

Who Governs? A Systematic Review of Stakeholder Power in International Branch Campuses

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Abstract: Who governs International Branch Campuses? This systematic review synthesizes literature from 2000-2025 to answer this question. Drawing on stakeholder theory and resource dependence theory, we analyze power sources of five key stakeholder groups, identify three power configuration patterns, and explore power operation mechanisms. Three research gaps are identified: limited understanding of power dynamics over time, insufficient attention to micro-mechanisms of power exercise, and lack of research on institutional corrective mechanisms. The review offers a conceptual framework and directions for future research.

Keywords: International Branch Campus; Stakeholder power; Governance; Systematic review; Resource dependence theory; Stakeholder theory.

1. Introduction

Who governs International Branch Campuses? When conflicts arise between home universities, host governments, local partners, faculty, and students, whose interests prevail? These questions are central to understanding IBC sustainability, yet answers remain elusive.

International Branch Campuses (IBCs) have grown significantly over the past two decades, with over 330 campuses operating worldwide (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2023). These institutions involve multiple stakeholders: home universities, host governments, local partners, academic staff, and students (Wilkins, 2020). Each stakeholder has different interests. Home universities want to protect academic reputation and generate revenue. Host governments seek to build local capacity. Local partners expect returns on investment. Faculty desire professional development. Students demand quality education. These diverse interests often create conflicts that undermine IBC performance (Healey, 2015).

Some scholars argue stakeholder conflicts are inevitable

because institutional logics differ between home and host countries (Shams & Huisman, 2011). Others suggest conflicts can be managed through appropriate governance design (Wilkins, 2020). However, existing research remains fragmented. Many studies describe "who" the stakeholders are, but few systematically examine "who governs"—that is, which stakeholders actually dominate decision-making and why. This systematic review addresses this gap by asking: Who governs IBCs? What are the sources of stakeholder power? How is power configured and exercised?

The review has four objectives: (1) identify power sources of key IBC stakeholders, (2) map power configuration patterns, (3) explore how power is exercised, and (4) identify research gaps to guide future inquiry.

2. Research Methods

This review follows a systematic literature review approach guided by PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Four databases were searched in March 2025: Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, covering publications from January 2000 to March 2025.

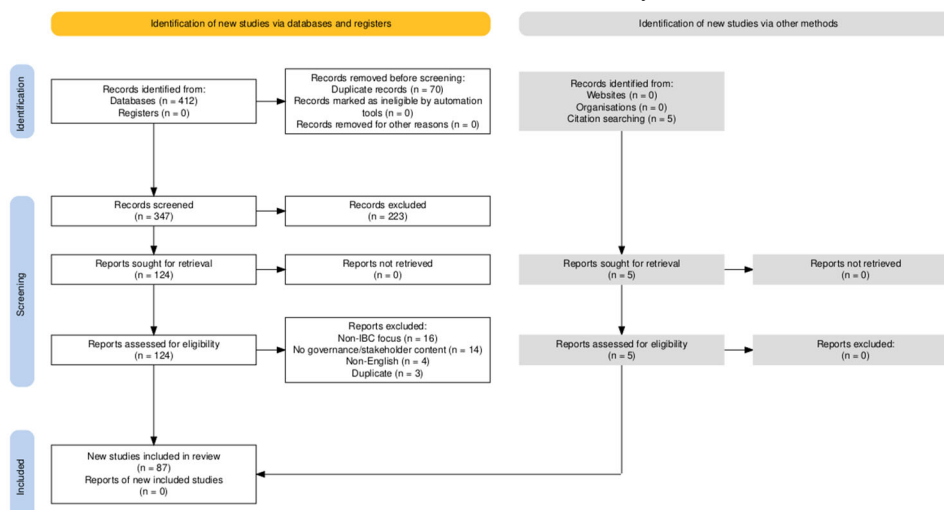


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study selection

Search strings combined: ("international branch campus" OR "transnational higher education") AND ("stakeholder"

OR "power" OR "governance" OR "decision-making").

The initial search identified 412 records. After removing duplicates, 342 records were screened. Following title/abstract screening and full-text review, 87 studies were included in the broader project. For this article focusing on stakeholder power, 42 studies were synthesized.

Studies were included if they: (a) focused on IBCs or transnational higher education, (b) examined governance or stakeholder dynamics, (c) were peer-reviewed, and (d) published in English. Thematic synthesis was used to analyze the selected studies.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram summarizing the study selection process.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Power Sources of Key Stakeholders

Drawing on resource dependence theory, stakeholder power derives from control over critical resources. The question "who governs?" can be answered by examining who controls resources that are essential and non-substitutable. However, scholars hold different views on which resources matter most. Some emphasize tangible resources like funding (Healey, 2015), while others argue intangible resources like legitimacy are equally important (Farrugia & Lane, 2013). This review integrates both perspectives.

Home University: The home university controls academic resources: academic brand, curriculum, quality assurance, faculty deployment, and degree-awarding authority (Wilkins, 2020; Healey, 2015). Some argue the home university remains the dominant governor because it controls academic legitimacy (Healey, 2015). However, others suggest this dominance can be constrained by host government regulations (Farrugia & Lane, 2013).

Host Government: Host governments derive power from regulatory and financial resources: operating licenses, accreditation, funding, and quality assurance frameworks (Wilkins, 2020; Pan & Mu, 2025). While some studies emphasize government power through regulation (Shams & Huisman, 2011), others highlight greater influence through direct funding. In education hubs like UAE and Qatar, government funding makes governments effective co-governors (Wilkins, 2020).

Local Partner: Local partners contribute facilities, local market knowledge, government relationships, and operational funding (Feng, 2012; Scott, 2021). Some studies portray local partners as passive resource providers (Feng, 2012), while others argue they become powerful governors through unique local knowledge (Scott, 2021).

Academic Staff: Academic staff control teaching, curriculum localization, assessment, and research (Jepsen et al., 2014; Yao & Yang, 2024). Scholars hold contrasting views. Some argue faculty collective power is substantial because they deliver the educational product (Jepsen et al., 2014). Others contend faculty influence on governance is limited, particularly for expatriate staff facing contractual precarity (Yao & Yang, 2024).

Students: Students influence IBCs through tuition revenues and reputation (Wilkins et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2023). However, researchers debate whether this constitutes genuine governance influence or merely consumer choice (Wilkins et al., 2017).

3.2. Power Configuration Patterns

Literature reveals three patterns of how governance power is distributed among stakeholders.

Single-Dominant Pattern (One Governor): One stakeholder controls most critical resources and dominates decision-making. Healey (2015) describes government-dominated IBCs; Wilkins (2020) discusses home university-dominated models. Advantages: efficient decision-making. Disadvantages: other stakeholders' interests suppressed, leading to legitimacy challenges (Farrugia & Lane, 2013).

Dual-Balanced Pattern (Shared Governance): Two stakeholders share relatively equal governing power. Feng (2012) describes Sino-foreign cooperative universities with joint management committees. Pan and Mu (2025) identify power sharing in Sino-Australian partnerships. Advantages: both parties' interests considered. Disadvantages: potential decision deadlock.

Multi-Dispersed Pattern (Distributed Governance): Multiple stakeholders control different resources, creating complex governance networks. Wilkins (2020) suggests this pattern emerges in mature IBCs. Abdou (2025) describes Egyptian IBCs with multi-party negotiations. Advantages: system stability. Disadvantages: governance complexity.

3.3. Power Operation Mechanisms

Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework that integrates the key elements addressing the question "who governs?" Drawing on resource dependence theory and stakeholder theory, the framework illustrates how stakeholder resources shape different power configurations, which in turn influence the mechanisms through which power is exercised in governance, ultimately affecting outcomes such as institutional stability, conflict levels, strategic alignment, and long-term sustainability.

Conceptual Framework of Stakeholder Power in International Branch Campus Governance

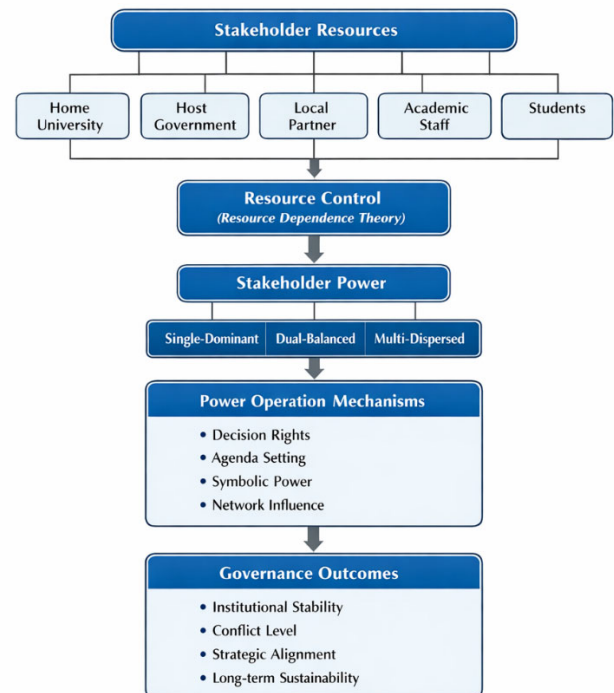


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Stakeholder Power in International Branch Campus Governance
Source: Synthesized from the reviewed literature (2000–2025).

Controlling resources provides the foundation for power, but power must be exercised through specific mechanisms to translate into actual governance influence. The literature suggests several operation mechanisms.

Decision-rights mechanisms: Power exercised through formal governance channels like board seats and veto rights (Healey, 2015).

Agenda-setting mechanisms: Power operates by controlling what issues enter governance processes. This receives limited attention in IBC research.

Symbolic power mechanisms: Power exercised through legitimacy claims and brand value. Farrugia and Lane (2013) discuss how legitimacy affects IBC governance and survival.

Network mechanisms: Power operates through personal relationships and professional networks (Cai & Hall, 2015).

Research gap: While studies identify "who has power," analysis of "how power is exercised in governance" is limited. Agenda-setting and symbolic power are particularly under-researched.

3.4. Research Gaps

Gap 1: Limited Understanding of Power Dynamics Over Time. Most studies provide static snapshots of who governs at a single point. There is limited understanding of how governance power evolves as resource dependencies change and IBCs mature. Key questions: When government funding decreases, how does governance redistribute? What triggers shifts in who governs? (Healey, 2015; Wilkins, 2020)

Gap 2: Insufficient Attention to Micro-Mechanisms of Governance Influence. The literature tells us which stakeholders are powerful, but not how they exercise influence in daily governance. How do stakeholders use agenda-setting to shape decisions? How can "weaker" stakeholders like faculty gain genuine governance voice? (Farrugia & Lane, 2013)

Gap 3: Lack of Research on Institutional Corrective Mechanisms. When governance power becomes excessively imbalanced, what mechanisms restore balance? Can faculty unions or student councils effectively counterbalance dominant stakeholders? How can governance structures prevent problematic power accumulation?

4. Conclusion

Who governs International Branch Campuses? This systematic review has synthesized literature to provide answers. We identified five stakeholder groups and their power sources based on resource control. Three governance distribution patterns emerged: single-dominant (one governor), dual-balanced (shared governance), and multi-dispersed (distributed governance). We explored how power operates through decision-rights, agenda-setting, symbolic, and network mechanisms, and presented a conceptual framework integrating these elements.

Three research gaps were identified: limited understanding of how governance power evolves over time, insufficient attention to micro-mechanisms of governance influence, and lack of research on corrective mechanisms for power imbalance.

To better answer "who governs IBCs?," future research should pursue: (1) longitudinal case studies tracking IBCs over time to understand how governance power evolves; (2) micro-process studies examining how power is exercised in governance settings like board meetings; (3) comparative studies across different regulatory environments; and (4)

action research exploring how weaker stakeholders develop collective governance voice.

For practice, this review offers several implications. IBC leaders should regularly ask "who really governs this institution?" and conduct power-resource dependency audits. Home universities and host governments should include power-balancing mechanisms in partnership frameworks. Faculty and students should use formal channels—committee representation, councils—to develop governance voice. Policymakers should design regulatory frameworks enabling multiple stakeholder participation in governance.

The question "who governs?" is not merely academic—it has profound implications for IBC sustainability. When governance power is appropriately distributed and exercised through transparent mechanisms, IBCs are better positioned to serve diverse stakeholder interests and achieve long-term success. This is the first of three articles examining IBC governance and resource integration.

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