Kleibert 2022). Most research on the German context focuses on various types of projects that materialise the fractured German TNE landscape (Raev 2020), including its emphasis on exporting vocational and technical training (Wiemann and Fuchs 2018). Little is known on why institutions from such less marketised higher education systems engage in IBC development as a distinctive type of TNE provision, and on political economic implications of these activities.

Therefore, in this paper we ask: why and how do higher education institutions from non-Anglosphere countries with less marketised higher education systems develop campuses abroad? We investigate these questions through the under-explored empirical case of German IBCs. We draw from semi-structured interviews with senior managers of German universities with campuses abroad, who are based either at the main or at the branch campus. The analysis shows that the way German IBC development takes place is both a reflection and driver of a particular form of neoliberalisation processes. Enabled by existing neoliberal reconfigurations of German higher education, such as new management paradigms, and encouraged by geopolitical considerations of the German state, which is involved in most projects, IBC-developing German universities expose themselves to marketised higher education practices and international competition abroad. Thereby, IBCs are not only products of already existing developments, but they also accelerate and intensify neoliberalising tendencies through the backdoor. While there are differences between the dynamics of German IBC development and their Anglosphere counterparts, they also share some underlying rationales that need to be understood within the German context.

The following section provides an overview of the literature and develops the paper's theoretical framework. Section three explains our methodology. In section four we discuss our claims empirically by analysing the rationales for German IBC development and how they reconfigure German universities. Section five concludes by situating the findings in a broader context.

German universities in a global landscape of transnational education

International branch campuses beyond the Anglosphere

IBCs are physical presences of higher education institutions that deliver degrees abroad. Scholars' interest in IBCs as a rather small empirical phenomenon is reflected in a growing number of publications within the larger field of TNE (Krollpfeiffer and Kosmützky 2012; Verbik 2007). The literature is, however, largely based on motivations and experiences of higher education institutions from a small number of countries, namely Australia, the USA, and the UK (Healey 2015; Ilieva et al. 2022; Lane and Kinser 2013; McBurnie and Ziguras 2011; Wilkins and Huisman 2012). These countries all belong to the Anglosphere and are characterised by shared cultural and historical ties beyond their common language. Moreover, higher education systems of these countries are shaped by commodification and decreasing public funding, which led to the emergence of entrepreneurial universities (Luke 2005; McGettigan 2013). These higher education systems and the degrees of their universities are desired by many students worldwide and have become globally hegemonic (Jöns and Hoyler 2013).

Internationalisation of higher education institutions is one major outcome of this marketisation, most visible in the dependence on international students' tuition fees as an important pillar of university funding. In Australia, e.g. higher education is the fourth largest export sector (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2021). In the UK, the current strategy for internationalisation places a central focus on higher education's export revenues, which are forecasted to grow to GBP 35 billion by 2030 including repatriated revenue from delivering degrees outside of the territory of the UK (HM Government 2019). Despite considerable financial and reputational risks and numerous examples of failed campuses (Kleibert, Rottleb, et al. 2021), offshore operations of higher education institutions from the Anglosphere have been strongly driven by the outlook of increasing direct and indirect financial revenues (Altbach 2010). Reviewing the respective literature on the motivations for operating IBCs, Hickey and Davies (2022) find that despite differences between the business models of elite and less prestigious universities, 'there is a consistent aim to generate revenue' (2). While often aspired via increasing the fee-paying student base, there can be more indirect forms of revenue creation. Creating reputational benefits through internationalisation and 'brand recognition' in markets beyond the home territory is also stated as such an indirect motivation (Kleibert, Rottleb, et al. 2021). Faced with increased competition in home markets and cutback of state funding, public universities from the UK see offshore campuses as territorial and symbolic 'fixes' to keep their operations afloat (Kleibert 2021). In these strategies, internationalisation is mainly understood through the lens of financial constraints and opportunities. Despite non-commercial reasons such as contributing to capacity building in the host country or tackling global challenges (Hickey and Davies 2022), most IBCs are thus directly and indirectly driven by commercial considerations.

Less is known, however, about the motivations of higher education institutions stemming from public-funded higher education systems with stronger state involvement. Though the USA, the UK and Australia are among the key exporters of IBCs, the geographies of IBC development are diverse. French higher education institutions, e.g. set up more branch campuses than institutions from individual Anglosphere countries. Also, countries such as Russia and Germany are active in operating IBCs worldwide

(Chankseliani 2021; Kleibert et al. 2020), even though their higher education (funding) systems are fundamentally different. Some research on German TNE in general, addresses state policies and interests in developing the field of TNE via governmental projects (Raev 2020). Yet, knowledge on rationales and experiences of German universities in operating branch campuses is limited. To understand the motivations of German universities and implications of setting up IBCs, we conceptualise their strategies within the context of how academic capitalism and other forms of neoliberalisation manifest in the German higher education system.

Neoliberalising higher education systems

Debates on the impact of neoliberalism on higher education and resulting reconfigurations of universities, as well as universities' position in market-state relations have produced influential concepts such as 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter 1997) and the 'entrepreneurial university' (Clark 1998). Scholars show how the global rise of neoliberal ideology along with increasing influence of the economic imaginary of the knowledge-based economy (Moisio 2018) faced universities with increasing critique for not sufficiently satisfying the human capital needs of the economy. This not only spurred on changes in universities' governance structures and their institutional strategic orientation, but also increased international competition for students and third-party funding (Holloway and Kirby 2020; Luke 2005; Marginson 2013; Münch 2014). Although public budgetary cuts and legal reforms subsequently brought universities closer to firms and private investors (Jessop 2017), their internationalisation is inextricably tied to the distinct socio-spatial restructurings and reconfigurations of their respective nation-states (Thiem 2009).

Thus, despite increasing dis-embedding of universities from the institutional and territorial structure of the state (Moisio and Kangas 2016) as well as from production of transnational class formations (Kauppinen 2013), they remain key pillars of the institutional nation-state and national knowledge production (Holloway and Kirby 2020). Arshad-Ayaz and Naseem (2017) demonstrate how universities become enrolled in (economic) foreign policy and geopolitics, thus contributing to dispersing and reproducing neoliberalism's hegemonic knowledge regimes. We follow the view of related work (Jessop 2017; Olssen and Peters 2007) that universities fulfil a complementary role in processes of knowledge and labour production for the private sector and governments' political projects. Universities have a function in restructuring state power under neoliberalisation. There have been moments of power shifts from the public to the private, and state structures have been permeated by managerial practices and market paradigms at the same time. We contribute to these debates by showing how the de-territorialisation and transnationalisation of minorly market-driven, public universities accelerate their neoliberal reconfiguration.

Neoliberalism as an ideology and its implementation in different societies has been subject to extensive scholarly investigation across the social sciences. Orthodox neoliberal theory emphasises the primacy of the free market, and the institutionalisation of its paradigms has resulted in countries around the globe deregulating and privatising public assets like healthcare or education (Peck and Tickell 2002). Yet, political economy perspectives have highlighted that, while always ongoing and adaptive, the global

restructuring processes unleashed by neoliberalism are also spatially diverse and contradictory. They interact with different regulatory and policy landscapes across national territories, resulting in different institutional reconfigurations (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2005; Hirsch and Kannankulam 2011). Jessop (2019) distinguishes several, globally interconnected, territorial manifestations of neoliberalism. In contrast to ‘principled neoliberal regime shifts’ (344), such as under Thatcherism in the UK or Reaganomics in the USA, Jessop also identifies a subtle form of neoliberal policy reforms, which are advanced via smaller steps and often justified by governments in reaction to specific crisis tendencies. However, these smaller steps can accumulate into fully developed neoliberal regimes, such as in the European Nordic countries or in Germany, where principles of liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and internationalisation have similarly become structuring elements of society and state institutions (Jessop 2019). Accordingly, we understand the ways German universities undergo processes of internationalisation and marketisation as an expression of German state institutions’ reconfiguration under neoliberalism.

Globally, neoliberalisation of universities often means moving towards Anglo-American models of higher education, in which the boundaries between universities’ functions of reproducing state and class power, and of constituting centres of scientific and commercial knowledge production are blurry (Sam and van der Sijde 2014). Although higher education systems in most countries have been permeated by free market logics, it is not always to the same extent or in the same form as in principled neoliberal regimes. Actually existing academic capitalism varies across different university models, one of which is the Humboldtian (Deem 2001). While the German higher education sector has undergone neoliberalisation processes, including restructuring universities’ governance structures according to New Public Management principles and opening universities to private sector influence (Belina et al. 2013), the process is less advanced than in the countries of the Anglosphere. Although German universities are publicly funded, they also face financial pressures. Despite an increase in overall public expenditures on higher education over the years, until 2020 they were facing rising (non-fee-paying) student numbers and a decreasing relative share of public funds compared to other sources (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020). Moreover, German universities have been assigned new roles in producing ‘excellent’ research, being expected to foster (regional) knowledge-based economic growth and technology transfer. Alongside this, claims for more accountability and ‘value for money’ became common among policymakers, economic actors, and university management. All these developments created high pressures for universities to acquire third-party funding and focus on economic impact and labour market outcomes (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020). One strategy of German universities to navigate these changing conditions is to emphasise internationalisation and international competitiveness.

Exporting German education

With gaining momentum only in the late-1990s and early-2000s, German universities systematic positioning in global TNE can be seen as rather late coming. Exporting German education involves a large variety of activities and strategies, few of which include establishing branch campuses. Raev (2020) identifies ten different types of

German TNE projects, including academic centres abroad, partnership programmes, or exchange programmes. Most German TNE is delivered by joint degree courses with a local university partner, or by so-called binational universities like the ‘German University in Cairo’ (DAAD and DZHW 2022). In global comparison, German TNE is a relatively small phenomenon. Geifes and Kammüller (2018) assess that German universities’ TNE programmes enrolled only 31,000 students abroad compared with 195,000 in British or 95,000 in Australian programmes. Little research, however, has taken into consideration the specific dynamics behind German universities setting up branch campuses, which are not a frequent phenomenon overall but involve large workloads and high financial and reputational risks for the individual universities (Kleibert, Rottleb, et al. 2021).

Scholars have shown how German universities’ internationalisation is entangled with national labour market policies. Researchers of German TNE often include in their analyses the strategies intended to attract international students and faculty to Germany (Jöns 2009), and how TNE is related to producing skilled labour for German firms (Fromm and Raev 2020). The dual vocational education and training system, a distinct element of Germany’s education system, plays a key role and is also being exported. Often considered a cornerstone of the country’s economic success, German policymakers seek to export this model to other countries, particularly as part of development cooperation programmes with emerging economies, and have enrolled German transnational companies as well as higher education institutions as close partners in these projects (Wiemann and Fuchs 2018; Wrana and Diez 2016).

Crucially, most literature on internationalisation and export of German higher education identifies a close entanglement with national interests. Usually, various state institutions are involved, such as the Federal Foreign Office or the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, as well as intermediary agencies such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or the German Agency for International Cooperation (Graf 2009). Geifes and Kammüller (2018) argue that the state’s involvement is the crucial difference between German and Anglosphere TNE as German TNE strategies are more deeply integrated in national governmental policies. The German government aims at internationalising German universities while simultaneously mobilising them in foreign policy strategies.

Fromm and Raev (2020) classify these German TNE activities as ‘collaborative’ because German nation-state actors collaborate with foreign partners in designing and implementing German TNE programmes on-site. In contrast, TNE programmes from the Anglosphere are more ‘independent’ because responsibility for the programmes supposedly lies with the exporting university. Around the 2000s, the German federal government aimed at integrating German higher education into the global market and boosting the country’s reputation as a place for study and research. It started to provide seed funding for entrepreneurially organised, competitive German TNE projects, intending to link academic and entrepreneurial aspects with foreign cultural and development policies (Hahn 2005). Thus, the state played a key role in connecting German higher education to dynamics of marketisation and neoliberalisation (Fromm and Raev 2020).

Some higher education policy studies suggest that German TNE projects need to be understood through a lens that focuses less on market factors – as done in research on TNE from the Anglosphere – and more on the political constellation and institutional

arrangements of the German nation-state. Geifes and Kammüller (2018, 16), e.g. claim that ‘for German universities, the main stimulus to engage in TNE derived from academic rather than economic motivations’ (16). However, our analysis of German branch campus strategies shows that their rationales can also be explained through market logics rather than some elevated academic motivation. Moreover, we do not see these two perspectives, the one highlighting marketisation processes and the one emphasising involvement of different state actors, as mutually exclusive. We argue that while the strategic orientation of the German state is a crucial factor in German TNE and important to understand its activities, the forms of German TNE vis-a-vis the Anglosphere cannot be solely explained by a dichotomy of market-led versus state-led strategies. Rather, as our empirical analysis shows, German TNE is driven by rationales related to processes of marketisation and neoliberalisation, but in the context of Germany’s political economy, they take on different forms than they do in the UK, the USA or Australia.

Methodology

For our inquiry, we define IBCs as physical presences of higher education institutions abroad, which award degrees in the name of the sending institution and which can be operated independently or together with local partners. This definition excludes several other forms of TNE, such as university projects that cannot be traced to individual German higher education institutions (see Knight and McNamara 2017), because we are precisely interested in how neoliberalisation processes affect institutions abroad and at home.

We started our analysis by identifying all German TNE projects that fit our understanding of an IBC. We did this via extensive desk research in 2018/2019, using online search engines as well as browsing university, newspaper and encyclopaedia websites. In total, the search revealed six IBCs, operated by a total of five universities in 2019 (summarised in Table 1 and Figure 1). Of these, one has since closed, and one is in the process of teaching out. An additional campus, by the University of Applied Sciences Bielefeld has announced the start of its operations in Hainan in China by the winter term 2023.

Given the small number of existing German IBCs as well as our interest in understanding rationales of decision-makers and consequences for their institutions, we used a qualitative research methodology following the desk research. We conducted seven semi-structured interviews with a total of 11 decision-makers of all German branch campus projects. Our sample covered interviews at three universities’ home campuses in Germany, which involved a total of seven interviewees, and interviews at three German branch campuses in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and South America. An additional interview was conducted with the DAAD, which we consider a key organisation in funding and coordinating Germany’s higher education internationalisation programmes. All interviews, except one, were conducted face-to-face. Ethical standards were applied in the process and respondents gave informed consent. Personal anonymity was granted to all interviewees. To gain additional insights, we participated in and observed discussions at the DAAD ‘Transnational Education Conference’ 2018 and the ‘Going Global

Table 1. German branch campuses worldwide.

Branch campus name	Main university	Years of operation	Programmes
The Sirindhorn International Thai-German Graduate School of Engineering	RWTH Aachen	2001–	Master programmes in engineering (chemical, electrical, material, mechanical, railway and infrastructure) PhD degrees in engineering (chemical, electrical, material, mechanical)
Heidelberg Centre Latin America	Universität Heidelberg	2002–	Master programmes in sciences (medical informatics, governance of risk and resources) Master programmes in humanities (international law)
TUM Asia	Technische Universität München	2002–	Bachelor programmes in engineering (chemical, electrical, IT) Master programmes in engineering (aerospace, green electronics, industrial chemistry, integrated circuit) Master programmes in sciences (transport and logistics)
FAU Busan Campus German University in Korea	Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg	2010–2019	Master programmes in engineering (chemical, biological)
Technical University of Berlin – Campus El Gouna	Technische Universität Berlin	2012–2023	Master programmes in engineering (energy, water) Master programmes in sciences (urban development)
German University of Technology in Oman	RWTH Aachen	2017–	Bachelor programmes in engineering (chemical, environmental, mechanical) Bachelor programmes in sciences (geoscience, IT, logistics, planning and architecture, regional development, sustainable tourism) Master programmes in sciences (petroleum geoscience)

Conference’ organised by the British Council in Berlin in 2019, and recorded our observations in protocols.

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on the processes that led to their respective institutions’ IBC establishment, including actors involved, expectations, operational challenges, and how the IBC is embedded in overall strategies. The interview data was audio-recorded and transcribed, except for one case in which no audio recording was allowed and a memory protocol was made. The resulting data were compiled, coded and thematically analysed within a software programme. Moreover, we assessed the analysis of these interviews against our insights from analysing a corpus of 96 similar interviews with managers from branch campus-operating universities from 12 countries as part of a larger research project (published, e.g. in Kleibert, Bobée, et al. 2021; Kleibert et al. 2023). For use in this paper, the German interview quotes were translated into English and, where necessary to ensure anonymity, references to specific places were adapted.

Disentangling state-market relations in German branch campus development

Building on and extending the literature reviewed in section two, this section unpacks the rationales and ramifications of German IBC projects and discusses them against the backdrop of IBC development from the Anglosphere. It shows that

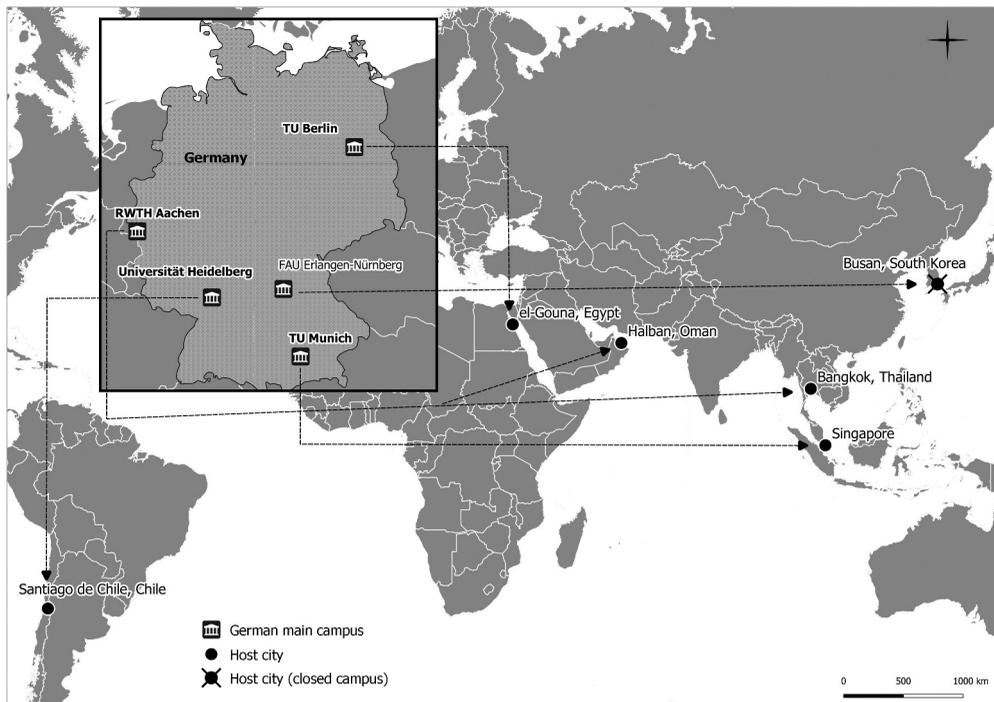


Figure 1. Mapping German IBC development.

the logics that underly German IBC development are neither identical with the ones in Anglosphere projects nor are they particularly exceptional. The first part of the analysis demonstrates that German IBC managers prominently emphasise their contribution to German foreign policy and local economic development, as well as potential academic benefits. However, German branch campuses are also driven by similar logics as their more commercial counterparts from the Anglosphere. Thus, the way German IBCs are developed and operated indicates that processes of neoliberalisation have already shaped German higher education more generally. Beyond this, the second part of our analysis demonstrates that the practice of exporting and running branch campuses further accelerates these transformation processes in their parent institutions.

German branch campuses: state- or market-driven? State- and market-driven!

This first part of the analysis explores the motivations of German universities to open IBCs, which at first glance starkly differ from those of universities from the Anglophone world. We show that university and branch campus managers see their institutions as expanding the influence of the German state abroad and act accordingly. This is for the most part in accordance with common views in the literature that German TNE projects are part of ‘science diplomacy’ (e.g. Raev 2020). However, the analysis also reveals that

even though managers' motivations are only limitedly permeated by neoliberal logics, they are surprisingly strongly driven by rationales of international competition.

Most German universities are public institutions funded by state budgets and usually not entitled to charge tuition fees. Despite ongoing debates regarding public higher education funding (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz n.d.), German universities are usually not under the same financial constraints that impact university leadership elsewhere, especially in the Anglosphere. One of our interlocutors explains:

And, of course, that puts our universities in a very different situation to a British university, which is not only encouraged but actually forced by its government to generate revenue through tuition fees, and which also lives in a context in which international education is seen as a separate economic sector in the country. That's very strong in Australia, that's very strong in Great Britain. And this is not how education, and transnational education, is seen in Germany. (interview DAAD)

Most of our interview partners emphasise that the decisions to establish branch campuses were not for financial reasons: 'It is not the purpose of German universities to generate profits. Why, then, should we take entrepreneurial risks abroad?' (interview home campus). Most managers doubt their branch campuses being feasible business operations, with tuition fees barely covering operational costs and even causing additional costs in the form of working hours within the main campus administration. Rather than citing financial reasons, university managers emphasised expectations for academic benefits by their presences abroad. One branch campus, e.g. is described as a 'laboratory' in which the university can develop new ideas, methods, and forms of teaching (interview home campus).

Different from many teaching-only campuses from the Anglosphere, German universities conduct research at their branch campuses. One manager even argues that 'scientific interest' is a precondition for all their university's projects abroad (interview home campus). Most managers hope that their IBC enhances chances for international research collaborations. Ecological, historic, and social contexts of the branch campus sites could offer researchers and students unique opportunities that they would not find at the home campus. However, reasons for operating branch campuses extend beyond intrinsic academic motivations. Rather, as one manager explains, research synergies generated by their IBC contribute to their university's federal auditing process and are part of their universities' 'Excellence Strategy'. The German Excellence Strategy is a funding competition with which the federal government encourages German universities implementing measures that increase international competitiveness (Berghaeuser and Hoelscher 2020).

Additionally, most German university managers frame IBCs as part of German cultural and academic foreign policy. One interviewed university manager, e.g. describes their IBC as broadcasting German culture and its model of education and science abroad: 'Ultimately, the idea of the branch campus is that it transports and represents our education model, our understanding and idea and culture of science and higher education in [the region]. That is basically the motivation' (interview home campus). Such explanations not only express pride in the brand of German higher education, but also frame branch campuses as part of a higher civic goal of German universities bringing education and enlightenment into 'less developed' countries. Similar development

rationales are cited in our interviews with IBC managers from the Anglosphere, but rather as ‘everyone benefits’ type of justifications for commercial interests. In our interviews with Anglosphere university managers university interests are usually put first and the ambassadorial role of their branch campus is rather seen as a by-product. This observation is consistent with other researchers’ findings on motivations for IBC development (Hickey and Davies 2022).

Yet, while highlighting that German IBCs are not supposed to make money, the interviewees from German institutions touch upon logics of competition, entrepreneurialism and brand building that are characteristic for Anglosphere higher education. One manager, e.g. recounts that their branch campus was partly attracted by ‘economic promises’ of the host government, and another mentions ‘affluent customers for education’ for explaining their IBC’s location (interviews home campus). Also, most German university managers, similar to managers from other countries (Schulze 2021), perceive branch campus projects as outposts that enable access to regional, formerly inaccessible, student markets, e.g. in Asia or the Middle East. Such rationalisations are reflective of the overall strategies of German universities to internationalise, which resemble, at least in language and strategic orientation, their counterparts in the Anglosphere.

Transforming German universities through branch campus development

This second part of the analysis demonstrates that their IBCs expose German universities to stronger competition and marketisation logics abroad than they usually encounter in the German context, and thus function as a backdoor for transformative effects in German universities at home. For this, we map out implicit shifts in state-market relations at the parent institutions along three dimensions: reconfiguration of university governance, marketisation through exposure to international competitors, and fostering deeper connections with industries and labour markets.

Reconfiguration of university governance

Establishing an IBC impacts universities’ institutional governance structures. This includes how and where decisions are taken, and universities’ financial architecture, as it opens them up for new funding flows, particularly private ones. Most German branch campuses can be traced back to initiatives by a handful of senior decision-makers in university leadership and powerful alumni from the host country. Thus, many of the branch campuses do not fit organically into the strategic framework of their university, obscuring their overall purpose for the institution:

What made it more difficult to embed this project within the university was – and I think we are still struggling with that – that it was not really a project of the university at large. It was not a decision taken by the academic senate. (interview home campus)

Similarly, a branch campus manager complains that their campus is not a ‘real university project in which the linkage between new foundation and old university is actually a solid bridge that stands firm’. Instead, the offshore campus project was mainly defined by ‘just a couple of people with an interest in the country’ (interview branch campus). In addition to not being part of a coherent strategy, IBC projects lead to a diffusion of universities’ organisational units and strategic considerations across different countries. One manager

explains the complicated administrative relation with their branch campus: ‘On the one hand, we are involved with them, but on the other, we want them to succeed on their own and understand them as a university, as a partner’ (interview home campus). These decision-making processes are in accordance with tendencies that have been observed by other authors. Belina et al. (2013), for instance, claim that institutional structures in German universities are increasingly shaped by individuals and by governance becoming more decentralised. With parallels to university transformation in the Anglosphere, these processes remove more and more aspects of university governance from democratic bodies of self-organisation, and instead place them in the hands of management boards and elite decision-makers.

Crucially, IBC development is not only reflective of these restructuring processes but also accelerates them. This becomes visible in the influence powerful elites in the host country have on the governance of German branch campuses. One IBC, e.g. is significantly subsidised by a politically influential local family, which also constitutes the campus’s directorate though it does not steer its day-to-day business (interview branch campus). Others have governance boards composed of delegates from the parent institution as well as political and economic representatives of the host country (interview branch campus), challenging German institutions’ principles of democratic self-organisation. The extensive impact of elites from the host country on branch campuses is closely tied to their financial support, which is a key pillar of many German IBCs’ financing model. It is public knowledge, e.g. that the Technical University of Berlin’s campus in El-Gouna was founded on Samih Sawiris’s initiative, a TU Berlin alumni, billionaire and influential public figure in Egypt. Sawiris and his foundations substantially funded the operation of the German IBC, as tuition fee revenues did not cover the full costs (Urschel-Sochaczewski 2012). Involvements like this are reflective of how the ambition of German university management to establish an IBC enables further encroachment of private interests into higher education institutions.

Moreover, in stark difference to their mother universities, all German IBCs charge tuition fees, choosing different strategies to be able to do this. The El-Gouna campus of TU Berlin, e.g. designed its curriculum to utilise a legal loophole. It only offered particular types of non-consecutive Master programmes that require students to prove a certain amount of professional working experience before enrolment. For these programmes, German universities are permitted by law to charge tuition fees. Most German IBCs are legally set up as separate private universities and listed as limited companies (‘GmbHs’ in German), as which they are allowed to charge tuition fees. Thus, IBCs can be seen as a way to circumvent legal regulations in Germany that generally prohibit charging tuition fees.¹ However, most campuses do not generate enough tuition fees to make IBC development a profitable business. Different from many branch campuses from the Anglosphere, German universities did not calculate most of their IBC’s budget on the expectation of generating tuition fees, but rather on government or third-party funding.

Reflective of how neoliberalism in Germany does not translate into the state’s complete withdrawal from public institutions and similar to other German TNE projects, German branch campuses are subject to strong state involvement. The DAAD was heavily involved in starting many German branch campuses, not only through facilitating connections and consultancy work on the local context but also through direct co-financing of the campus. At the same time, one of the milestones the DAAD set for one

campus was to recruit a sufficient number of fee-paying students (interview home campus). This shows how branch campus development does not only expose higher education institutions to market pressure, but also how superordinate organisations involved in broader higher education policy embrace these logics.

Thus, as similarly observable in universities in the Anglosphere, processes of reconfiguring governance structures and opening up to new funding sources contribute to normalising entrepreneurial university practices in German IBCs and in German higher education more generally. This tendency is considerably intensified by German IBC development taking place in marketised higher education contexts, which favours certain management decisions and pressures universities to sell their ‘product’.

Marketisation through exposure to competitors

By venturing out of Germany and establishing IBCs, German universities became exposed to more competitive higher education landscapes. Whereas at home German higher education institutions predominantly compete for students only with each other, relocating exposes them to competitive pressures of Anglophone universities that offer degrees within the same higher education system or even at the same location. Influenced by international rankings (Jöns and Hoyler 2013), the confrontation and challenge to recruit fee-paying students abroad leads German universities to re-evaluate their positionality.

Managers report having experienced inferiority compared to universities from the Anglophone world, in particular the USA and UK, in terms of being able to attract the best students to their IBC:

In [host country] we only managed to attract lower-tier students. The most talented students who can afford it go to the USA or the UK. Here, in Germany, at least we manage to attract mid-tier students. But in [host country] we only got the lower-tier ones: those who never planned to become internationally mobile and were not able to get admission in [host country capital]. (interview home campus)

This shows that, while Germany is in general a desired destination for many internationally mobile students, individual German universities lack the reputation and brand value of elite universities from the Anglosphere. This experience leads higher education managers to critically evaluate and reposition course offerings as well as branding and advertisements with reference to institutions from more marketised systems. Managers of French IBCs mention similar challenges in competing with Anglophone institutions in Africa (Bobée and Kleibert 2022).

Some German IBC managers express jealousy at the ease with which Anglosphere institutions benefit from (post-)colonial relations and a widely spoken language, as well as their early-mover positions and advanced marketing strategies. A German IBC manager recounts experiences at an international education fair to explicate feelings of competitive disadvantages compared to Anglophone institutions:

Not even within a university [the German universities] have a conforming corporate identity that they sell, because each faculty does its own thing. Some flyers are in English, some are in German and then maybe we’ll do a bit of Chinese. It starts with the layout. It’s all a bit haywire. And then you compare it with American, English universities. Of course, you can argue whether they are too much like a company, too corporate. But if you then want to

be in the game, then branding, external presentation, is the first impression for the students and parents. (interview branch campus)

The ambivalence of questioning the corporatisation of universities while longing for a stronger corporate identity indeed characterises many of our interviews with German managers. By entering into direct competition with Anglosphere universities' branch campuses at a given location, higher education managers feel compelled to conform to competitive and market pressures. In this way, the marketisation of branch campuses is not simply realised via their governance structures as quasi-privatised entities and reliance on tuition fees, but their exposition to foreign competition from highly-marketised higher education systems also has a broader impact on the entire university, including in Germany. Thus, further marketisation required at the branch location leads to institutional change 'back at home'.

Most managers involved in German IBC projects have a somewhat conflicted opinion on their respective projects. While most acknowledged their IBCs as not revenue-generating, they rationalised branch campus development by increases in universities' 'international reputation' and 'visibility', which in turn would generate additional income. This shows that, although the German higher education system remains predominantly publicly funded, the overall management acts according to very similar rationales as their counterparts in more evidently liberalised higher education contexts.

One way German IBC managers deal with these competitive pressures is capitalising on the reputation of the brand 'Made in Germany', which signals value, quality, and excellence, instead of relying on a strong institutional brand. Being associated with German technology provides a competitive advantage similar to the symbolic value of brands like BMW and Mercedes (interview branch campus). To attract (international) students, most of the German branch campuses build upon the reputation of 'German engineering' and focus on STEM-related programmes. Yet, at the same time, as far as we could find out, all German IBCs operate in English (and not in German). This not only serves to 'internationalise' the German university by extending English-language offerings, but it also highlights how German TNE plays out within the global hegemony of Anglophone higher education.

Deepening connections with industries and labour markets

In most German IBCs, German corporations have been involved in some form. One form of industry involvement can be found in German firms' supportive role as visible representatives of the education system that 'German engineering' is built on, but also as information transmitters, and as networking intermediaries. With regards to the founding process of their campus, one branch campus manager points out that when the local government was considering supporting German universities to set up branch campuses at their location, this government first reached out to contacts in a German multinational firm for information and recommendations on potential high-quality German universities (interview branch campus). Another form of industry engagement is directly funding or subsidising single elements of German IBC's infrastructure. At one IBC, e.g. a leading multinational German mechatronics corporation funded a respective laboratory (interview branch campus). Such close involvement of German multinational companies also exists in some other German TNE projects beyond IBC development.

The German multinational firm Siemens had played a key role in the development of the German-Russian Institute of Advanced Technology, before the cooperation between German and Russian universities was suspended due to Russia's attack on Ukraine. This deep industry involvement at branch campuses may promote dependencies – e.g. personal or financial ones – which can seriously impact future decisions and partnership relations at the German main campus.

German IBC development is also tied to human capital needs of Germany's industrial sector, which is strongly based on exporting goods, respectively advanced industrial products. The majority of German IBCs come from German technical universities or have a clear STEM focus (see Table 1). The rationale is explicated by referring to Germany's export-oriented economy: 'It is actually in the interest of German companies producing abroad that local specialists are then trained according to a practice-oriented model with content and quality that they know from Germany' (interview DAAD). Accordingly, German firms influence IBC development and 'formulate interests in terms of the curriculum. Or, e.g. offering work, bringing in interns. So, to actually train a local reservoir of skilled workers there that can work there in their own company' (interview DAAD).

Besides providing a labour pool that is trained in and equipped with German industry-oriented education in regions with subsidiaries of German multinational firms, German branch campuses act as gateways for foreign high-skilled labour into Germany. One manager explains that many of their IBC's students strive for an internship opportunity in Germany (interview branch campus). For foreign students and graduates, enrolling at a German university and obtaining degrees that are acknowledged and accredited in Germany enables easier access to the job market in Germany by helping circumvent obstacles such as visa issues, non-recognition of degrees as well as cultural distance or language barriers. Thereby, IBCs place international talent in the German economy and contribute to satisfying firms' need for high-skilled labour. This role steers the strategic orientation of German universities towards graduate employability and labour market needs more generally. German IBCs can thus be interpreted as projects that symbolise their universities' move away from Humboldtian ideals and growing commitment to human capital needs of the German private sector, which may be the German version of creating accountability to taxpayers.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that managers of German IBC-developing universities ground their IBC projects in Humboldtian ideals. Similar to the narratives woven into their university websites, higher education managers mainly rationalise IBCs via academic motivations that are related to research opportunities, exchanging knowledge and collaboration, and piloting new forms of education. They moreover highlight higher goals of spreading the achievements of German higher education into less-developed countries. Thereby, these managers differentiate their institutions from the majority of universities in the global TNE landscape and their supposedly purely profit-driven motivations. While German IBCs differ from most Anglosphere IBCs by engaging in research activities, IBC-developing German universities and their decision-makers are very similar to their counterparts from more marketised higher education systems. They have also been

motivated by financial opportunities, logics of international competition as well as reputation and brand building. Furthermore, German IBCs are closely entangled with interests and human capital needs of the German industry. We have shown that, although having already been in place in the German higher education system, these entanglements are also intensified by branch campus development. The logics, dynamics and actors involved in IBC projects accelerate and deepen these tendencies, not only in the universities themselves but also in the engaged German political bodies.

This analysis contributes to the literature on TNE by providing empirical insights into hitherto under-researched German IBCs. As such, German branch campus development is reflective of the way the German higher education system is undergoing processes of neoliberalisation: in small steps and less visible than in more principled neoliberal regimes. Beyond the case of German IBCs, this also gives insights into how internationalisation of higher education unfolds in less marketised systems and how it can catalyse processes of neoliberalisation by connecting socio-political configurations across space. In that regard, branch campus development strengthens and multiplies the contact between such different systems. Universities from countries with less marketised higher education systems need to consider this potentially undesirable effect when they seek to establish an IBC or other forms of TNE.

This is particularly important given the fact that by exposing themselves to logics of marketisation through IBC development, German universities are also discovering the risks inherent in the establishment of such campuses. Some of them have already been faced with the same reality as many of their counterparts from the Anglosphere (Kleibert, Rottleb, et al. 2021). When higher education institutions enter market-based environments in which achieving sufficient student enrolment and tapping funding sources other than their government is necessary, they also expose themselves to the possibility of failure. Of the six IBC projects we explored, two have already been or are in the process of being closed down. Such branch campus closures are rather frequent in international comparison, and thus the terminations of these German ones are no exceptions. However, from the perspective of the German higher education landscape, it is a new experience. Financial difficulties because of market pressure have never led to the closure of a public German university, and thus the offshoring of campuses introduces a new reality to them. It remains an open question what the long-term consequences of such branch closures will be for German universities. Whereas de-coupling from the IBC's marketised higher education host context, which accompanies the branch closure, can translate into a general re-consolidation as a less marketised German higher education institution, there may also be long-term effects on the university's organisational structure and strategic orientation.

Note

1. Despite some differences between the federal states, in general the legal situation in Germany prevents public universities to set their own tuition fees. They do charge tuition fees to non-EU nationals, which yet tend to be very low in international comparison.

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