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"American" as Intercultural Brokerage: A Typology of Country-Branded Higher Education, Local Adaptation and Soft Power

Abstract

Over the past century and a half, and with particular acceleration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, universities outside the United States have adopted "American," "United States," or closely related American identity markers in their institutional names. This article examines that phenomenon not simply as branding, commerce, mimicry or soft power, but as a project in intercultural brokerage. The central argument is that the "American" university abroad occupies a mediating space between American academic culture and local or regional educational, political, economic and social needs. At its strongest, the model translates liberal education, student-centered pedagogy, English-medium instruction, institutional autonomy, professional preparation and accreditation culture into local contexts without simply reproducing the United States abroad. At its weakest, it reduces "American" to a marketable sign of prestige, mobility or modernity. The article proposes a five-part typology of Americanness in global higher education: legacy/institutional Americanness, nation-building Americanness, operating-system Americanness, market Americanness and nominal-symbolic American-ness. It also distinguishes country-branded American universities from branch campuses, joint universities, microcampuses and licensure-pipeline institutions. The article concludes that the "American" label is best understood as a polyvalent intercultural signifier: its meaning is produced through the relationship between institutional practice, local aspiration, global mobility, quality assurance and the changing symbolic position of the United States in world affairs.

Keywords: *American universities abroad, country-branded universities, interculturalism, higher education branding, soft power, transnational education, Northern Cyprus, academic accreditation*

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"Amerikan"ın Kültürlerarası Arabuluculuk Rolü: Ülke Markalı Yüksek Öğretim, Yerel Adaptasyon ve Yumuşak Güç Tipolojisi

Öz

Geçtiğimiz bir buçuk yüzyıl boyunca, özellikle de yirminci yüzyılın sonlarında ve yirmi birinci yüzyılın başlarında hız kazanarak, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri dışındaki üniversiteler kurumsal adlarında "Amerikan", "Amerika Birleşik Devletleri" ya da bunlarla yakından ilişkili Amerikan kimlik belirleyicilerini benimsemiştir. Bu makale, söz konusu olguyu sadece bir markalaşma, ticari faaliyet, taklit ya da yumuşak güç olarak değil, kültürlerarası arabuluculuk projesi olarak incelemektedir. Ana tez, yurtdışındaki "Amerikan" üniversitelerin, Amerikan akademik kültürü ile yerel veya bölgesel eğitimsel, siyasi, ekonomik ve sosyal ihtiyaçlar arasında bir arabuluculuk alanı işgal ettiği yönündedir. En güçlü haliyle bu model, liberal eğitimi, öğrenci merkezli pedagojiyi, İngilizce eğitim dilini, kurumsal özerkliği, mesleki hazırlığı ve akreditasyon kültürünü, ABD'yi yurtdışında basitçe kopyalamadan yerel bağlamlara aktarmaktadır. En zayıf haliyle ise "Amerikalı" kavramını, prestij, hareketlilik veya modernliğin pazarlanabilir bir sembolüne indirger. Makale, küresel yükseköğretimde "Amerikalı olma" kavramına ilişkin beş bölümden oluşan bir tipoloji önermektedir: miras/kurumsal Amerikalı olma, ulus inşa edici Amerikalı olma, işletim sistemi Amerikalı olma, piyasa Amerikalı olma ve nominal-sembolik Amerikalı olma. Ayrıca, ülke markalı Amerikan üniversitelerini şube kampüslerinden, ortak üniversitelerden, mikro kampüslerden ve lisans verme sürecine yönelik kurumlardan ayırmaktadır. Makale, "Amerikan" etiketinin en iyi şekilde çok anlamlı bir kültürlerarası gösterge olarak anlaşılabileceği sonucuna varmaktadır: bu etiketin anlamı, kurumsal uygulamalar, yerel beklentiler, küresel hareketlilik, kalite güvencesi ve dünya meselelerinde ABD'nin değişen sembolik konumu arasındaki ilişki yoluyla ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: yurtdışındaki Amerikan üniversiteleri, ülke markalı üniversiteler, kültürlerarasılık, yükseköğretim markalaşması, yumuşak güç, ulusötesi eğitim, Kuzey Kıbrıs, akademik akreditasyon

Introduction

What does it mean for a university in Beirut, Cairo, Sharjah, Girne, Central Asia, Nigeria or Iraq to call itself “American”? The question is not merely nominal. It is not only a matter of institutional naming, clever marketing, imported symbolism or educational fashion. It is a question about the movement of academic cultures across borders and about what happens when one educational language is translated into another social world.

The “American” university abroad is neither simply American nor simply local. It is a contact zone. It carries a name associated with the United States, but it operates within another country, another legal system, another cultural field, another labor market and another set of social expectations. Its meaning, therefore, cannot be determined by name alone. Some institutions bearing the American name are historically rooted in missionary, philanthropic or liberal educational projects and have developed deep institutional cultures over many decades. Others are nation-building institutions founded in transitional, post-conflict or reform-oriented societies. Others adopt American curricular, accreditation and pedagogical practices for practical reasons related to employability, professional preparation and international recognition. Still others use “American” mainly as a commercial sign, selling the promise of mobility, English, modernity and global opportunity. Finally, some use the label in a largely symbolic manner, with only limited integration of American academic practice.

This diversity is the problem the present article addresses. The “American” name in global higher education does not refer to a single institutional reality. It names a spectrum of meanings, practices and aspirations. It can point to a real academic tradition, a liberal arts curriculum, a quality assurance regime, an English-language platform, a business model, a soft-power project, a student-recruitment strategy or a loosely defined aspiration toward international status. In some cases, these meanings coexist. In others, one meaning overwhelms the rest.

The article argues that the most productive way to understand the phenomenon is through the lens of interculturalism. By interculturalism, I do not mean the mere coexistence of cultures within the same institution. Nor do I mean a simple celebration of diversity. I mean an active process of mediation, translation and negotiated practice through which an institution brokers understanding between American-derived academic culture and the local or regional culture in which it operates. The American university abroad becomes an intercultural institution when it does more than import a name, more than sell a brand and more than imitate external forms. It becomes intercultural when it translates academic values into local realities, negotiates difference without erasing it and creates a space in which students, faculty, administrators and communities learn to move between cultural worlds.

This argument matters for several reasons. First, the American university abroad has become a significant phenomenon in international higher education. Long's work on global American higher education has shown the extent of American higher education beyond the United States, including independent American universities abroad, branch campuses, joint universities, microcampuses and institutions linked to U.S. accreditation or academic practice. Second, the branding of higher education has become a major feature of the global educational marketplace, where universities increasingly compete through reputation, identity, rankings, symbolic capital and promises of employability. Third, the relationship between American education and American soft power has become more complicated. American-style universities abroad may generate attraction to American education, English, professional opportunity and liberal learning, but this does not automatically translate into support for U.S. foreign policy or even admiration for the United States as a state. Fourth, in regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and Northern Cyprus, international higher education is deeply connected to economic development, international student mobility, institutional legitimacy and the desire to occupy a meaningful place in global educational circuits.

The article, therefore, proposes a typology of Americanness in global higher education. The typology does not rank institutions morally. It does not assume that older institutions are always better, that commercial institutions are always empty or that American forms are inherently superior to local forms. Rather, it asks a more specific question: what kind of Americanness is being claimed, performed and operationalized? Is American identity historical, curricular, pedagogical, political, economic, symbolic or merely promotional? The answer varies across cases.

The argument proceeds in five parts. First, the article reviews relevant scholarship on academic branding, country-branded universities, American universities abroad, internationalization and soft power. Second, it defines the methodological logic of the typology. Third, it presents five types of Americanness: legacy/institutional, nation-building, operating-system, market and nominal-symbolic. Fourth, it interprets the phenomenon as intercultural brokerage rather than simple branding or soft power. Fifth, it considers implications for regions such as Northern Cyprus, where higher education, internationalization, recognition, branding and local development intersect in especially visible ways.

Literature Review: Branding, Internationalization and the American University Abroad

The literature relevant to this topic lies at the intersection of higher education branding, internationalization, country-branded universities, transnational education, intercultural competence and soft power. No single body of scholarship is sufficient by itself. Branding scholarship explains why the name matters. Internationalization scholarship explains why universities cross borders and why institutions seek global visibility. Work on American universities abroad explains the historical and institutional specificity of the American case. Intercultural scholarship helps explain what these institutions do when they function well. Soft-power theory explains why states and societies care about them.

Academic Branding and the University as Symbolic Institution

Universities have always had identities, but the contemporary university increasingly works within a global economy of reputation. The name, logo, accreditation, ranking position, campus architecture, language of instruction and institutional narrative all become part of a larger brand ecology. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) identified higher education marketing as an expanding field, especially as universities respond to competition, market choice and international student recruitment. Melewar and Akel (2005) similarly examined corporate identity in higher education, noting that universities communicate identity through names, symbols, internal culture, external messaging and stakeholder relationships. Biagioli and Sunder (2022) place the matter in sharper conceptual terms by examining the university brand as part of a global economy of distinction, where excellence, prestige and symbolic differentiation become institutional assets.

Within this larger branding environment, the word “American” functions as a powerful educational sign. It may evoke practical associations: English-medium instruction, credit-hour systems, general education, student-centered pedagogy, professional preparation, institutional flexibility, U.S. accreditation and mobility into American graduate schools or labor markets. It may also evoke ideological associations: freedom of inquiry, liberal education, democracy, civic engagement, critical thinking and openness. Finally, it may evoke consumer associations: prestige, cosmopolitanism, employability, upward mobility and access to a global middle-class future.

Yet the American label is not stable. It is not owned by any single institution, state agency or accreditor. It is used by old missionary-founded institutions, newer liberal arts universities, private career-oriented universities, offshore medical schools, proprietary ventures, international branch campuses and symbolic institutions with limited American academic content. The brand, therefore, requires classification. The same word can perform different institutional work.

Country-Branded Universities and Transnational Education

The phrase “country-branded university” is useful because it situates American universities abroad within a broader phenomenon. A country-branded university uses a national name or national identity marker to claim a relationship with another educational culture. The American case is distinctive, but not unique. German, British, French, European, Canadian and international labels also circulate in global higher education. These names are not decorative; they make claims about academic standards, cultural orientation, quality, mobility and legitimacy.

Country-branded universities differ from ordinary internationalized universities. A university can recruit international students, teach in English or participate in exchange agreements without naming itself after another country. A country-branded university makes the foreign reference central to institutional identity. It announces that its

academic self-understanding is mediated through another educational tradition. In that sense, it is intercultural from its inception, even when it is commercially motivated. The name places the institution in relation to at least two cultural worlds: the country invoked by the brand and the society in which the institution actually operates.

Country-branded universities also differ from international branch campuses. A branch campus is an extension of a parent institution. Its legitimacy derives from the home university whose name, curriculum and degree-granting authority it carries. By contrast, many "American" universities abroad are independent institutions. They may be U.S.-accredited, affiliated with U.S. institutions, inspired by American models or historically founded by American actors, but they are not necessarily branches of American universities. This distinction matters because independent American universities abroad must construct Americanness rather than simply inherit it from a parent campus.

American Universities Abroad

The literature on American universities abroad has developed significantly in recent years. Purinton and Skaggs (2017) brought together institutional leaders and scholars to examine independent transnational American and liberal arts universities around the world. Their work emphasizes that these institutions are not merely copies of U.S. universities. They operate in complex cultural, political and institutional environments and must bridge local context with American or liberal arts educational models. Long (2018, 2020, 2023) has further developed this field by mapping American higher education outside the United States and distinguishing among independent American universities abroad, branch campuses, joint institutions, microcampuses and institutions linked to U.S. accreditation. His work is particularly important because it demonstrates that the phenomenon is larger, more varied and more historically layered than casual observers assume.

Long's discussion of "coattail riders" is especially relevant to the branding question. Older and more institutionally grounded American universities abroad may worry that newer or less academically substantive institutions dilute the American brand. The concern is not simply competitive. It is reputational. When the same label is used by institutions with very different histories, quality standards and missions, the meaning of the brand becomes unstable. This instability supports the need for typology. Without classification, the American university abroad becomes either romanticized as educational diplomacy or dismissed as marketing. Neither response is adequate.

Internationalization and Intercultural Competence

Internationalization scholarship provides another necessary frame. Knight's widely used definition of internationalization describes the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education (Knight, 2004). This definition is helpful because it does not reduce internationalization to student mobility or institutional expansion. It includes purpose,

function and delivery. It also includes the intercultural dimension, which is often mentioned but not always sufficiently developed.

The American university abroad can be read as a particular form of internationalization: not only the internationalization of a local institution, and not only the external projection of American education, but a hybrid institutional form that requires intercultural negotiation. The work of Byram (1997), Bennett (1986, 2017) and Deardorff (2006) helps clarify this point. Intercultural competence involves knowledge, attitudes, skills, interpretation, interaction, adaptation and critical awareness. It is not achieved merely by placing students from different national backgrounds in the same classroom. Nor is it achieved by using English as the language of instruction. It requires structured encounter, reflective pedagogy, institutional support and the capacity to mediate among different norms.

When applied to American universities abroad, this means that Americanness should not be measured only by accreditation or curriculum. It should also be measured by the institution's capacity to broker understanding between educational cultures. Does the institution teach students how to think across cultural frameworks? Does it adapt American-style pedagogy to local histories and social realities? Does it prepare students to inhabit both local responsibility and global mobility? Does it create genuine dialogue between imported academic forms and indigenous or regional knowledge? These questions move the discussion beyond brand authenticity toward intercultural performance.

Soft Power and Its Limits

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power remains relevant because American universities abroad have often been understood as instruments of attraction. The logic is familiar: if students are educated in American-style institutions, they may develop favorable attitudes toward American culture, language, educational norms or political values. Bertelsen (2012) applies this logic to institutions such as the American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo, while also noting the limits of the model. American universities abroad may generate attraction to American education, liberal norms and elite networks without generating support for unpopular U.S. foreign policies. This distinction is essential.

The soft-power frame is, therefore, useful, but incomplete. It tends to view the university from the perspective of the state or international relations. The intercultural frame views the university from the perspective of educational practice. A university may serve soft power, but that is not the whole of its meaning. It may also serve local capacity-building, social mobility, professional formation, intercultural understanding, regional modernization or personal transformation. In some cases, these functions overlap. In other cases, they diverge. A student may admire an American-style university while rejecting American foreign policy. A host society may value American accreditation while

resisting American political influence. An institution may use American academic structures while producing graduates deeply rooted in local or regional identity.

Thus, the question is not whether American universities abroad produce soft power. The better question is: what kinds of relationships do they broker, and for whom?

Methodological Note: Reading Americanness as Institutional Practice

This article is conceptual and typological. It does not claim to provide a statistical study of all American-named institutions abroad. Rather, it proposes a framework for interpreting the variety of institutions that use American identity markers in higher education outside the United States. The typology is based on comparative reading of institutional histories, missions, governance structures, accreditation claims, curricular models, ownership patterns, regional roles and scholarly discussions of American universities abroad.

The central analytic question is: what kind of Americanness does the institution enact? The answer cannot be derived from the institutional name alone. It must be read through several indicators:

1. **Founding history:** Was the institution founded by American missionaries, philanthropists, educators, local governments, entrepreneurs, U.S.-linked agencies or private investors?
2. **Governance:** Is the institution non-profit, proprietary, state-supported, locally governed, independently chartered or directly linked to a U.S. parent institution?
3. **Accreditation and quality assurance:** Does the institution hold U.S. regional accreditation, programmatic accreditation, local accreditation, international accreditation or no meaningful external validation?
4. **Curriculum and pedagogy:** Does it use liberal arts education, general education, credit-hour structures, student-centered learning, professional schools, English-medium instruction or American-style assessment?
5. **Faculty and academic culture:** Does it recruit internationally, employ U.S.-trained faculty, support academic freedom, cultivate research and encourage critical inquiry?
6. **Market positioning:** Does it present the American label as a pathway to employment, international mobility, U.S. graduate study, licensure, migration or prestige?
7. **Intercultural function:** Does it broker understanding between American-derived academic forms and local or regional culture, or does it merely superimpose foreign symbols?

These indicators allow for a more careful typology. They also prevent the analysis from collapsing into praise or criticism. An institution may be commercially motivated but academically serious. It may be locally governed but strongly American in curriculum. It

may be historically American but deeply indigenized. It may be symbolically American but practically local. The typology below is, therefore, not a ladder of virtue. It is a map of institutional forms.

A Five-Part Typology of Americanness in Global Higher Education

Type One: Legacy or Institutional Americanness

Legacy or institutional Americanness refers to institutions whose American identity is historically deep, organizationally embedded and academically substantive. These institutions often began in the nineteenth or early twentieth century through missionary, philanthropic or educational initiatives. Over time, many became independent, regionally significant institutions with strong local roots. Examples include the American University of Beirut, the American University in Cairo, Lebanese American University and the American University of Paris.

Their Americanness is not limited to name. It is expressed through governance, curriculum, liberal education, English-medium instruction, independent boards, international faculty, alumni networks, accreditation histories and a long-standing commitment to academic standards associated with American higher education. At the same time, these institutions are not simply American enclaves. They have been shaped by the societies in which they operate. AUB is not merely an American institution in Lebanon; it is also a Lebanese, Arab, Mediterranean and global institution. AUC is not merely an American institution in Egypt; it is also a Cairo institution, an Egyptian institution and a regional intellectual actor.

This type demonstrates the intercultural thesis most clearly. Legacy institutions are not successful because they export America unchanged. They are successful when they indigenize, translate and sustain an academic culture that remains recognizable as American in some respects while becoming locally meaningful. Their graduates often inhabit multiple worlds: local, regional, global, Anglophone, professional and civic. Their institutional identities are, therefore, layered rather than singular.

This type also shows why the phrase “authentic Americanness” must be used carefully. The authenticity of these institutions does not lie in reproducing the United States. It lies in the durability of their academic culture and in their ability to mediate between American-derived educational values and local intellectual life. In this sense, legacy Americanness is not simply inherited. It is continually remade.

Type Two: Nation-Building Americanness

Nation-building Americanness appears in institutions founded in societies undergoing transition, reconstruction, reform or post-conflict reorientation. In these cases, the American model is adopted not only for prestige but as a symbol of civic renewal,

institutional modernization, democratic aspiration or national development. Examples include the American University of Central Asia, the American University of Armenia, the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, the American University of Afghanistan and related institutions established in politically fragile or reform-oriented contexts.

The American label here functions as an aspiration toward a different kind of educational and civic order. It may signal openness, liberal education, leadership development, civic responsibility, gender inclusion, academic freedom or post-conflict reconstruction. These institutions often operate under difficult conditions. They may rely on external support, local philanthropy, international donors, U.S.-linked networks or host-government cooperation. Their stability may be vulnerable to geopolitical change.

The American University of Afghanistan illustrates the promise and fragility of this type. It was established as part of a broader project of educational reconstruction and civic formation. Its mission was never simply to sell an American degree. It sought to prepare Afghan women and men for leadership, public service and national rebuilding. Yet its physical operation became vulnerable when the political order changed. Its continuation through online education and exile-like arrangements demonstrates both the resilience and vulnerability of nation-building Americanness.

Interculturally, this type is especially complex. It can be emancipatory when it opens educational space for students excluded by local systems, particularly women and marginalized groups. It can also be politically vulnerable when it is perceived as too closely aligned with U.S. power. Its success depends on whether it can broker American-derived academic ideals into local legitimacy. If it remains externally imposed, it is fragile. If it becomes locally owned while retaining its reformist educational purpose, it can become transformative.

Type Three: Operating-System Americanness

Operating-system Americanness refers to institutions that adopt American academic structures, accreditation models, curricular formats and pedagogical practices for practical educational purposes. The term “operating system” is used deliberately. In these institutions, American identity is not necessarily historical or ideological. It is functional. It describes how the institution organizes teaching, credits, programs, assessment, quality assurance and professional preparation.

Examples include American University of Sharjah, American University of Kuwait, American University of Ras Al Khaimah and similar institutions in the Gulf and other regions. These universities often emphasize business, engineering, information technology, architecture, communication, health sciences and other professional fields. Their Americanness may be expressed through U.S.-style curricula, accreditation by bodies such as ABET or AACSB, English-medium instruction, general education requirements, student services and employability-oriented pedagogy.

This type should not be dismissed as shallow. In many contexts, operating-system Americanness may be precisely what students and societies need: transparent credits, transferable qualifications, professional standards, applied learning, student-centered instruction and international recognition. The institution does not need to be historically missionary-founded or ideologically liberal in order to make a real educational contribution.

Yet this type also raises questions. If Americanness becomes primarily a system of delivery, what happens to the deeper civic and humanistic dimensions of American liberal education? Is critical thinking reduced to a graduate attribute? Is student-centered learning reduced to classroom technique? Is accreditation treated as academic culture or merely as external validation? The strength of operating-system Americanness lies in its practicality. Its weakness lies in the possibility that academic form may be detached from academic ethos.

Interculturally, operating-system institutions succeed when they adapt American structures to local educational needs without treating local culture as a problem to be overcome. They fail when they imagine modernization as simple Americanization. The better model is translation: professional standards and academic systems are imported, but they are interpreted within local moral, linguistic, social and economic contexts.

Type Four: Market Americanness

Market Americanness refers to institutions that use the American name primarily as a commercial and reputational asset. These institutions may still provide real education, and some may be legitimate within their local systems, but their American identity is substantially tied to student recruitment, tuition value, brand visibility and market differentiation. Examples may include some private universities in the Gulf, Mediterranean, Caribbean and other regions, including institutions whose promotional language emphasizes American style, global opportunity, transferability and employability more than institutional history or liberal education.

In this type, “American” works as a consumer signal. It promises that students are buying access to something larger than a local degree: English, prestige, international culture, modern facilities, professional mobility and perhaps a pathway toward the United States or other Anglophone systems. In emerging higher education markets, such symbolic value can command tuition premiums and attract students from regional middle classes seeking upward mobility.

The offshore medical school sector represents a specific sub-type of market Americanness. Institutions with “American” in their names in the Caribbean and elsewhere often market themselves as routes toward U.S. medical licensing, residency and professional practice. Here, the brand is not merely vague prestige. It is tied to a concrete pathway: preparation for U.S. examinations, clinical rotations and professional

mobility. This is licensure-pipeline Americanness, a more specific form of market Americanness.

The problem with market Americanness is not that it involves commerce. All contemporary universities operate within economic realities. The problem arises when the brand outruns the substance. If the American label promises quality, mobility or recognition that the institution cannot deliver, then the brand becomes ethically questionable. If it uses American symbolism without academic transparency, then it risks exploiting students' aspirations. If recruitment agents or promotional materials overstate accreditation, recognition, employability or migration possibilities, then market Americanness becomes not intercultural brokerage but symbolic extraction.

Still, market Americanness may also perform a real intercultural function when responsibly managed. It may make international education accessible to students who cannot study in the United States. It may create English-medium professional opportunities in regions where such opportunities are limited. It may expose students to different academic expectations and social worlds. The issue is not whether the institution has commercial motivations. The issue is whether commercial promise is matched by academic delivery and intercultural responsibility.

Type Five: Nominal-Symbolic Americanness

Nominal-symbolic Americanness is the thinnest form of the phenomenon. In this type, "American" functions mainly as a name, image or generalized aspiration. The institution may have limited U.S. accreditation, limited American curricular structure, limited faculty connection to American higher education and limited evidence of American-style academic culture. English may be partial. Programs may be locally structured. Governance may be opaque. The American label may appear primarily in promotional materials, architecture, slogans or naming.

This type is not automatically fraudulent. Some young institutions begin symbolically and later develop substance. In some contexts, "American" may mean little more than modern, international, English-medium or professionally oriented. The problem is analytic rather than moral: the label tells us very little unless supported by practice.

Nominal-symbolic Americanness demonstrates why the American label should be understood as polyvalent rather than fixed. It can mean deep institutional inheritance, reformist aspiration, academic operating system, market signal or symbolic horizon. In the nominal-symbolic form, the label points less to the United States than to an imagined future: modern campus, international students, global jobs, English-speaking confidence and escape from local educational limitations.

Interculturally, this type is weak unless it develops mechanisms of real mediation. A name alone does not broker cultures. A logo does not create intercultural competence. English-medium instruction does not automatically create global understanding. The nominal-

symbolic institution becomes more than symbolic only when it builds curriculum, faculty culture, student services, quality assurance and community engagement around real intercultural learning.

Branch Campuses, Joint Universities and Microcampuses: Related but Distinct Forms

The typology above concerns institutions that claim Americanness as part of their identity. It must be distinguished from other forms of transnational higher education.

An international branch campus is a physical campus abroad operated by, or closely tied to, a parent university in another country. NYU Abu Dhabi, Texas A&M University at Qatar, Carnegie Mellon Qatar and similar institutions derive their identity from the U.S. parent institution. Their Americanness is, therefore, not independent. It is delegated, extended or franchised from a home campus.

International joint universities represent another form. These are institutions created through cooperation between U.S. and host-country partners, often with separate legal identity. Duke Kunshan University and similar institutions are not simply American universities abroad, nor are they merely local universities. They are negotiated institutional hybrids.

Microcampuses, dual-degree programs and twinning arrangements are still different. They may allow students to earn U.S.-recognized credits or degrees while studying partly or wholly outside the United States, but they may not create a full American-branded institution.

These distinctions matter because the intercultural work differs in each case. A branch campus must translate the parent university into a local environment. An independent American university abroad must construct its own legitimacy. A joint university must balance two institutional authorities. A microcampus must manage curricular alignment across sites. All are intercultural, but not in the same way.

American as Intercultural Brokerage

The central claim of this article is that the American university abroad should be understood as an institution of intercultural brokerage. Branding, commerce, accreditation and soft power are real, but they are not sufficient. The more fundamental question is whether the institution mediates between American academic culture and local or regional culture in a way that produces understanding, capacity and meaningful educational formation.

Intercultural brokerage has at least six dimensions.

First, it is **linguistic**. English-medium instruction is not only a technical choice. It places students in a global academic language while also requiring them to negotiate identity, expression and local belonging. The institution must help students use English without alienating them from local languages and cultural worlds.

Second, it is **pedagogical**. American-style education often emphasizes discussion, questioning, student participation, office hours, continuous assessment and critical thinking. These practices may challenge students who come from more hierarchical, examination-driven or memorization-based systems. The institution must broker the transition without insulting prior educational cultures.

Third, it is **civic**. Many American-style institutions speak of leadership, service, responsibility, ethics and citizenship. These ideals must be translated into local civic realities. Civic education in Beirut, Cairo, Sharjah, Girne, Kabul or Sulaimani cannot simply reproduce U.S. civic language. It must become meaningful within local histories, constraints and possibilities.

Fourth, it is **professional**. American academic models often promise employability, internships, applied learning and career preparation. The institution must connect global professional norms with local labor markets. Otherwise, it risks producing graduates trained for opportunities that do not exist or credentials that are not recognized as expected.

Fifth, it is **epistemic**. The strongest American universities abroad do not merely import knowledge. They produce knowledge from their location. They allow American academic forms to encounter Arab, Turkish, Mediterranean, African, Central Asian, South Asian or local intellectual traditions. They become sites where knowledge is not only transferred but re-situated.

Sixth, it is **ethical**. Students and families often invest heavily in American-branded education. They do so with hopes of mobility, dignity, employment and a better life. The institution, therefore, has an obligation to be transparent about accreditation, recognition, transferability, employment outcomes and the actual meaning of its American claim.

This intercultural-brokerage model helps move the discussion beyond a false choice. The American university abroad is not either noble educational diplomacy or cynical branding. It can be both, neither or something in between. Its real value depends on whether it can transform the American label into responsible educational practice.

Soft Power Reconsidered

The soft-power interpretation remains important, but it must be reframed. American universities abroad may contribute to U.S. soft power by increasing familiarity with American academic norms, English-language education, liberal values and professional

networks. However, this does not mean that graduates become uncritical admirers of the United States. Nor should that be the goal of serious education.

In fact, if American-style education works properly, it may produce graduates who are more critical, not less. They may admire American academic freedom while criticizing American foreign policy. They may value liberal education while rejecting cultural domination. They may use English for global mobility while remaining deeply committed to local or national identity. This is not a failure of soft power. It is evidence that education cannot be reduced to propaganda.

The intercultural model is, therefore, more educationally honest than the soft-power model. It recognizes that students are not passive recipients of American influence. They interpret, accept, reject, adapt and localize what they encounter. The university is not a pipeline of influence; it is a field of interactivity. Within that field, American forms meet local agency.

This is also why American universities abroad may remain prestigious even when U.S. state power declines or American foreign policy becomes unpopular. The value of the institution can become decoupled from the image of the United States. AUB, AUC or other established institutions may be respected not because students love American policy, but because the institutions have become locally embedded centers of academic quality. The brand survives when it becomes more than brand.

Northern Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean Relevance

The topic has particular relevance for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the wider Eastern Mediterranean. Northern Cyprus is a higher education society in an unusually concentrated form. Universities are central to its economy, demography, international visibility and relationship to the outside world. International students from Turkey, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and other regions encounter Northern Cyprus as both educational destination and intercultural space. In this environment, institutional names, accreditation claims, English-medium programs, international partnerships and brand identities matter intensely.

Girne American University and the American University of Cyprus are especially relevant cases because they place “American” directly within the Northern Cyprus higher education landscape. GAU, founded in 1985, is the older and more established example, while AUC represents a more recent local articulation of the same country-branded phenomenon. Together, they show that “American” in Northern Cyprus is not merely an imported label, but part of a wider regional economy of educational aspiration, international student recruitment, English-medium instruction and institutional positioning.

Northern Cyprus also brings the ethical questions into sharper focus. In a context shaped by political non-recognition, international student recruitment, accreditation complexity

and economic dependence on higher education, the responsibilities of branding are substantial. The American label can help institutions signal quality and international orientation. It can also create expectations that must be carefully managed. Students need transparency regarding recognition, transfer, accreditation, employability and mobility. In such a context, intercultural brokerage is not only a pedagogical ideal. It is a public responsibility.

The Eastern Mediterranean also has a long history of educational encounter: missionary schools, liberal arts colleges, language institutions, religious schools, colonial and postcolonial universities, national universities and contemporary private institutions. American-branded education in this region should, therefore, be read historically, not only commercially. It participates in a much longer story of cultural mediation, educational borrowing, identity negotiation and regional modernity.

For a TRNC-based journal, the topic is, therefore, not external. It is locally meaningful. Northern Cyprus is both a participant in and observer of the global American-brand phenomenon. It offers a setting in which the promises and tensions of international higher education are visible: aspiration and vulnerability, opportunity and over-promotion, global language and local reality, educational commerce and intercultural encounter.

Discussion: From Brand to Responsibility

The five-part typology suggests that “American” in global higher education should not be accepted at face value. It must be read institutionally. What is the history behind the name? What academic practices support it? What accreditation or quality assurance mechanisms validate it? What does it promise students? What kind of cultural translation does it perform? What relationship does it cultivate with the local society?

The typology also suggests that no single type exhausts an institution. A university may begin as market Americanness and develop operating-system substance. A nation-building institution may seek legacy status over time. A legacy institution may commercialize parts of its operation. A branch campus may function as soft power, market actor and intercultural broker simultaneously. The types are analytic tools, not rigid boxes.

Still, the typology allows for sharper questions.

For legacy institutions, the question is whether historical prestige remains connected to present academic vitality.

For nation-building institutions, the question is whether external support becomes local ownership.

For operating-system institutions, the question is whether academic structure is joined to academic ethos.

For market institutions, the question is whether promotional promise is matched by educational delivery.

For nominal-symbolic institutions, the question is whether the name is becoming practice or remaining image.

The intercultural frame adds another question for all types: does the institution create real understanding between American academic culture and local or regional culture? If not, then the American label remains incomplete.

Future Research Questions

Several research directions follow from this analysis.

First, empirical studies should examine how students understand the American label. Do they associate it with quality, employment, migration, English, freedom, prestige, pedagogy or something else? Student perception may differ significantly by region, class background and field of study.

Second, comparative case studies should examine how American-branded institutions adapt curricula to local contexts. The issue is not whether they use American textbooks or credit systems, but whether they create educational meaning across cultural boundaries.

Third, researchers should distinguish between institutional accreditation, programmatic accreditation, professional licensure pathways and promotional claims. This is especially important in regions where students may not fully understand the differences among local recognition, international accreditation and U.S. accreditation.

Fourth, alumni studies could test the soft-power assumption more carefully. Do graduates of American universities abroad hold more favorable views of American culture, American education, American democracy or American foreign policy? These are not the same thing.

Fifth, research on Northern Cyprus could examine how international students experience American, European, Turkish, Mediterranean and local institutional identities. TRNC higher education is an ideal setting for studying the relationship between branding, recognition, mobility and intercultural adaptation.

Sixth, future work should compare “American” branding with “British,” “European,” “German,” “French,” “Canadian” and “international” branding. Such comparison would clarify whether American branding is unique or part of a broader global grammar of country-branded education.

Conclusion

The “American” university abroad is a complex institutional form. It cannot be understood only as branding, only as soft power, only as commerce or only as academic imitation. It is best understood as a spectrum of institutional practices organized around a powerful but unstable sign: American.

This article has proposed five types of Americanness in global higher education: legacy/institutional, nation-building, operating-system, market and nominal-symbolic. These types identify different ways the American label is claimed and enacted. In some institutions, Americanness is historically deep and academically embedded. In others, it is a reformist aspiration, a curricular system, a professional pathway, a commercial signal or a symbolic gesture toward modernity.

The article has also argued that the phenomenon is fundamentally intercultural. The purpose of the American university abroad, when it is educationally serious, is not to reproduce America elsewhere. Nor is it merely to sell American prestige. Its deeper purpose is to broker understanding between American-derived academic culture and local or regional culture. It translates, adapts, negotiates and sometimes contests. It creates a space where students learn not only subjects, but worlds.

This intercultural role carries responsibility. The American label should not be used casually. It should be supported by transparent governance, credible quality assurance, meaningful pedagogy, ethical recruitment, local engagement and honest communication about what the institution can and cannot provide. Where these conditions exist, the American university abroad can become a site of genuine educational exchange. Where they do not, the name risks becoming only a commodity.

In the end, the question is not simply whether a university abroad is truly American. The more important question is whether its Americanness has become educationally, ethically and interculturally meaningful. If it has, then the institution does not merely carry a foreign name. It becomes a bridge.

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