Latest UK branch campus developments: University of Warwick rejects plans for Singapore campus and Liverpool moves into China

Following substantial debate and consultation, the UK’s Warwick University earlier this week decided against proceeding with its plans to establish a branch campus in Singapore. Concerns about academic freedom and human rights issues in Singapore, recruitment of staff and students to the campus and financial risks associated with the project appear to be behind the lack of support from the institution’s academic community. Following its announcement on the branch campus development, the University’s Council stated that the University will continue to investigate opportunities for increased activities in Singapore and Asia. What appear to be the main factors behind Warwick’s decision not to venture into Singapore? With a range of foreign universities operating in Singapore, why did the city state fail to convince Warwick that it is an attractive site for the institution’s international activities? Were the conditions from the Singaporean government markedly different to those given to an Australian university, which is currently establishing a branch campus in the country? In related developments, UK’s University of Liverpool earlier this week announced plans to open a branch campus in China.

The University of Warwick received an invitation from the Singaporean government in 2004 to open a branch campus in the country. Details on the proposed plans for the Singapore campus are relatively limited, however, it was envisaged to be a fully-fledged multi-faculty institution initially offering a range of undergraduate degree programmes in engineering, sciences, social science, business and humanities through seven research centres, designed to replace traditional departments. Similar to Nottingham’s plans for its branch campuses in China and Malaysia, Warwick had plans for mobility of students between its two operations. The Singapore campus would have been Warwick’s first large scale operation abroad. In the press statement regarding Tuesday’s decision, the Council “reaffirmed the University’s commitment to development in Asia as an integral part of its international strategy.” Warwick’s current offerings abroad appear to be limited. According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency, only 32 students were enrolled in programmes offered by the University outside the country in 2003/4, although this figure may underestimate real activity – for a discussion of HESA data, please refer to the Observatory’s July 2004 report. Warwick Business School also participates in the European MBA consortium, in which students spend part of their program at the campuses of France’s ESSEC and Germany’s Mannheim Business School. The University appeared to have had brief plans to open a campus in Knowledge Village in Dubai but there is no further evidence of any activity. An MBA is currently offered for managers in the Gulf region in co-operation with Dubai-based Knowledge Horizon. In 2003, the University, together with the universities of Manchester and Nottingham, opened an office in the South Korean capital of Seoul to jointly market their courses. The University was established in 1965 and has approximately 16,000 students enrolled at its campus near Coventry in the West Midlands. Despite only being in operation for forty years, the institution has been very successful in building a reputation for excellence in teaching and research and placed eighth in the Times’ most recent ranking of British universities.

Following initial concerns raised at the institution over academic freedom in Singapore and general risks associated with a fully-fledged branch campus development, an eight-month feasibility study was undertaken (this is reported to have initially been budgeted at £400,000 (US$706,000) but cost the University a total of £800,000 (US$1.4 million). In addition to issues of financial risks and legal responsibilities, the feasibility study also investigated the state of human rights in Singapore. The study’s final report, which is currently not available in the public domain, was delivered to the University in September 2005, and reportedly found the market to be financially and socially favourable for Warwick (although no conclusive
recommendations were reportedly made). It also included a report from Dr. Thio Li-Ann, a human rights specialist at the National University of Singapore as well as feedback from a group of Warwick postgraduate students who made a contingent visit to the country. Whilst the students were reported to provide positive feedback, some of Dr Li-Ann’s statements were a cause of concern: “speech is permissible as long as it does not threaten real political change or to alter the status quo”. She warned that “the government will intervene if academic reports cast a negative light on their policies” but said that the presence of Warwick in Singapore could “serve as an impetus for continued liberalisation”. According to the Financial Times, “Singapore requires international educational institutions operating in the city-state to agree not to conduct activities seen as interference in domestic affairs.”

Despite the relatively positive indications of the report and high-level support for the project, specifically from the Vice-Chancellor, Professor David VandeLinde, resistance from the academic community appears to have been strong throughout the consultation process. It has been suggested that the arts, social studies and engineering departments were opposed to the idea of operating in Singapore, whereas more mixed opinions were expressed by academics in the science and medical faculties. According to the student newspaper at Warwick, the senior management, as one of its final efforts before the matter went to Senate and Council, wrote to the Singaporean government, asking that the students enrolled in Singapore would be exempt from the laws limiting freedom of assembly, speech and press and that bans on homosexuality and certain religious practices on campus be removed. It was also requested that it be guaranteed that staff and students would not be punished by the authorities for making academic-related comments that might be seen “as being outside the boundaries of political debate”. The government’s response to this request is unclear. Following the prolonged debate a final decision was made earlier this week. After the Senate recommended last week not to proceed with establishing the branch campus, the Council reached the same conclusion on 18 October.

Warwick’s decision to pull out of the project on the basis of the conditions offered by the Singaporean government is reported to be the first time that a foreign institution has declined to meet the authorities’ conditions. This is not the first time, however, that the issue of academic freedom and human rights have been raised in connection to the establishment of a foreign university branch campus. When University of Nottingham’s new campus in China was opened last month, a journalist from the UK newspaper the Guardian reported on the institution’s experiences in the country. Nottingham stated that so far the new campus had enjoyed the same charter and guarantees of academic freedom as the parent institution, but that this would not necessarily prevent complications in the future. According to Professor Douglas Tallack, (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Internationalisation) the University’s tactics “are to build up sufficient trust with our partners and the city and province in which we are located so that when difficult issues come up, as they are bound to, we will be able to have a discussion and not simply a stand-off”.

Details on what the opposition centred on at Warwick seem scarce. A few newspaper reports such as the University’s student newspaper have pointed to the surrounding issues however, very little actual and consistent information has been forthcoming. It appears that the opposition has mainly stemmed from concerns over the potential lack of academic freedom, and to a lesser extent financial, student and staffing issues. Alongside worries over academic freedom and human rights issues, members of staff have also expressed the belief that the University should focus on developing and improving the home campus instead of entering into large-scale and resource intensive foreign operations (particularly given its limited experience in off-shore provision). In connection to this, it was argued that the University is already sufficiently occupied with its new medical school, efforts to improve its research ratings and managing the horticultural research facility that it took over last year.

The extent to which the University would be able to attract high quality students to the Singapore campus has also been questioned. Tuition fees at the Singapore campus were going to be similar to those charged from international students at the UK campus, in the range of £12,000 (US$ 21,188) per academic year, which is considerably more than students pay at local higher education institutions in Singapore. Long-term projections for enrolment were ambitious with 10,000 students to be recruited, approximately 70% of them coming from outside Singapore. It has been argued that the most capable local and international students...
prefer to go to prestigious domestic universities or to the home campuses of foreign institutions. Whilst Warwick has a strong reputation in the UK, a market study carried out by the University indicated that it is less well known outside the country. Success of the Singaporean campus in attracting a sufficient high number of well-qualified students would depend on the institution’s ability to build a reputation in Asia similar to that enjoyed by the home campus in the UK. There are arguably other factors that would make the institution attractive to local and international students. Whilst tuition fees were not envisaged to be much lower than at Warwick’s home campus, the total costs associated with a degree programme at the Singapore campus would still be lower (for domestic students) than studying abroad. It would also appeal to students who would like to obtain a foreign degree without studying abroad. Full control over the branch campus would mean that students would be assured that the education in Singapore would be of the same quality as that provided on the home campus.

Concerns over staffing issues were also raised. Some academics were worried that it would be difficult to recruit a sufficiently high number of qualified people to the campus (bearing in mind that enrolments were projected to reach 10,000 students) mainly due to high costs of living in Singapore and perceived general difficulties in recruiting qualified academics. Whilst it could potentially be hard to persuade large numbers of academics to relocate from the UK campus to Singapore, the model employed by the University of Nottingham for their campuses in China and Malaysia, where the senior members of staff are recruited from the UK and academics at more junior level locally and internationally, might have provided a solution. In a country such as Singapore, with a highly educated workforce, most of them fluent in English, this arguably should be feasible.

The financial details of the operation are unclear, as is the role this issue has played in the debate. One of the most recent reports from the UK newspaper the Times states that Warwick was planning to invest £150 (US$265) million in the project to cover the costs for land, buildings and equipment. It was furthermore anticipated that the University would be unlikely to enjoy any profits from the operation for several years. According to the student newspaper at Warwick, the University was estimating the costs of the campus to be close to £300 (US$530) million for the first 20 years with the institution being in £150-200 (US$265-353) million debt as a result of the investment. At the time of writing it is uncertain how much the Singaporean government would provide. Whilst financial considerations appear not to have been the decisive factor, the fact that Warwick would have been required to make a considerable investment in the project is likely to have been a cause for concern. Importantly, institutions seem to be increasingly concerned about risks and the sharing of these when entering large-scale international operations.

The Singaporean Economic Development Board’s (EDB) efforts to attract Warwick to set up in Singapore are closely connected to the city state’s declared ambitions of becoming a regional educational hub and recruiting 150,000 international students by 2012. In addition to Australia’s University of New South Wales (UNSW), which is planning to open the first comprehensive foreign owned and operated institution in Singapore in 2007 (see below for further details), a number of foreign institutions, such as the business school INSEAD, US University of Stanford, MIT and University of Chicago Graduate School of Business have with the support of the Singaporean government established a presence in the city state. Furthermore, approximately 170 foreign providers are currently offering programmes in Singapore, often through local partners from the private sector. What would have distinguished Warwick from the existing branch campuses in the country were its comprehensive course offerings at both undergraduate and post-graduate level and its or unique academic structure.

How do the conditions for Warwick’s plans in Singapore compare to those of New South Wales? Following an invitation from EDB in December 2002, the Australian University in April 2004 announced that it would be establishing a comprehensive branch campus in the city-state (refer to the Observatory’s 30 April 2004 article for further details). UNSW is reported to have received almost US$60 million from the EDB to support construction, working capital and research for the first 10 years and an additional US$85 million in loans from the Australian government for the project. From the limited details provided, it seems that both UNSW and Warwick would have been required to invest substantially in their new branch campus developments. As mentioned above, all foreign institutions are also required to comply with the
government’s request not to interfere with local politics. Without further details it seems unreasonable to conclude whether Warwick’s situation was substantially different to that of UNSW or whether internal factors at the UK-based university provided the decisive influence on the debate.

In related news, another UK institution announced plans to move into the Chinese market. In a statement released on 18 October, the University of Liverpool disclosed that it received approval last month from the Chinese Ministry of Education to establish a university in partnership with the Chinese Xi’an Jiaotong University. “Xi’an Jiaotong and Liverpool International University” (the tentative name for the project) will initially focus on undergraduate degrees in computer science, electronics, and IT, with projected enrolments of 8,000 students in 10-15 years. Students will reportedly receive certificates from both Xi’an Jiaotong University and the University of Liverpool upon completion. The 175 acre university campus will be located in the Dushu Lake Higher Education Zone of Suzhou Industrial Park, founded in 1994 by the Chinese and Singaporean governments and aiming to attract 10-20 foreign institutions to work with local partner universities on site, potentially involving 50,000 students (refer to the Observatory’s September 2003 report and its 4 September 2003 article for further discussion of the Suzhou Graduate Town initiative). Foreign operators that have reportedly signed agreements to set up facilities at Suzhou include Dayton University (US), Limerick University (Ireland), and the National University of Singapore.

Similar to Warwick, the Chinese campus will be Liverpool’s first large-scale operation abroad. However, the University has been active in China since it formed a partnership with the China Education Service Centre (a government organisation authorised by the Ministry of Education to provide consulting and develop international links) to launch “the fully first online MBA from a foreign institution in China.” University of Liverpool currently operates three online MBAs which attract a large number of international students. Apart from this successful operation, the University’s offerings abroad appear to be limited. Liverpool’s partner Xi’an Jiaotong University is a public institution based in the city of Xi’an in the centrally located province of Shaanxi. Founded in 1896, the University has more than 26,000 students and 64 research institutes.

The latest developments in branch campuses point to the increased activities of UK institutions in this area. Whilst the numbers of institutions entering this kind of activity are still relatively small, the establishment of large-scale operations abroad seems to be an emerging trend amongst UK institutions. The branch campus model may be particularly appealing to pre-1992 institutions, many of which have so far been reluctant to offer programmes abroad through collaborative provision. As discussed in the Observatory’s 16 September 2005 article, operating through branch campuses provide the institution with full control over its academic offerings but are resource intensive undertakings with benefits that may only materialise on a large scale in the long-term. The coverage, albeit limited, of the debate at Warwick has offered a rare insight into the issues concerning branch campus developments from an institutional perspective. The fact that it appears to be the first institution to reject an invitation largely on grounds of academic freedom and human rights issues makes the developments more noteworthy. Whether other institutions will have similar concerns in the future will be interesting to follow.