Understanding Satellite Campuses in the UK

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Abstract

This paper summarises a project undertaken to gain insight into UK universities that operate a main campus and satellite campus structure. Although we found some limited published reference material on the subject, there was clearly a significant gap in the literature. Our premise was that an increased understanding of the models, issues, management and leadership approaches to satellite campuses would help support decision making and organisational and leadership development within the sector. The project was funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE).

Summary

Samuel Schuman's book entitled, "Leading America's Branch Campuses" (2009) brings together a very useful collection of essays that discuss multi-campus university and college systems in the US, covering a range of organisational and systems issues. David Maughan Brown (2000) provides some useful reflective insights into the changing dynamics between campuses at the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) in South Africa. Nickerson and Schaefer (2001) provide an extensive survey of educational branch campus administrators. Dengerink (2001) focuses on issues of institutional identity and organisational structure in relation to multi-campus arrangements, using the University of Washington and Washington State University as exemplars. Scott et al. (2007) provide a study of Australian multi-campus universities with a focus on comparison of the operational efficiency of multi-campus organisations as compared with single campus institutions. Smith (2009) examines the external factors that influence academics working in a campus of an Australian University in the United Arab Emirates. McBurnie and Ziguras (2007) and Heffernan and Poole (2004, 2005) provide further studies of transnational campus arrangements.

Following the initial literature survey, a long-list of candidate institutions in the UK with multiple campuses was created according to the most up-to-date Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data available at the time. This identified 54 institutions with multiple campuses.

In order to focus our study we developed a precise definition of what we meant by 'satellite campus' (Scott et al. 2007). This was based on key characteristics which included the existence of an identifiable main site for the institution, a minimum travelling time between main and satellite, and a critical mass of students at the satellite both in absolute terms and percentage of institutional full-time equivalent student numbers (FTE). This definition yielded 11 case study institutions in England, each with a single satellite, although some also had other non-qualifying campuses.

For each case study institution we telephone interviewed a member of the senior management team, targeting the officer with specific responsibility for the satellite, where one existed, or the Registrar and Secretary (or equivalent). These interviews took the form of semi-structured conversations of about an hour, where participants were encouraged to explain key aspects of the satellite within the context of the institution as a whole. Although free flowing story telling was encouraged we ensured each participant covered 10 pre-determined high-level theme areas.

Each of the satellite sites was then visited and we met key leadership staff based there. If there was a senior executive (e.g. Dean or Pro-Vice-Chancellor) responsible for the site and based there either full-time or for a significant proportion of each week, we interviewed them. These colleagues were also engaged in a structured conversation, again with our 10 key themes covered. A substantial amount of quantitative and qualitative data was captured from the primary desk research and transcription of our conversations. On completion of the fieldwork a workshop was organised for all participating institutions, to share early findings and discuss emerging themes and develop our thinking further.

Analysis of the data revealed a number of core themes, trends and potential theories. A variety of organisational structures were evident along with different leadership and management approaches on both the academic and professional service side, and some switching between structures. There were indications of different perspectives of the same institution for those based at different campuses. The importance of understanding this at a senior institutional level was highlighted. Relationships were evident between campus history and strategy. Campus voice, representation (staff and student) and approaches to governance also varied, including the approach taken by the students' unions.

We found that in general students don't tend to travel significantly between campuses for academic reasons although they may do so for other reasons, such as to use sports facilities. Staff travel was more common with some evidence of gravitational pull towards the main site for academic staff. There was a surprising lack of use of electronic communications mechanisms for meetings, although there were some exceptions.

The project has opened up many interesting angles for further study in relation to organisations with satellite or multi-campus structures within the UK and abroad and we are planning to extend the study to look at a broader range of structures, attributes and contexts.

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