Creating a British Higher Educational Ethos in Foreign Universities:

Examples from Egypt

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Recently an increasing number of new universities, colleges of higher education and postgraduate programs have been springing up throughout the world. Some are institutions already existing but refashioned, like those British polytechnics that are now universities. Yet many are entirely new foundations. They are launched for a variety of reasons. The spectrum spans ethical considerations, such as that education is a human right; the political perception that education is vital to national development; the desire of some countries to export their educational systems; private educational entrepreneurship; and universities augmenting their student intake when, for security reasons following the so-called "War on Terror", visas are denied to foreign undergraduates who must therefore be accommodated on offshore campuses.

In this article I shall focus on the creation of new universities in foreign settings. This might mean that those creating the university come from one country or continent and install a duplicate of their own institution in another. Or it could mean that the higher educational system of one culture is introduced into foreign institutions by members of the host culture. There are of course many other variants. But what I shall consider here is implanting the British system of higher education abroad by both British and local staff.

I shall of course be indicating what exactly is meant by a British system of higher education. But rather than seeking to define it directly at this point, I will consider its characteristics and values through my discussion of how to introduce British education into a foreign context. I begin by focusing on the importance of clarity about the nature and purpose of the institution. Then I shall consider the introduction and stabilization of systems for ensuring quality. Paramount, though even more challenging, is the creation of a British higher educational ethos. I shall therefore go on to consider in more detail some of the skills this requires, in the hope that my observations may be useful to those creating, or developing, universities of this kind.

I will be illustrating my points with examples from Egypt. This is not simply because of my personal familiarity with the country, or since it is topical after the so-called Arab Spring. Rather, among many Egyptians reform in education is now increasingly considered crucial to continuing political development. Moreover, the values underlying the ethos of British higher education resonate strongly with the aspirations of the original protesters on Tahrir Square.

That said, let me start with the most important element, after funding, in establishing a university with a British system of higher education in a foreign context: clarity about its nature and purpose. For without such clarity staff might well gain the wrong impression about the university. This produces misleading expectations, leading to disappointment - including to other stakeholders. While it fails to alert all concerned to the skills required to pursue the institution's true objectives.

A number of foreign universities claim to be British, use the word in their name and offer

a British educational system. Yet many are locally owned and governed by national laws. They are, in other words, cultural hybrids. This must be clearly recognized if either of two extreme views of the institution is to be avoided. For on the one hand the university is not purely British. If it were, it might be inoperable in its current context. But nor is it, on the other hand, entirely foreign. This could deprive it of its single greatest market advantage, and impose an ethos so much at variance with that of British higher education that it would be almost impossible to deliver that education.

To operate as if either extreme were the case would be divisive and damaging. A compromise might, of course, be reached. Yet though it could pay lip service to both British and local systems it would still fall short of resolving the matter. Management of the university might be considered a local responsibility, while the academic program would be British. The trouble is that these two elements are interdependent. Many management issues have a direct bearing on the delivery of the academic program. If they are decided according to a local perspective at variance with the ethos of British higher education, they have the potential to undermine it. Management and the academic program simply cannot be separated without harming the organic development of the whole institution.

There is one way in which to be clear about the respect in which the university should be bicultural. It is to be equally clear about the institution's objective. Admittedly this leaves open the question of how that objective is to be achieved.

In the case of Egypt it should not be difficult to be clear about the objective of a hybrid or bicultural university, since their existence reflects Egyptian government policy on higher education. The inspiration for this policy was the Egyptian government's realization that its national universities were failing because of Nasser's unrealizable socialist promise of universal higher education. The number of students had become – and remains - unsustainable. Cairo University is now the size of a small city. Private universities were therefore officially encouraged to set up alternatives, even if they only reached a restricted socio-economic class. They were often foreign. So the British, French and German universities in Egypt were established to advance educational reform through their respective national systems.

This reform is intended not only as a way of diverting a number of students to private universities, but also as a means of providing additional high quality education. This is envisaged as occurring through each of these nations' internationally respected systems of learning, teaching and research. They are to deliver excellence in higher education to the benefit of Egypt. It shows clearly the respect in which they are bicultural.

That said the bicultural character of such a university is actually far from simple. There is a fundamental disparity between what each culture brings to the institution. The British component is an academic system abstracted from UK practice, whereas the foreign component is a pre-existent, continuing and vital national context. A codified series of norms and procedures is being implanted into a live social organism.

How might this foreign implant not only survive but flourish? For even if the host culture were not simply to reject it, as the whale did Jonah, the locally funded private university might

well bring about a damaging sea change. Its foreign educational ethos might subvert the British one in a series of initially small but accumulating and ultimately overwhelming stages. Two elements are required: systems ensuring quality must be put in place from the outset; then, less obviously but even more important, a supporting ethos must be developed, although this inevitably takes time.

Along with its world language, quality systems are among Great Britain's more remarkable exports. In UK higher education these have been developed since the 1980s not only to ensure that government expenditure on universities was justified by the resulting quality of education, but also to implement and maintain standards in institutions newly acquiring the status of universities. The development of quality systems for these purposes has put Britain in an advantageous position for founding new universities, including in foreign contexts.

Ready at hand is a set of quality principles established by Britain's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Although British readers will certainly be familiar with it, the QAA needs introduction to others. It is an independent body funded by UK universities and colleges. It is not an accrediting body, but provides the means to describe academic standards and how they will be implemented and monitored, so that institutions can assure their own quality. Among these standards are benchmarks for each degree area.

There is, of course, a great difference between enunciating principles and embedding them in practice. Three things are necessary not only to install but also to stabilise the quality systems. All are British imports. There needs to be a Head of Quality from the outset. It must be a person with a depth of relevant British experience, responsible for the application of the quality regulations. Then the university would be strongly advised to reach agreement with a leading British university for validation of its degrees. This means it can offer a British degree, possibly as well as a local one, on condition that it demonstrates adherence to QAA standards. This is monitored annually and through a periodic and rigorous revalidation process likely to span a period of seven months. The university would, thirdly, need to set up an annual quality review cycle to ensure, both for its own benefit, and that of the revalidating institution, that it is not only abiding by the relevant norms, but continuously enhancing its implementation of them.

So far, as will doubtless have been noticed, description of the actions taken to introduce British higher education and its quality systems has been impersonal. It is as if principles had merely been plucked from documents, or from that thin air we now call cyberspace, and embedded in an inert body. But implementing them actually requires responsiveness to the situation in which they are being implanted: namely a host culture and the human factor. There are two distinct but closely related reasons for this. It is necessary to encourage the growth of that ethos indispensable to supporting quality, not just as a set of abstract regulations, but as educational values that are meaningful for people. Yet it is also vital to ensure that, far from exciting resistance, albeit passive, from members of the host culture, they engage with that ethos. Not that one dare be as sanguine as to assume they would all be other than cautious, even defensive, at first.

Now although I am suggesting that in implementing a British academic program, as well

as in showing how it can be done with respect to quality, one should view the matter less impersonally, I must go on doing so abstractly just slightly longer when discussing how to sponsor an ethos. For it must be asked what exactly that ethos is, and so identify its principal features. Indeed, given the number of universities that are growing up with significant British elements, it would be a good idea for, say, the British Council, to define a British educational ethos. This could best be done by articulating key principles in three main areas: quality standards, governance and student experience. QAA documentation may be helpful, specifically when and if relevant features of good practice are identified in its institutional audits of collaborative provision. Significant too are the selection criteria that the British Council has on occasion applied to those foreign investors seeking to create a British university abroad. For the criteria have been used to isolate what was seen as that "Britishness" which would be the institution's core identity and hence the feature distinguishing it from other local private universities, be they entirely domestic or foreign to some extent or other.

In the three areas I mention, in the case of Egypt, the descriptors were as follows. With respect to quality there were to be quality assurance mechanisms to ensure standards equal to the British "home" institutions. In governance there should be a dual Egyptian/British Board of Trustees and a credible system for withstanding 'personal influence'. And a student experience should be provided comparable to that in the UK. In addition to these specific items, a strong overarching vision was required from those applying to create the university. For it was considered that without this to aim for, a full-blown teaching and research university, operating at British standards of excellence, would simply not emerge.

It is clear from these descriptors that the approach taken to determining a British ethos was for the university to model itself on British ones, and to ensure that it had done so through relevant mechanisms. Crucially, however, the descriptors fail to provide guidance on how, in the human reality of a foreign institution, this ethos is to be introduced and so successfully sustained as to be permanently equivalent to that in the UK. In fairness it might be said that this is not the role of descriptors. They are simply intended to identify key principles. But it should be added that there seem to be few if any other places where one might find advice on how to create and sustain an ethos, as such, supporting the embedding of British higher education in a foreign context. Attempts to deliver such academic programs are new. It means that there is still only a paucity of digested experience to share. Moreover, it is also the case that an ethos is not only about key principles in specific areas such as quality or governance. It is about values, such as those which inevitably obtrude in the descriptors mentioned above. Thus the mechanisms intended to ensure quality standards and reduce personal influence are fundamentally invoking the values of excellence and integrity. Yet values are notoriously difficult to transfer and inculcate.

A host culture is liable to claim that values such as excellence and integrity are universal. Its members will surely bridle at the suggestion that they need be taught them. This makes the issue of how to deliver a British academic ethos, with its indispensable complex of values, not only all the more difficult but also important, if not urgent. If we do not gain insight into how to

deliver it, the experiment of introducing British higher education outside the UK is likely, at best, to sag to a dismal lowest common denominator of UK university practice and, at worst, to fail.

I therefore propose to sketch some of the ways in which a British ethos can be introduced in a foreign university. Though lest any should think I am on the verge of serving a dish of pie in the sky, let me add that I shall also be taking account of some very real barriers to achieving these objectives. Considerable thought must be devoted to what can be done to address them.

Let me begin with just three of the various core values in the British ethos: clarity, openness and a sense of ownership. I shall show how they can be modeled and gradually transferred as common practice through a fourth value: process. The process I have in mind begins at the top. For that is where an overarching vision needs to be formulated, as required by the descriptor considering it indispensable for a full-blown teaching and research university operating at British standards of excellence. The Board of Trustees must strongly support the vision, embed it in the university's mission and endorse it operationally in a strategy. Start-up universities that are privately funded should, despite the attractions of rhetoric, be clear and unambiguous in devising their strategies about the balance to be struck between volume of student intake and its quality; about the challenges of transferring from a strategy of volume, to one of quality; and, if an original critical mass of students is insisted upon, about what should be the specific timeline for the change. This will of course require consideration of the different and possibly conflicting claims of financial viability and academic standards. Where the institution is not for profit, or predominantly so, the question of financial viability will appropriately be determined by the need to lay foundations over an initial period for a university with relevant UK quality standards. Where the institution is largely directed by a profit motive in the interests of the investors, the mode of reckoning financial viability will be a cause for concern, even potentially of friction, in a British higher educational context.

Ideally, the entire university will contribute to a continuing development of the mission and strategy, if not of the vision. In the case of only recently created universities all three elements must inevitably have the status of a given, provided at the outset by the founders. But whether the institution is new or not, all three need to be fully shared throughout the university. Hence the elements of clarity, openness and sense of ownership mentioned as cardinal values in the British educational ethos. This sharing is a process which can model all the other processes, such as budget and quality review, by which a British university operates. It depends on procedures and enables planning.

This lack of process and planning in some parts of the world is so surprising, indeed disorienting, to Westerners that it is worth reviewing the possible reason for it before returning to the issue at hand: how a university's vision, mission and development strategy might be shared. After all, advancing an ethos surely requires understanding the ethos of the culture into which one is entering.

Let us take the case of Egypt again. It is, as Queen Victoria's Prime Minister Disraeli said of nineteenth century England, two nations. But they are disproportionate. Despite the country's

great total size the nation of its "haves" is remarkably small. It is the group from which the private universities draw their students and, difficult as this may be to believe in Cairo with its traffic and heavily crowded neighbourhoods, it is largely a face-to-face society. People know each other. They have often gone to school together. They are unlikely to change their life circumstances (with the notable exception of Egyptian Christians and Jews who emigrated for religious reasons, or those, including Muslims, fleeing Nasser's policies, and now the social effects of Fundamentalism). So, unlike Westerners, especially Americans, who may live in a different city with a different job and possibly a different spouse several times in a couple of decades, Egyptian "haves" do not repeatedly re-establish or reinvent themselves. This means that they do not need to acquire the capacity to extract themselves from their original situation or to identify what they will require of themselves and of life generally as individuals in a new situation. In this face-to-face society, then, reality tends to be experienced situationally, some might say statically. It is not isolated from its context, submitted to impersonal analysis and viewed as a set of abstract processes to advance planning.

Necessarily simplified, this explanation may offer some insight at least into why, by contrast, it is important to model a process so as to extend a British educational ethos. The process in question is the sharing of the university's vision, mission and development strategy. This means that these statements embodying British aspirations in higher education must make their way from the Board of Trustees to the campus and pass through all the arteries of its academic and administrative support staff who should then feed back their views for incorporation, as relevant, into the next version of the plans. But this can only be done if there is understanding of, and commitment to, these aspirations by such as must provide the momentum for the process. This implies two qualifications. First, since Boards of Trustees tend to meet only a couple of times a year and include individuals who have many other demands on their time, often, in the UK, they need a mechanism to ensure, on a more regular and detailed basis, that their decisions, such as to share the university's aims, are being successfully implemented. A small Directorate Group drawn from the Board and meeting four times a year fulfills this role. Secondly, the senior campus administrators must be chosen to have exactly that understanding, commitment and energy necessary enthusiastically to share and make an increasing reality of the British aspirations endorsed by the Board.

In many countries educational law requires the University President to be a national. This need not be a disadvantage. There are many who have great empathy for British higher education and enthusiasm to see it established for the benefit of their country. So some such individuals who have predominantly local experience may be admirably suitable. But these days there are also likely to be those who have lived and studied in the UK, absorbing its academic ethos by cultural osmosis.

For any President, regardless of the extent of his British experience, there is one major challenge, above all, in an institution with local private investment. It is to remain as free of personal influence as the British Council's descriptors above require of a university itself. Rather, the President needs the clarity of mind and strength of personality to communicate and

uphold on a continuing basis, with regard to whatever issue is at hand, the specific aspect of the British ethos and what would be both the local support for upholding it and the likely damage in contravening it.

In addition to the President, the process of sharing the vision, mission and strategy embodying a British academic ethos needs key individuals, such as deans and heads of department, who have the understanding and commitment to do so. Furthermore, they will support staff in embedding and delivering it. They must also monitor staff success in this, thereby annually completing and renewing the process. It requires a preponderance of people with British experience, as well as unbegrudging, visible acceptance by the investors and President that they are required. For there are clear budgetary implications to importing a significant number of foreigners whose presence without the lead of unequivocal support from the top might well be resented by local staff. Here too there are, however, considerable challenges posed on those many host cultures that confer on seniority an importance unknown - and barely understood - in the West. In some there is a strict hierarchy determining who can be Dean, Vice-Dean, Professor, Head of Department and so on. Furthermore, individuals are expected to defer to each other along vertical lines of authority, making it hard for talented junior staff with ambition and energy to have influence comparable to that which they would enjoy in British or American universities. It also enables some senior staff to stagnate academically. Under such conditions of pyramidic organization it is fatally easy for the entire institution to develop as a collection of separately organized, frequently unconnected, faculties. How, then, can these local elements be responded to so as to promote a British ethos? It can be done by recruitment, staff development and the creation of lateral lines of organization.

It is vital to develop an appropriate strategy to recruit for the key positions identified above those who not only have a depth of relevant British higher educational experience but who also comply with local legislation with regard to degrees and seniority. The word "British" in the last sentence is critical. While individuals from the USA, Canada and Australia are first cousins educationally, and will have much to contribute later, a university which is building a UK ethos in its early years needs those with specific experience and knowledge of that ethos. This does not include academics who have only studied for a British doctorate since they are not acquainted with the undergraduate program or the student experience. Again, staff must be of the same quality as those at British universities. So if they are to be recruited it requires, in addition to appropriate advertising, the assistance of validating UK universities and strenuous British networking by British staff already employed. There should be an attractive and competitive package of salary and benefits. A full domestic and professional orientation program must be offered with continuing support in these areas. Careful consideration must be paid to the elements that will enhance retention. These include opportunities for research and professional development. It is essential, too, for academic and pension links with Britain to be maintained for those staff who will eventually return to the UK.

A further way of promoting a British ethos, despite the challenge of some local conventions, is through staff development. Changes in attitude will be slow but must advance.

Thus a full program of UK staff development is indispensable to guide staff in fostering another of British higher education's core values: independent learning. This can be done through engaging a British staff development advisor to deliver workshops and projects on a schedule of planned visits. Success depends on increasingly moving from central provision of such sessions to providing those which address the issues specific to a given faculty or department on its own terrain. And the reluctance of staff to engage can be overcome in a number of ways. They may well be receptive if a certificate of attendance is provided. In some cases it is required in applications to the local Ministry of Higher Education for promotion to full professor. The staff development program can also be required for a probation period and even beyond. In fact, in the case of staff development the local prescriptive concept of authority, where it exists, can be used to advantage insofar as the line manager has the authority simply to decree that British quality standards and procedures in learning and teaching will be mechanically followed until such time as the staff development has enabled department and faculty members to do so with more sympathy and understanding. In demanding this, line managers potentially have a mechanism that may not normally exist locally. It is an annual Personal Development Review, of which student evaluations and peer observation of teaching play a part.

Lateral links can also offset local assumptions that contrast with a UK higher educational ethos. The model is Pro-Vice-Chancellors in British universities. In the UK there is generally one for each of the following three areas: Learning and Teaching, Research and Enterprise. Their remit cuts transversally across the institution and grants them the authority to ensure that deans implement relevant university policy. This prevents faculties from developing in isolation and veering away from institutional objectives. It counterbalances the impact of hierarchy by making academic staff accountable on given matters not merely to their superiors in the faculty or department. It prevents even senior professors from failing to comply. And the means by which the Pro-Vice-Chancellors may advance and monitor the development of the policies for which they are responsible is through coordinators chosen from the faculty's academic staff.

Here, then, are some of the ways in which the assumptions of the host culture can be met in furthering a British higher educational ethos. It is an ethos which should be implicit in the University's vision, mission and strategy and which a process should be devised to share and so advance throughout the institution. For the process itself models core values such as clarity, openness and a sense of ownership. And an understanding of, and commitment to, this underpinning system of values is indispensable even where strict quality measures have been introduced in a university delivering a British academic program.

I conclude with caveats. There are three. First, I have presented an ideal picture. All of its elements may not exist simultaneously in a privately owned university. One or other link in the chain of the process I have described above may always be weak or become so unexpectedly. Development will have to advance in whatever areas remain intact, with care to prevent the missing element from distorting the whole. This means one must learn to operate under conditions that are continuously imperfect and uncertain. One must also retain an inner compass regarding the University's purpose, no matter how it is overwritten, modified, or simply ignored

by those entering at whatever point a link in the chain has broken. Doing so requires a strong stomach, energy in maintaining momentum, and avoidance of the Slough of Despond. Above all one must have the emotional clarity and strength of mind to see through the disagreeable personalization into which disputes over purpose can deteriorate in some countries, and understand that one is not, as a person, necessarily the target, but rather merely perceived as a temporary obstacle in an issue of control.

Secondly, it is important to avoid an "Us-Them" mentality. This is corrosive and prevents one from appreciating just how many local members of academic staff share the mission. This is especially the case with staff members who have studied abroad, or who have acquired the more modern, less hierarchical management approaches. Their perspective may be closer to one's own than that of some of one's compatriots who have either gone native in a grotesque parody of some features of local culture, or who have decided to be all things to all men. Most refreshing is the eagerness of the best students for a British ethos. They are the best reminder that the university is all one.

Finally, one must never forget who holds the cards if a university aspires to have a British academic program. Regardless of choreographed assertions of cordial relations, or protestations at not having one's institutional independence or cultural context adequately appreciated, there is no doubt that the university is ultimately bound to respond to coldly calculated British pressure. It will come from revalidating UK universities, from companies assessing whether they should fund or refund an activity, or from governmental and cultural stakeholders reviewing whether they wish to continue providing high profile support. Each of them has the capacity to reinforce what is positive, correct what is awry and bring about beneficial development with reference to the avowed objective.

And what is that objective? Caveats notwithstanding, it is to do something supremely worthwhile. It is to offer young people the opportunity to acquire British higher education's cardinal value: independence of a trained mind.