

Saxton Bampfylde

**Overseeing overseas:
International campus
leadership and how to
get it right**



A background graphic consisting of a network of interconnected nodes and lines. The nodes are represented by small circles, and the lines are thin, connecting the nodes in a complex, web-like structure. The overall color palette is a gradient of purple and blue, with the text in white.

Overseeing overseas: International campus leadership and how to get it right

Introduction

For almost forty years Saxton Bampfylde has worked with leaders in higher education in the UK and internationally. Over this time, we have seen HE institutions innovate, diversify, and expand academically and geographically to ensure they can operate effectively in a modern and interconnected world.

For most institutions, an international reputation is important to attract students, academics, research projects and funding, and an international presence in the shape of a physical campus or a joint venture, whilst a relatively new concept, is the path that a number of UK universities, of all missions, have chosen.

This report explores the international campus movement and takes a close look at expectations of and challenges for its leaders, and how universities can attract, retain, and develop the right talent. We have spoken to leaders across the sector to gain their insights and to understand their experiences and the challenges they have faced. Our conversations have addressed five principal areas:

- What are the essential skills and experience needed?
- How attractive are these opportunities? What are the key selling points?
- Does it need to be an academic?
- Knowledge of the institutional context vs country knowledge?
- What comes afterwards?

As more institutions consider the international market, with new student pipelines and commercial opportunities, the right leadership for their overseas presence is essential. We hope that the insights shared here are useful and provide some food for thought on the subject.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to those who have so kindly given up their time to share so freely those insights and experiences.



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A guide to identifying the best leadership at international campuses

What are the essential skills and experience needed?

There is no absolute blueprint for a leader of an overseas project, since the model and set-up can differ considerably from one institution to another when an appointment is made. Typically, considerations boil down to the commercial opportunity, length of a project's existence (start-up or well established), the political and cultural landscape of the host country, and the positioning of the campus within its wider institutional context. There were nevertheless some overarching themes that emerged from our conversations (in no particular order).

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- 1 Entrepreneurial Outlook** It was widely agreed that to lead an international campus (particularly if it is a newer operation) you need to be entrepreneurial, strategic, and opportunistic. An eye for spotting new opportunities and an ability to continually horizon scan is essential to build momentum and ensure that revenue streams do not dry up.

 - 2 Commercial Astuteness** Where the focus of the job is on student recruitment and revenue generation, sound market knowledge will be important, and an overseas operation of this kind will be firmly geared for commercial imperatives and the bottom line. The ability both to bring in quick wins and to build regular income streams will be essential, as will the commercial acumen to ensure that the campus remains financially solvent.

 - 3 Capacity to Cope with Uncertainty** An ability to live with and manage uncertainty also comes high on the list of attributes – “If you are unable to do that, you won’t last very long!” A lack of established practice, precedent and data sets will all contribute to an uncertain environment.

 - 4 The Consummate Diplomat** External relations are often a significant part of the job, such as in building partnerships and for strategic engagement with key figures, organisations and institutions in a country – at both national and local level – so diplomacy and ambassadorial skills are critical. Conflict management can also come into play, especially if there are tensions with a partner organisation or the local community (for instance, a perception that you are taking away local jobs). “One’s behaviour must be impeccable at all times as a representative for the University and British education more generally.”
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5 Academic Internal Management

External interface is, however, not the only story, and the role will often demand somebody who is a strong academic manager internally. “In international campuses you tend to find a more junior and inexperienced staff base than back in the UK” – so there may be a big job to do in staff development and quality assurance, and in some cases, building research capability from scratch. There is also often a higher turnover of staff than in a typical institutional environment (especially in a TNE context), so being able to manage a rotating staff base, and not being put off by it, is helpful.

6 International Experience

Being able to bridge the culture gap is important for these roles, so an international dimension to a candidate’s CV can be a real plus. Specific understanding of the host country was seen as helpful but not essential.

7 Adaptability

Running a campus is not just about having oversight of the academic agenda: it often involves having to turn a hand to several other functions, for example, sales and marketing, health and safety, catering, compliance and regulation, or getting to grips with international law. So adaptability and a willingness to venture into unfamiliar areas of activity are important.

8 Energy/ Resilience

“These roles are really hard graft... the amount of energy and drive needed is significant.” If it is a start-up, the new leader may have to build the in-country network from scratch whilst also acting as the driving force for a project based a long way from its parent institution. The early days can feel especially isolated, particularly for people who naturally feed off the dynamics and politics of typical university life, and being clear about the job to be done is a good way to stay motivated.

Are these types of roles attractive?

An international lifestyle; a new cultural experience; a senior leadership role; the chance to build something new with a degree of autonomy; new skills and training; and (typically) good remuneration ... on the surface there are many factors that should make an overseas leadership position appealing. However, we have scratched beneath that surface and found that the reality can be somewhat different.

“A remote campus cut off from the mothership means a whole different job offer.”

Overseas campuses can, we found, be challenging environments to work in, and as a result difficult to recruit to. This is often the case where they are felt to be not being fully embraced or valued by the wider university community – or worse, viewed as a “vanity project” or “a drain on resources”. A perception in the market that the campus/project is a bit of an offshoot without the full backing of the sponsoring institution can further complicate the recruitment challenge.

We found that where universities look after their campuses well, with an integrated, “one university” approach, these opportunities are considered more appealing, and thus attract higher quality candidates. This is especially the case where there is a seat on the executive or an additional PVC portfolio attached to the role, so candidates can see they will be genuinely part of a global leadership team where their contribution is valued. Ensuring that they feel part of the running of a global institution and not out on a limb is important, whilst also allowing them the freedom to innovate. If the role is properly positioned in the wider institutional context and the university’s investment in the project is clearly demonstrated, there is less fear of being marginalised.

Poorly drafted job descriptions can make it harder to recruit to these roles, so there must be clarity from the outset about the role and its purpose, and the nature of the relationship with the parent institution.

“There is a constituency of people who want that itinerant, international life.”

There is clearly a cadre of people who enjoy the itinerant, international lifestyle and spend their careers moving around and working in different overseas campuses.

There may also be personal links to a country or region that play a part in motivation. However, it can be harder to recruit beyond this pool and attract a wider range of leaders because of the personal and professional challenges involved.

As outlined above, these roles (especially start-ups) demand considerable time and energy, so the university may seek to appoint an academic whose research career is essentially over – since they simply will not have the bandwidth to maintain it. This “end of research career” label can be a real deterrent, as can the perceived risk of becoming out of touch with UK policy and networks.

External conditions can also be barriers to recruitment. For example,

it is currently particularly difficult to obtain visas for Singapore, which limits the available candidate pool; likewise, the political economy of China makes it an increasingly difficult proposition for recruitment; and the more patriarchal system in the Middle East means that female candidates are often reluctant to apply for opportunities at international campuses there.

Similarly, personal commitments, family obligations and the complexities of moving can all be barriers to recruiting and lessen the appeal of a move abroad.

So whilst attracting a broader diversity of talent to these leadership roles is important, it can prove a real challenge. In addition, the appointments tend to be fixed term (typically three years), which makes it hard to achieve continuity in terms of leadership.

The opportunities and development possibilities therefore need to be a real focus in any recruitment process if the most effective leaders of overseas campuses are to be brought into the mix.



Does the role need to be done by an academic?

“A professor who carries academic weight...opens doors no matter where you are in the world.”

Whilst there were mixed views on this question amongst those we spoke to, for the most part, it was thought that in the interests of credibility, these roles should be held by an academic – largely because it remains a challenge for someone coming from a non-academic background to have the necessary clout with external stakeholders. The credibility of a professor who carries academic weight adds a different level of value which travels well and opens doors no matter where you are in the world. In the case of a joint venture or partnership arrangement, we heard that it needs to be someone who will resonate with the partner organisation, and in that respect, profile and rank are very important.

It was, however, considered less important to be a high-flying research

leader – indeed, it was more likely for these roles to attract people with credentials in education, bringing a passion for leadership, students, quality and staff development.

‘A strong non-academic works for some; for others it would be heresy to even suggest it.’

Some people were more open minded and felt that a campus leader did not need to be an academic at all, particularly where a strong business focus is required, and could indeed be someone who had come through the professional services route. Others felt it largely depended on the nature and character of the institution, or on the other senior people supporting the leader – for instance, a Director of Studies with responsibility for academic matters. Overall, however, the consensus was that, even if it was not – or should not be – essential, the lead for an international project is in practice usually an academic.

How valuable is existing knowledge of the parent institution vs knowledge of the country?

The ideal candidate for these roles is someone who knows the university's main campus, but also understands the local setting and culture in which the overseas campus or operation is based. However, we heard that finding someone who brings both can be difficult, and when it came down to which was the more important, institutional knowledge was generally prioritised; broad cultural awareness nevertheless remained highly desirable.

“A perfect candidate would come from within the institution already”

Overseas campus leaders often have to liaise with the UK home institution at many different levels – from the vice-chancellor or provost through to heads of school and programme directors. Established experience within that institution can therefore really help and enables such relationships to work smoothly.

“A trusted hand”

Particularly in the early stages of establishing an international operation, it is more likely that a university will appoint somebody from within its ranks so that there is real confidence and trust in their ability to deliver. A

strong understanding of the university's mission and strategy and how it operates makes it more likely that they will be able to hit the ground running: significant trust is being invested in a long-distance working model, so a “known and trusted hand” is often seen as preferable. As a campus grows and develops, it was felt that the potential to recruit a leader with a local background was more likely to be considered, especially given the probable financial implications of retaining a UK academic on an expat package to do the job.

Knowledge of local culture and language must not be underestimated, however. We heard that some governments are really emphasising the value of their language; for example, in Malaysia the government is considering making it mandatory for all meetings to be held in Malay. Language ability is therefore becoming increasingly important, and we heard there is often a requirement for campus leaders to learn the language of the host country.

It was also considered critical to make sure – if you do appoint a leader with no knowledge of the host country – that you have others within the team who understand the local setting, are embedded in the culture and can give support in that area.

Does this role offer good career growth? What is the post-international role trajectory?

These are important roles which should in theory represent a significant development opportunity for ambitious and inspiring leaders, by offering a chance to broaden experience and develop a good set of transferable skills. However, we sensed that in reality they are not always seen as such, and in fact there is a real concern about “what comes next?”. One person said he had recently taken on another international campus role as “there was no obvious job to go back to” within his own institution when his secondment came to an end.

Is it career development? Is it a graveyard slot or a springboard to further advancement? Where do these roles sit in a career path? How easy is it to go back into broader university leadership?

These are all questions that not many universities have grappled with – and that has created challenges when trying to recruit to these positions.

“Re-routing the career is a big thing. We need to show it is valuable.”

There are some universities who do it very well, ensuring that integration back into the institution is more seamless and that the risk the individual has taken on is rewarded (particularly if the role has been undertaken on a secondment). However, in general, we heard there needs to be clearer thinking from more universities about the opportunities and rewards that can come from taking on an international role.



“Can be CV gold dust. Many institutions are looking for a globalised view.”

For those entering or returning to the UK market from an international role there can, it was suggested, be a real opportunity, but that does depend on the institution. A global outlook and broad cultural experience are increasingly important for UK institutions seeking to attract international students and to bring a diverse perspective to their leadership. The breadth and depth of experience gained in these roles is also very valuable – and it brings greater credibility

in the UK market if it is gained in an established campus, where both academic and international leadership will be evidenced, than in delivering a start-up campus project and making it operational.

If an institution chooses to invest in or sustain an international campus, appointing a high-quality leader should be a priority, and reflected in the associated status, pay and profile. The potential to flourish in this role with real career development opportunities should be highlighted – not the notion that they can expect to disappear from view unless they work incredibly hard to raise their own profile.

Conclusion

So what are the key points that we have taken away from our conversations? Here are some findings that we hope will generate further discussion in the months ahead.

- Each role must be clearly specified in line with the geography and culture of the overseas campus and its host country.
- Selection criteria must be tailored to ensuring that those appointed bring skills, personal qualities and ambitions in line with the appointment in question.
- Leading an overseas campus is a defining move for the person appointed, and it should be made clear whether a particular opportunity is likely to be a step up the career ladder or the apex of it.
- These roles are complex and challenging, but can also offer significant institutional potential for cultural, commercial and collaborative development. So it is crucially important to identify and nurture the talent that will best thrive, lead and inspire in an international environment.

Perhaps most importantly, in the eternal search for new streams of income and potential for expansion and reputational enhancement, universities embarking on overseas operations of any kind ignore at their peril the importance of attracting the right person to the right job at the right time – in the interests of both the individual and the institution.





About Saxton Bampfylde

Saxton Bampfylde is globally recognised as a trusted, values-driven leadership advisory firm. Our record of finding outstanding leaders at both board and executive level has been built on our pioneering approach to research-intensive executive search. Today, we have built powerful long-term partnerships with some of the world's most dynamic and significant organisations, across the commercial, public and not for profit sectors, and with over 130 consulting partners around the world across 40 global offices through Panorama (www.panorama-leadership.com), we are able to seek out and engage with the very best talent around the world. We value the continued success of our clients' organisations and through our bespoke leadership services we are able to support individuals and their teams to develop and realise their full potential. Committed to living our values, Saxton Bampfylde became the first employee-owned executive search company in 2014, a unique model in our industry.

Our dedicated Higher Education Practice

We have advised universities on senior appointments for over 35 years, including over 180 vice-chancellor appointments globally. In the last two years our work includes the appointment of Professor Nick Jennings as Vice-Chancellor at Loughborough University, Professor Katie Normington as Vice-Chancellor at De Montfort University, Professor Andy Schofield as Vice-Chancellor at Lancaster University, and Victor Chu as Chair at University College London. Our work with HEIs is informed by our strong track record of appointing leaders in adjacent sectors. Recent examples include our work to appoint Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser as Chief Executive of UKRI, Professor Lucy Chappell as the Chief Scientific Advisor to DHSC, and current work to appoint the inaugural CEO and Chair of the Government's Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA).

Leadership Advisory

Helping the continued success of our clients' organisations, Saxton Bampfylde also offers bespoke leadership services which support individuals and their teams to develop and realise their full potential. Services include coaching, executive assessment, governance review and talent mapping.

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