

Strategic Insights: Pioneering Role of Xiamen University Malaysia in Shaping International Higher Education

HUANG Xuanzhi

Lingnan University, China

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Abstract: This article presents a thorough analysis of the management strategies and strategic planning that have contributed to the success of Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) as a premier international branch campus. Through an extensive literature review and a detailed case study, the author distills the multifaceted pioneering experiences shaping XMUM's development, offering invaluable insights into the broader field of international higher education. The author scrutinizes its alignment with global initiatives, its proactive approach to collaboration and partnerships, its unwavering commitment to educational quality and innovation, its focus on talent development and international faculty recruitment, its effective cultural integration and localization efforts, its efficient risk management and response mechanisms, its strategic brand building and its dedication to sustainable development and social responsibility. These factors have been pivotal to XMUM's achievements and provide a roadmap for other higher education institutions looking to expand globally.

Keywords: International higher education (IHE); strategic planning; global initiatives; collaboration and partnerships; educational quality and innovation; talent development; international faculty; cultural integration; risk management; brand building; sustainable development; social responsibility

Notes on the contributor: Xuanzhi HUANG is a postgraduate student at the School of Graduate Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, China. His major research interest lies in English literature study as well as international higher education and management. His email address is xuanzhihuang@ln.hk.

1. Introduction

The trend of internationalizing higher education (HE) is a strategic response to the increasingly globalized world, where the dissemination of knowledge and cultural exchange are essential for the development of a competitive workforce. “In the context of globalization, cultivating international talents has become a national strategic need, which is both necessary and important (WANG, XM, 2024: 158)”, This trend is particularly



evident in developed countries, such as the USA, UK, Germany, and Australia, etc., which have established extensive overseas education programs, reflecting their commitment to global educational influence.

China's engagement in this global movement is underscored by data from the Ministry of Education, indicating that the country has established the world's largest HE system and reached a popularization stage of HE recognized by the international community. Up to 2024, the total number of Chinese HE institutions nationwide amounts to 3,117. Within this figure, there are 2,868 ordinary institutions of higher learning, which include 1,308 undergraduate institutions, 1,560 vocational colleges, and 249 adult HE institutions, excluding those in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan regions, as well as Confucius Institutes abroad. Among the recognized universities, 22 have established their overseas branches. Notably, Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) stands out as the first university to be independently established overseas with the approval of the Chinese government.

The establishment of overseas educational institutions by Chinese universities, such as XMUM, not only signifies a leap in the quality of Chinese HE but also represents a strategic move to enhance China's soft power and international cooperation in education. As LIAO (2021) points out, this "development is crucial as it addresses the urgent question of how universities can expand globally, maintain cultural roots and manage effectively in the new era".

China's plan with international education standards is imperative for several reasons. As the most populous country and a key driver of global economic growth, China faces significant domestic demand for HE. Concurrently, it seeks to export its educational models and actively participate in shaping global education governance. According to Ziggurats & McBurnie (2011), international branch campuses (IBCs) are identified as a prime strategy for cross-border education, capable of elevating tertiary education quality in developing regions and bolstering human capital development.

The definition of IBCs, as entities that must operate within resource-receiving countries and confer degrees from the parent institution, sets a standard for the authenticity and credibility of these international endeavors. Up till 2016, Chinese universities have established a total of seven overseas branches, six of which are operational and one in the preparatory stage (ZHAO & XIE 2018). Analysis of these initiatives reveals several characteristics of China's current international educational landscape, including a late start, small scale, slow development pace, limited geographic distribution, and a narrow focus on school level and curriculum offerings.

Globally, the number of IBCs has seen a rapid increase since 2000, growing from 24 to over 300 by 2017, which has diversified the global HE landscapes (HOU et al., 2018). The majority of these IBCs are provided by Western nations, such as the USA and the UK, with a significant concentration in Asia (Garrett et al., 2016). This trend underscores the importance of Asia as a hub for international education and the potential for Chinese universities to play a more prominent role in this arena.

"As an important part of HE, China's HE internationalization has always been the focus of researchers (CAI, ZHU & XIONG 2020)." XMUM is a quintessential example of the internationalization of Chinese universities, whose successful management is worthy of further revisit. This article aims to analyze XMUM's operational insights and strategic plans and provide a practical reference for the overseas expansion of other universities and the internationalization strategy of China's HE.

Xiamen University (XMU), founded in 1921 by Malaysian Chinese philanthropist Tan Kah Kee in Fujian province, China, holds the distinction of being the first Chinese university established by an overseas Chinese. In

2014, XMUM furthered its international reach by becoming the first Chinese university to establish a campus in Malaysia. The establishment of XMUM represents a significant milestone in bilateral international cooperation and educational exchange.

XMUM positions itself as a globally oriented institution, providing students with a competitive edge in the economic, cultural and technological exchanges between ASEAN countries and China. With the academic excellence of its parent university, XMUM offers students opportunities to study abroad and intern in China and other countries. Its curriculum is a blend of distinctive Chinese elements and a contemporary learning environment that encourages interdisciplinary dialogues.

XMUM envisions itself as an institution with a global perspective, offering high-quality education and research facilities while fostering multiculturalism (GUO 2017). The university has been committed to producing graduates who are wise, distinguished and capable of becoming responsible citizens contributing to the growth and progress of Malaysia, China and other ASEAN countries.

Now, XMUM's faculty includes, according to its recent official online statistics, not only excellent teachers selected by the main campus in Xiamen, China, but also experienced scholars from Malaysia and those recruited globally. Out of over 300 members of its teaching staff, more than 80% of them have doctoral degrees. Up to 2024, there are more than 7,500 students from Malaysia, China and 43 other countries and regions.

The branch campus has seven colleges and offers twenty-three undergraduate programs in the fields of liberal arts, business, medicine, science and engineering. In addition, there are eleven master's programs and six doctoral programs respectively. Based on partial statistics, since its inception and commencement of enrollment in 2015, XMUM has attracted "over 12,000 students from more than 40 countries and regions", embarking on their academic and dream pursuits within this institution's environs (MAO et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

Considering that managing overseas campus by universities in Chinese Mainland is a relatively new phenomenon in recent decades, the author found only 68 documents from the National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database with the Chinese keywords “高等教育國際化” (higher education internationalization) and “海外分校” on Dec. 12, 2024. Out of the 142 key words of these papers, 120 key words form a network map, as shown in the following Figure.

From Figure 1, it is not difficult for us to find, from the map, that the chief themes of these papers can be categorized into the following five groups:

2.1 *Background of HE internationalization and trends*

The background and landscape of HE internationalization and its trends make the research focus. Among several papers analyzing the background and trends of internationalization, LIU and PANG (2024) emphasize the importance of key dimensions, international orientation and development paths in the context of building a strong educational nation. JIANG (2024) studies the development of Johns Hopkins University's overseas branches from the 1950s to the present, providing a case study for understanding the evolution of overseas branches.

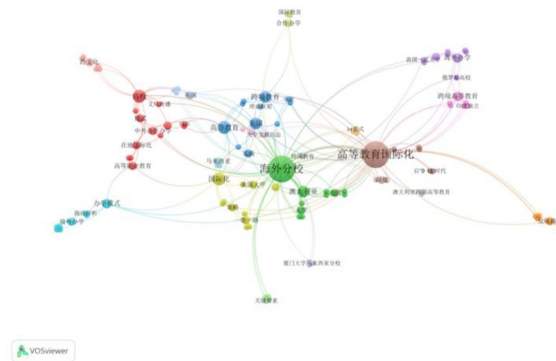


Figure 1 VOSviewer bibliometric key-word network map

2.2 *The emergence and operation of overseas branches*

The establishment and functioning of IBCs are also important research issues. For instance, WANG and MINAWAR (2023), among others, discuss the rise, operation and effectiveness of overseas branches of Russian, American and European universities in Central Asian countries, offering a comparative perspective. HU (2022) specifically analyzes the transnational strategy and risk response of Xiamen University's Malaysia branch, providing direct experience for the operation of overseas campuses.

2.3 *“Belt and Road” initiative and internationalization*

Changes in the international landscape of HE are often in the research spotlight. For instance, LU and TAN (2022) study the path of Henan universities in establishing overseas branches under the “Belt and Road” (B & R) initiative, providing background for understanding the role of XMUM in regional cooperation. DONG (2020) explores new strategies for the IHE in Guangdong under the B & R construction background, further emphasizing the importance of regional cooperation in HE internationalization.

2.4 *Challenges and experiences of IBCs*

Challenges and experiences of IBCs are also under frequent discussion. For example, YOU and WANG (2019) analyze the current status, challenges and experiences of university overseas branch construction, providing a general understanding of the challenges faced by XMUM. LIAO (2019) makes a study of the motives, types and challenges of HE overseas branches, offering a theoretical framework for the specific case analysis of XMUM.

2.5 *Cultural dissemination and cross-cultural communication*

Cultural dissemination and cross-cultural communication are also significant concerns. For example, LI and YAN (2021) study the dissemination of Chinese culture in Russia from the perspective of university overseas branches, providing a reference for understanding the role of XMUM in cross-cultural communication. LIU (2014) discusses the cross-cultural adaptation of teachers in the context of international education and foreign

experience and enlightenment, offering practical guidance for cross-cultural communication at XMUM.

Moreover, the keywords “international branch/campus” network emerges as a prominent node, with its size and connectivity, indicating that it is one of the core concepts in discussions on the internationalization of HE. For example, GUO (2015/2017) has made preliminary analyses (including a SWOT analysis) of the opening and running of XMUM, thus forming a small node in Figure 1, making known its founding and early development.

In summary, the above literature indicates that XMUM, as a successful model, serves as a paradigm for the internationalization of Chinese HE. Its 10 years of management experiences may provide practical references for other Chinese universities. Therefore, the present article attempts to shed light on the innovative contributions and leadership position of XMUM in the global landscape of IHE.

3. XMUM’s Chief Management Experiences in Running Overseas Campus

In the present global era, XMUM has emerged as a successful model of overseas campus operation and management. Drawing from its latest information and academic insights, its successful management experiences can be grouped into three main parts:

3.1 Strategic and partnership-oriented management

First is its forward-looking strategic plan and global perspective. As we can see, XMUM’s strategic plan with the B & R initiative has been a cornerstone of its success. By aligning with this national strategy, it has not only expanded its forward — looking global footprint but also contributed to China’s soft power in Southeast Asia. For instance, its collaboration with local Malaysian institutions has led to quite a few joint research projects and academic exchanges, which are in line with China’s B & R Initiative’s emphasis on cultural and educational cooperation. This plan has also facilitated funding and support from both the Chinese and Malaysian governments, as evidenced by the joint educational grants and scholarships offered to students from both countries. As its official website on — line reports show, XMUM strives to “become a university with a distinctly global outlook” to “nurture young talents with dignity and wisdom”.

Next is its active collaboration and partnerships. XMUM’s management success is also attributed to its robust collaboration and partnerships with local and international entities. A prime example of this is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the Malaysian Ministry of Education, which has led to the development of joint degree programs and research initiatives. These partnerships have not only enhanced its academic offerings but also strengthened its position as a bridge for cultural and educational exchange between China and Malaysia, and with other countries as well. According to the latest statistics from its website, XMUM has, up till now, 33 international partners in 13 countries outside Malaysia, which makes a great progress for its global engagement and partnerships.

3.2 Academic — quality and people — centric management

The second effective management experience is its emphasis both on academic-quality and people-centric management. XMUM’s commitment to educational quality and excellence is evident in its adoption of



international teaching standards and its focus on quality and innovation. For example, it has implemented the flipped classroom approach, which has been welcomed by students and has led to improved engagement and learning outcomes. It has a small class size with a student — to — lecturer ratio of 15: 1. Additionally, it has integrated technology into its teaching methods, such as the use of virtual reality in engineering courses, which provides students with a cutting-edge learning experience.

Next is its emphasis on talent cultivation and international faculty. XMUM's successful approach to talent cultivation is multifaceted, focusing on attracting and retaining international faculty and students. Even in foreign language departments in local universities at home, "The English teachers' professional development should be locally based and internationally oriented (CHEN, 2014: 65)", not to mention the IBCs. In the past two decades, it has managed to attract outstanding faculty from diverse backgrounds, which has enriched the academic environment and provided students with a global perspective. Eighty percent of its academic staff are doctoral degree holders and one — third are from XMU China, while the rest are recruited from Malaysia and other countries. For instance, its faculty includes renowned scholars from various fields, such as Robin Robertson, an esteemed professor specialising in physical oceanography, Mahdi H. Miraz, a specialist in communications engineering, the world's top 2% scientist by Stanford University, etc. The engagement of distinguished scholars has enriched the academic environment and provided students with a global perspective and superb skills related to their majors. In addition, the university aims to nurture young talents with dignity and wisdom, turning them into fine citizens of the region, who will contribute to the prosperity of the people and social progress of Malaysia, China and Southeast Asia as well.

3.3 Holistic development — oriented management

Since its founding, XMUM has paid great attention to cultural integration and localization in Malaysia, its host country. It has maintained a friendly cooperation with the Malaysian government in many fields in HE internationalization. This approach can be as being prevented by effective measures in cross-cultural and international teaching processes, scientific research, extracurricular activities, and relationships with local cultures and different races. For instance, it held, recently, a Chinese debate competition for both local and international students to participate in, which helped promote cross — cultural exchanges during the competition.

XMUM's efficient risk management and response strategies are good examples. Different from the school running at home in China, it's unavoidable for branch campuses overseas to face unpredictable problems and even risks. As a university that actively embraces the rest of the world, XMUM has taken several feasible and practical measures to face the issues. These risks mainly come from several aspects. The first is about education laws and regulations, whose differences require them to be highly vigilant at all times. Secondly, the diversified culture and customs of Malaysia make faculties meet more challenges when setting up new courses. In addition, other risks such as language communication barriers between teachers and students and the flow of funds also trouble the management of XMUM. In order to respond to these uncertainties, XMUM actively communicates with the local education department and adopts an inclusive attitude to obtain feasible solutions. Simultaneously, adjustments have been made to the curriculum of some professional training plans. In addition, it actively learns from the curriculum management of other outstanding universities with overseas campuses, such as the University Nottingham Malaysia and New York University Shanghai, etc. , and takes new measures in teaching as well as



research while integrating its own distinct teaching concepts with local special conditions.

Moreover, its efficacious brand building and increasing international influence are also foresighted. XMUM's brand-building efforts have been instrumental in binding its university brand and enhancing international influence. In order to grow into a distinguished research-oriented university, XMUM has actively established partnerships with various international universities and institutions. For example, it has a close cooperation with Waseda University, Japan's prestigious world's top research university. This initiative helps to enhance its international profile and academic reputation. XMUM has regularly hosted international conferences, seminars, workshops, and other events that have attracted scholars and researchers worldwide. For example, the Conference on Malaysian Chinese Education and Language Inheritance was held at XMUM in 2024, which has marked a significant milestone in global and Malaysian Chinese language research. This and other international events not only provide a forcible platform for academic exchange but also help to position XMUM as a hub for global intellectual discourse.

Its consideration of sustainable development and social responsibility is also important. In order to promote the well-being of the local society, XMUM has dedicated to taking its social responsibility in order to maintain a long — term development. The considered initiatives are reflected in the promotion of industry engagement, active participation in various community services and sustainable practices for a better environment. For instance, cooperating with Xiamen Star TV, XMUM set up studios, in Kuala Lumpur in 2021, to encourage students majoring in advertising and journalism to participate in news practice. Its aim not only helps students acquire professional career experiences but also offers quality assurance for relevant local industries.

“The contemporary strategic plan in post-secondary education serves an integrative and coordinating function (Hinton 2012: 28).” If we look at XMUM's successful IHE management experiences from Hinton's tripartite strategic planning category, as shown in Figure 2, they fit well into the three levels of management, strategically, operationally and tactically, respectively.



Figure 2 Hinton's strategic planning category (ibid.)

In other words, strategic and partnership — oriented management is forward— looking and pioneering, the academic — quality and people — centric management policy is effective, and the holistic development — oriented management feasible.

Well—polished strategies and policies, plus effective operation, will lead to flourishing management in IHE. XMUM's success can be attributed to the above key factors, which include a forward—looking strategic plan and global perspective that guide its operations. This is complemented by active collaboration and partnerships, which foster a dynamic educational environment. A focus on educational quality and innovation ensures that the



institution remains at the forefront of academic excellence. The emphasis on talent cultivation and the recruitment of international faculty enriches the learning experience and enhances global perspectives among students.

Furthermore, XMUM effectively integrates cultural diversity and localizes its practices, which is crucial for an international campus. This approach not only respects the local context but also contributes to the global educational mission. Efficient risk management and response strategies are in place to navigate the challenges inherent in international operations, ensuring the stability and continuity of the institution. The institution's efficacious brand-building and international influence are testaments to its commitment to global recognition and impact.

In addition, XMUM considers sustainable development and social responsibility in its strategic planning, which aligns with the growing importance of these issues in IHE. The author believes that XMUM's experiences in IHE provide valuable insights into the effective operation and management of an international campus, helping shape the development of IHE.

In summary, XMUM stands as a paragon of successful international campus operation and management, offering a comprehensive blueprint for Chinese universities venturing overseas. Its strategic acumen, manifested in forward-looking plans aligned with the B & R Initiative and global partnerships, has not only expanded its footprint but also enhanced China's soft power in Southeast Asia. The unwavering focus on academic quality, underpinned by international teaching standards, innovative pedagogies, and a people-centric approach to talent cultivation, ensures its academic excellence.

XMUM's cultural integration and localization efforts in Malaysia, along with its proactive risk-management strategies, demonstrate its adaptability and resilience in a foreign educational landscape. The institution's efficacious brand-building initiatives and growing international influence, bolstered by high-profile international events, position it as a significant player in global HE.

Moreover, its commitment to sustainable development and social responsibility, which is evident in industry-community engagement, aligns with the evolving imperatives of IHE. These multifaceted foresighted experiences of XMUM provide invaluable insights, guiding other Chinese universities in their IBCs endeavors to achieve educational, cultural and social impact.

4. Conclusion

The article provides an in-depth analysis of XMUM's pioneering experiences as a successful model of IBC operations. Its development journey offers valuable insights into the complexities and opportunities of internationalizing HE. Its success can be attributed to several key factors, including a strategic plan with global initiatives, robust collaboration and partnerships, a commitment to educational quality and innovation, talent cultivation, cultural integration, effective risk management, brand building, and a dedication to sustainable development and social responsibility.

Through the above strategies, XMUM has overcome hardships when integrating China's strategic blueprint of "going out" and "promoting the building of a China-ASEAN community with a shared future". Its practice has greatly promoted the combination of both localization and China's advanced HE concepts in Southeast Asia. Based on XMUM's great achievements, this article can give guidance and practical references for other Chinese

universities in planning and running their IBCs.

This comprehensive analysis of XMUM's efficacious management experiences as a thriving IBC provides a multifaceted perspective on the intricacies and opportunities of IHE. Its journey serves as a beacon for other institutions contemplating global expansion, offering a wealth of insights into the strategic and operational nuances required for success in the international arena.

At the core of its success lies a forward-looking strategic plan that aligns with global initiatives, particularly the B & R Initiative. This alignment has not only broadened its global reach but also significantly contributed to China's soft power in Southeast Asia. The strategic integration of its operations with local Malaysian entities has resulted in a symbiotic relationship that enriches both the educational landscape and the cultural exchange between China and Malaysia.

The robust collaboration and partnerships fostered by XMUM are a testament to its dynamic educational environment. These partnerships, such as the Memorandum of Understanding with the Malaysian Ministry of Education, have been pivotal in developing joint degree programs and research initiatives. They have also solidified their role as a cultural and educational bridge between China and Malaysia, extending their influence to other countries through their international partnerships.

XMUM's unwavering commitment to educational quality and innovation ensures that it remains at the vanguard of academic excellence. The adoption of international teaching standards and innovative pedagogical approaches, like the flipped classroom and virtual reality in engineering courses, has enhanced student engagement and learning outcomes. This focus on innovation is a key differentiator that sets XMUM apart in the competitive landscape of IHE.

The emphasis on talent cultivation and the recruitment of international faculty have enriched the academic environment at XMUM, providing students with a global perspective and a diverse array of scholarly insights. This approach to faculty recruitment and talent development is crucial for preparing students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

Cultural integration and localization are central to XMUM's strategy, reflecting the Malaysian government's approach to internationalization and localization. XMUM's cross-cultural and international teaching processes, scientific research and extracurricular activities have facilitated meaningful interactions with local culture and diverse racial groups, promoting a more inclusive and globally aware student body.

Efficient risk management and response strategies have been essential for XMUM to navigate the challenges inherent in international operations. By actively engaging with local education departments and adopting an inclusive attitude, it has been able to address uncertainties and adapt its curriculum and teaching methods to local conditions, ensuring the stability and continuity of the institution.

XMUM's efficacious brand building and international influence are evident in its partnerships with prestigious universities and its hosting of international conferences and events. These efforts have not only enhanced its global profile but also positioned it as a hub for global intellectual discourse.

Lastly, XMUM's consideration of sustainable development and social responsibility in its strategic planning aligns with the growing importance of these issues in HE. Initiatives such as industry engagement, community service and sustainable practices demonstrate their commitment to contributing to the well-being of local societies and maintaining long-term development.



Both XMU and its IBC, XMUM, have set a good example in IHE, playing a pioneering role in shaping IHE and offering strategic insights. By emulating XMUM's strategy and management experiences, other universities in China can not only enhance their global footprint, but also contribute to the internationalization of HE, strategically, socially and sustainably.

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