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The rise of the remote metropolitan branch campus – Definitions, motivations and models

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the university remote metropolitan branch campus (RMBC). Drawing on approaches used to frame international branch campuses, it proposes a first definition for an RMBC, distinguishing it from a wider group of domestic 'Satellite Campuses' that includes multi-campus universities within regions. Using interviews with 10 RMBC directors in London, it explores motivations for their creation and approaches used to organise and resource these ventures, as well as to attract and teach students. It concludes that the dominant reasons for creating RMBCs relate to financial diversification, reputation, reach and business engagement, but that in some cases the repositioning of an RMBC has been strategically reactive in response to external changes in its operating environment. Whilst there is evidence for a range of organisational models amongst London-based RMBCs, there are key commonalities around the students attracted, the programmes offered and approaches to teaching and learning. RMBCs in London are growing and thriving, but face challenges from market entrants and uncertain future UK Government policy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the emergence of the remote metropolitan branch campus (RMBC) within the growth and commercialisation of higher education (HE). It builds on a definition for international branch campuses (IBCs) to define an RMBC, and drawing upon interviews with the Directors of 10 RMBCs in the London, which accommodates

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over 30,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students at these sites, investigates why and how they have been established and considers their future potential.

1.1 | Context

The emergence of RMBCs over the past 25 years has coincided with the latter stages of the neoliberalisation and marketisation of HE. A founding pillar of neoliberalism is that markets are the most efficient basis for making decisions, promoting the role of the market over the state and diminishing the importance of regulation and national borders (Harvey, 2005). In parallel, globalisation has accelerated the movement of resources, people and goods, whilst the rise of managerialism within UK universities increases the willingness to extend beyond traditional geographical boundaries in search of additional revenues (Healey, 2008; Hill et al., 2015; Maisuria & Cole, 2017).

These forces, together with a reduction in the level of public funding for universities in countries such as the UK, have coincided with a sequence of geographical diversifications in HE. The first of these, prominent in the 1990s, was the trend for universities to recruit students from overseas. Whilst internationally mobile students continue to be hugely important to UK higher education institutions (HEIs), the second trend – acknowledging that many are unable or unwilling to travel long distances to learn for financial or cultural reasons – has been the rise of transnational education (TNE) (Healey, 2015).

TNE has taken many forms, including offering courses by distance learning and universities subcontracting the delivery of their qualifications to local partners via franchising or validation models (Burgess & Berquist, 2012; Knight, 2016; McBurnie & Zigas, 2007). It has also included the creation of IBCs: 'bricks and mortar' premises partly or wholly owned by a 'home' university in an overseas territory, serving a local or regional market using a myriad of models (Lane & Kinser, 2013; Verbik & Merkley, 2006). The Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) estimated that 333 IBCs were operating in March 2023 (C-BERT, 2023).

It could now be argued that a third, more recent, manifestation of neoliberalisation and globalisation is emerging in the form of RMBCs.

1.2 | Method

In seeking to arrive at a working definition of an RMBC, this paper distinguishes them from generic domestic satellite campuses and draws comparisons with previous definitions of IBCs. To understand the motivations behind the creation of an RMBC and explore the models employed and challenges encountered, the authors selected London as a geographical case study owing to the high number of RMBCs that have been created there in recent years. An 'insider researcher' qualitative methodology (Healey, 2017) was adopted, based on the seniority and knowledge of the sector of the two researchers and the strength of their networks. Semi-structured interviews were held with 10 of London's 13 RMBC Directors (Interviewees A–J). The interviews were transcribed and coded, to identify key themes in relation to institutional rationale and aims; operating models; programme offerings; target markets; pedagogical approaches and wider opportunities and risks. This dataset was supplemented by content analysis of university strategies; annual reports; London RMBC websites and other publications such as staffing adverts and job descriptions to gain further insights.

This paper explores what our analysis reveals about why RMBCs are becoming more common and under what conditions they appear to prosper. In seeking to look towards the future, the paper discusses the influencing factors behind RMBC development and how these divide between internal factors, such as financial imperatives, reputational ambitions or home-campus limitations and external factors, such as international student mobility and preference, educational agglomeration and system autonomy.

1.3 | Existing literature

There is a significant depth of literature on IBCs, estimated by Hickey and Davies (2022) to be over 120 peer reviewed works since 2000, with prominent authors including Phillip Altbach, Nigel Healey, Kevin Kinser, Jane Knight, Jason Lane, Stephen Wilkins and many others. Compared to the scale and breadth of research into IBCs, the literature on RMBCs is limited. Amongst the earliest to discuss what we will define RMBCs was Altbach (2012) who examined Northeastern University's RMBCs in North Carolina and Washington State, drawing comparisons with the IBC debate around institutional motivations; the use of home-based faculty; the value of a 'branch' degree and consistency in accreditation. Lane et al. (2013) observed growth across the United States, suggesting how 50 independent regulatory systems have adapted to universities increasingly out of their home state. Addie et al. (2015) investigated the growth of RMBCs in Canada, suggesting that the extension of institutional brands and outreach into new communities to recruit non-traditional students are key motivations, but questioning their long-term value.

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published a first thematic enquiry into the London campuses of UK universities in 2014 (QAA, 2014). Based on an assessment of public information and a survey of recently emerging RMBCs, but without using a clear and consistent definition, this report paints a mainly positive picture of the RMBC trend. It suggests that RMBCs appeared to be generally well planned by universities, and where a joint venture with the private sector was the preferred route, suitable contingency plans were in place.

The QAA report also found that RMBCs were mostly established within existing university structures, rather than as separate legal or operational entities, and that the principal motivation for their creation was access to international students. QAA (2014) highlighted some potential concerns, particularly in relation to the deployment of casual and part-time staff; the use of overseas agents in recruiting students; questionable student progression and achievement outcomes and the differential campus experience between the RMBC and the home location.

Brooks and Waters (2018), building on QAA (2014) and drawing on Madge et al. (2015) (who discuss RMBCs in the context of internationalisation), provided a first in-depth academic appraisal of the RMBCs in London, with a focus on the way institutions exploit the attractiveness of London as a global capital city to compensate for a lack of resources provided directly by the universities to students. Taking the 14 RMBCs then in existence as their population, they undertook a systematic review of secondary materials, including prospectuses and online content to discuss the role that London plays in their establishment. They concluded that 'selling' London as a global city to international students is pivotal to the success of RMBCs in the UK capital.

Most recently, Kleibert (2021) has provided a valuable economic geographer's perspective on the growth of both IBCs and RMBCs, with a specific focus on the latter in London. She used interviews with senior leaders within universities to analyse the motivations for expanding spatially, arguing that both IBCs and RMBCs present 'territorial fixes' through access to new markets – predominantly international students – and 'symbolic fixes' in reputational gains, including association with London. Another interesting observation is her assertion that a London RMBC may actually be a viable alternative to – or steppingstone towards – an IBC, especially for universities located in more remote parts of the UK, which are not often considered by international students.

2 | DEFINING A RMBC

Whilst the generic term Satellite Campus has been used to encompass new physical sites established by universities at home, and sometimes overseas, no attempt has been made to define what we are terming a RMBC, which is located in the same country as, but not geographically near, to the home campus. In contrast, entire articles have been committed to discussing the difficulties of accurately defining an IBC, as skilfully summarised in Wilkins and Rumbley (2018). In this respect some have emphasised the importance of legal structures, branding, curriculum oversight, regulatory control and other factors (Kinser & Lane, 2012; Knight, 2016, 2020; Lane & Kinser, 2013; Lawton & Katsomitros, 2012). Whilst some, including Wilkins and Rumbley (2018) and others, have proposed

improvements and enhancements, and others exist including the TRANSEDU definition of 'Offshore Campuses' (Kleibert et al., 2020), the most widely cited definition of an IBC comes from C-BERT, which provides a contemporary global data source on IBCs. It describes an IBC as 'an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider' (C-BERT, 2023).

Using similar logic to arrive at a definition of an RMBC requires the consideration of four key factors: geography; ownership; brand; and function. It is also important to differentiate an RMBC from a general domestic 'satellite campus', of which it is a subset. There are many universities that have been created by merging legacy colleges and institutions – each with their own campus – with examples in the UK including the University of the Highlands and Islands, University for the Creative Arts and University of South Wales. Others have grown by establishing or acquiring campuses in the same region as their home campus, such as Nottingham Trent University's branch campus in Brackenhurst, Exeter University's outposts in Truro and Penryn or the joint campus opened in Medway between Canterbury Christ Church University, the Universities of Kent and Greenwich. We have not considered to these examples to be congruent with the RMBC concept; they are satellite campuses, but are geographically proximate serving the same local or regional markets.

An RMBC must be geographically distant from the main campus or campuses of an institution in an urban setting, most likely in a different region of a country or state. 'Home' institutional ownership is important, to distinguish RMBCs from the myriad of domestic partnerships that universities have developed, with, for example, further education providers, student 'pathway' providers or other private institutions. This distinction is particularly important, considering the large number of domestic collaborations that many universities have with branded 'centres' providing progression and pathway providers such as Study Group, INTO or Kaplan. University-specific branding or, as a minimum, co-branding is an important element in the designation of an IBC and – given the link to reputation and quality – this branding equally applies in the domestic context. Finally, and most fundamentally, an RMBC must have a core purpose of delivering undergraduate and/or postgraduate level HE; otherwise, it could not be considered a true university campus.

Our proposed definition of an RMBC is, therefore:

a teaching facility that is established or acquired in a strategic metropolitan location which is geographically remote from – but in the same country as – the home campus of the higher education provider; that is owned or leased, at least in part, by that provider; is operated in the name of that provider; and that offers academic programmes, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by that provider.

This working definition provides a tractable framework for analysing RMBCs, without specifying precisely the minimum geographical distance required from the main campus, nor the minimum percentage ownership required or the minimum number or range of academic programmes needed. Equally, it does not stipulate the minimum scale of the campus, nor the required facilities, or the presence of other activities such as business engagement or research.

This definition of an RMBC means that they are primarily campuses of regional universities in major commercial centres, with the majority of examples to be found in the same countries that have traditionally led the growth of the IBCs. In the United States, established literature suggests that many universities are increasingly establishing branch campuses out-of-state, in major population centres, which we would consider RMBCs (Lane et al., 2013). For example, the University of Southern California has recently established a campus in Washington DC, reportedly to enhance the student experience and access policy makers and grants (Knox, 2023). In Australia, a desk-based review suggests that there are five RMBCs based in Sydney and four in Melbourne. Some of these RMBCs originate from afar within New South Wales and Victoria, respectively, but others – for example Charles Darwin University (based in Darwin) and Curtin University (based in Perth) – have established RMBCs in Australia's financial and cultural hubs (University Reviews, 2023a, 2023b).

3 | LONDON AS A FOCUS FOR RMBCs

London, which has been a hub of RMBC activity in recent years, is the geographical focus of this study. London hosted 507,000 HE students in 2021/22, who were registered at over 20 public universities (including RMBCs and constituent institutions of the University of London), a similar number of specialist publicly funded institutes and colleges, and dozens of alternative – and in many cases small – providers (HESA, 2023).

3.1 | Growth and focus

The longest-established RMBC in London is the University of Cumbria's outpost in Tower Hamlets, which has been providing teacher training – and more recently business-related programmes – under various guises for the past 50 years. Seventeen further RMBCs have been created in the 21st century, of which five have subsequently closed, including three high ranking institutions (Kleibert, 2021). Whilst there is no firm evidence for this, it is possible that more restrictive international student visa policy in the 2010s, and an inability or refusal by some RMBCs to adapt to this development, may have played a key role in these closures.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, an eclectic mix of English institutions have established RMBCs in London, including Russell Group members (e.g., the Universities of Warwick, Liverpool, and Newcastle), large post-92 universities (e.g., Northumbria, Staffordshire University and Coventry Universities), and smaller providers including York St John University. Several of the universities that have established a London RMBC – including Anglia Ruskin, Coventry, Cumbria, Glasgow Caledonian, Staffordshire and the University of the West of Scotland – were already multi-campus operations within their own regions.

Whilst no recent publicly available data exist, interviews conducted for this paper suggest that there were at least 30,000 students attending RMBCs in London as of spring 2023. This represents around 6% of London's HE student population (HESA, 2023) and is a large increase compared with the 8500 RMBC students in the city in 2014 (QAA, 2014). In addition to the 18 RMBCs that have existed at some stage since 2007, several additional 'London Centres' – co-branded with UK universities, offering franchised or validated programmes and sometimes branding themselves as 'branch campuses' – have also operated. These include Ulster University and Solent University ventures in association with QA Higher Education, and the now closed Study Group centre in association with the University of Huddersfield. That these are sometimes referred to as branch campuses by researchers, students and the organisations themselves can be misleading.

There is a pattern in the range of programmes being offered by London RMBCs, with a strong focus on business and computing courses, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. More detailed examination reveals many courses in business management and related disciplines, including accounting and finance, healthcare management, cyber security, project management and tourism and events.

There are some patterns of geographical agglomeration of London RMBCs. Most noticeable is the clustering in East London, perhaps reflecting the availability of space that benefits from the appropriate educational planning classification; more competitive pricing than other parts of the city; and proximity to affordable student accommodation. Of the 13 current RMBCs, three are co-located at East India Docks, two are sited in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford (and will soon be joined by a third) and three are on the eastern fringe of the City of London, which was also the location of three of the closed RMBCs.

Based on trends concerning space being rented by regional universities in London, the pace of RMBC establishment is increasing (Prynn, 2023). Table 3 summarises the four new London RMBCs that have been announced but are yet to open. In late 2023, Teesside University will open a London campus offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in digital technologies and enterprise at the Olympic Park, close to the RMBCs of Loughborough University and Staffordshire University (Here East, 2023). Also in late 2023, Nottingham Trent University is planning to open a campus in Whitechapel focused on creative education aligned to eSports

TABLE 1 London RMBCs in 2023.

University ^a	Current location	Established	Approx. students	UG	PG	Dominant disciplines
Anglia Ruskin University	Farringdon, EC1N, East India, E14	2007	8500	YES	YES	Business, Law, Health
Coventry University	Spitalfields, E1	2009	5000	YES	YES	Business
Coventry University	Dagenham, IG11	2017	Unknown	YES	NO	Business, Law, Health, Computing
University of Cumbria	Canary Wharf, E14	2007 ^b	500	YES	YES	Education, Business, Health
Glasgow Caledonian University	Shoreditch, E1	2010	1500	NO	YES	Business, Health
Loughborough University	Stratford, E15	2015	800	NO	YES	Business, Design, Computing
Northumbria University	Spitalfields, E1	2014	6000	YES	YES	Business, Computing
Staffordshire University	Stratford, E15	2019	430	YES	YES	Computing
University of Sunderland	Canary Wharf, E14	2012	4700	YES	YES	Business, Health
University of Wales, Trinity St David	Kennington, SW9	2012	Unknown	YES	YES	Business, Computing
University of Warwick	London Bridge, SE1	2015	<250	NO	YES	Business
University of West of Scotland	East India, E14	2016	4000	YES	YES	Business, Computing
York St John University	East India, E14	2018	2200	NO	YES	Business, Computing

Source: Authors, based on interviews and university websites.

^aIn addition, some HEIs, such as Ulster University, Solent University and the University of Northampton operate London Centres with third parties.

^bThe University of Cumbria gained university status in 2007, but its campus in London has been in operation, led by legacy institutions, since 1973.

(Sacco, 2022). Looking further ahead two universities plan to open campuses in parts of London some distance from current clusters. The University of Portsmouth is planning to open an RMBC in Waltham Forest, northeast London, in 2024 (BBC, 2021), and Sheffield Hallam will establish a campus in Brent Cross, northwest London, in 2025, with an aim to reach 5000 students there by 2030 (Sheffield Hallam University, 2022).

4 | MOTIVATIONS AND MODELS: THE VIEWS OF LONDON RMBC DIRECTORS

4.1 | Institutional motivations

Commercial reasons appear to be the dominant rationale for establishing RMBCs. The ability to reach a new student segment – in the context of income diversification – was explicitly stated by eight of the ten interviewees as a main driver, particularly the ability ‘to capitalise on the opportunities London offers for international students’

TABLE 2 Closed London RMBCs.

University ^a	Opened	Closed
University of East Anglia	2010	2014
University of Liverpool	2013	2020
Newcastle University	2015	2022
University of South Wales	2014	2015
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	2011	2018

Source: QAA (2014), Addison (2019), Kleibert (2021), Newcastle University (2022).

^aThe University of Huddersfield has also ceased its partnership with Study Group.

TABLE 3 Announced London RMBCs.

University	Planned opening
Nottingham Trent University	2023
Portsmouth University	2024
Sheffield Hallam University	2025
Teesside University	2023

Source: BBC (2021, 2022), Sacco (2022), Here East (2023).

(Interviewee F) and to ‘access markets not available anywhere else’ (Interviewee G). Even in RMBCs where international students are not the focus, several interviewees highlighted that the aim is to cater for a set of domestic students different to those that would be attracted to the home campus. Some also reported that the markets in which their home campuses operated were becoming crowded and that there was a perception, supported by demographic evidence, that demand for HE in London is increasing at a faster rate than in their regions.

However, several of the interviewees acknowledged that increasing financial revenue is only one of several motivations. In seven cases, an element of historical legacy has played a role. These seven had established the campus following one or more previous franchising or validation relationships with private providers or London-based colleges. In some cases, the creation of an RMBC was proposed by the partner, and it was a reactive development because of partnership difficulties or owing to the tightening of government rules around international student recruitment from 2010.

Almost as prominent as income generation is the role that an RMBC can play in building a university's profile overseas. Seven interviewees – including directors of large and highly ranked institutions domestically – suggested that a London base can, and in some cases already has, enhanced the international reputation of the home university. As one interviewee explained, the London campus was established to enhance the reputation of the university because it was ‘unknown overseas despite a high ranking nationally’ (Interviewee I). A variation on this theme, relevant in two specific cases, are examples of universities that had strong international reputations prior to setting up in London, but were sited in geographical locations that are perceived as unattractive to international students. In these cases, the association with London is seen as important in breaking down negative perceptions of home campus locations: ‘we wanted to be seen and heard in an international centre for higher education’ (Interviewee D).

The contrast between the regional economies of London and the home locations of those that have established an RMBC clearly presents a further motivation. Several interviewees stated that the opportunities that London offers for business collaboration, student placements and immersive business experiences – as well as wider knowledge exchange – were driving factors behind establishing RMBCs in London, and that it was hoped that these relationships could benefit students across the entire institution. Many stated that the London RMBC had become an important element of the University's wider student employability offer.

Less prominent in the narrative around motivations – but relevant to their viability and prospects for survival – are perceptions that RMBCs were the personal projects of senior members of university leadership teams. Three of the interviewees believed that the original move to London was, in part or in its entirety, a ‘vanity’ project that lacked strong and coherent rationale (Interviewees B, H and J). Two of three interviewees conceded, however, that notwithstanding the lack of a clear business plan, the RMBCs had allowed the university to carry out small, controlled ‘experiments’ with the lessons being used to understand how the wider institution could improve; for example, one noted that the RMBC provided the opportunity to ‘*pilot interesting courses and explore new ways of working to deliver these effectively and efficiently*’ (Interviewee F).

4.2 | Organisational models

The interviews reveal that there are three organisational models being used to operate London RMBCs. All are reasonably simple from a regulatory perspective, a process which involves notifying the UK HE regulator, the Office for Students, of an additional campus and seeking UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI) approval for its use to teach international students, if applicable. The first, adopted by five of the 10 institutions interviewed, is the fully integrated model, whereby the RMBC is legally part of the home university. Here they operate as either standalone faculties or schools, or in two cases are parts of faculties or schools based at the home campus. In terms of size, these tend to be the smaller RMBCs measured by student numbers. This is a marked contrast with IBCs, which all need to be established as legal entities to operate in foreign jurisdictions.

The second model is where the RMBC is a wholly owned subsidiary of the home university, operating as a separate legal entity. Two of the larger RMBCs have taken this approach, which can be compared with the small number of IBCs operating on this basis, notably the Universities of Reading and Southampton in Malaysia.

In the third model, the ‘home’ university has created a joint venture with an external organisation to establish and operate an RMBC. Adopted by three of the sample – and often formed with a private sector provider of marketing, student recruitment and pathway services – this is also the approach sometimes used where the RMBC has evolved from a legacy partnership. This is also overwhelmingly the dominant organisational form of IBCs, where a joint venture is either required by the host government (e.g. China) or chosen by the home university to share costs and acquire local capability.

In addition to variations in the legal model chosen, the approach to governance varies across the ten RMBCs in the sample. The most common overall model is one of a high degree of autonomy but, in general – and in many cases following initial ‘animosity’ or ‘suspicion’ – in a positive relationship with the home campus, whereby ‘*respect remains important*’ (Interviewee G). In almost every case, the London-based staff members are either directly or indirectly managed by the Director, who reports into the parent university organisation at a senior level.

The degree of curriculum, pedagogical and research influence or control from the home campus varies dramatically across the sample RMBCs. In nine of the 10 – particularly but not exclusively in line with legal autonomy – there is a high degree of autonomy concerning day-to-day teaching, research and administrative issues; in only one case does the Director consider oversight from the home campus to be dictatorial. Organisational maturity clearly plays a role, with more autonomy evident in some of the older RMBCs, where past success appears to have bolstered confidence by the home university on the one hand, and self-confidence amongst the RMBC staff on the other. Many of the Directors interviewed pointed to the benefits of being able to create a new campus which can break free from the inefficiencies and rigidities of the home institution and the HE sector more generally; they emphasised that this freedom to innovate has helped focus operations on the student experience and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy, waste and duplication.

4.3 | Student models

The interview findings challenge the notion of homogeneity in the UK markets for student recruitment suggested by the QAA report in 2014, suggesting that there are at least three models in operation (QAA, 2014). The first, apparent in six of the sampled RMBCs, is a clear focus on the international student market, principally at postgraduate level, but also in some cases at undergraduate level. For example, one interviewee stated that London was a '*chance to attract a high calibre international student*' (Interviewee D). Some made a firm case against focusing on domestic students, with one interviewee noting that '*there are enough institutions offering places to home students*' (Interviewee B), whilst another argued there was '*simply too much competition for home students*' (Interviewee H). Whilst the source of international students varies between the sample institutions, their main markets have transitioned from China in the early years of London RMBCs to a dominance by India and other parts of South Asia – and to a lesser extent West Africa – over the past 5 years. Almost all the RMBCs use agent networks to recruit these students, whilst in some cases recruitment is led by a partner organisation.

The second student recruitment model – a focus for two of the RMBCs across undergraduate and postgraduate levels – is orientated towards local domestic students. In most cases, the students in question are mainly atypical home entrants to UK HE, often being residents in the UK of non-UK origin; mature students or returners to education; working students and/or students with parenting or caring responsibilities. Interviewee C reported over 600 enrolments of mature Italian students, almost all of whom had been living and working in London for many years. The same interviewee reported that their RMBC student cohort had an average age of 32 and was heavily skewed towards female learners with caring responsibilities. Interviewee E claimed that all their students were '*hyper-local*', originating from one of two boroughs in East London including many students of Bangladeshi heritage. Both Interviewees C and E highlighted the demographic opportunities of a growing population in East London as a key reason for locating in the capital.

The third approach to student recruitment blends home and international students learning side-by-side in broadly similar numbers. Whilst currently only two RMBCs have this balance, most of the interviewees highlighted the importance of aiming for a mixed model in the longer term, to allow their institutions to remain agile and shift between target student markets in response to changing government policy. Interviewee F neatly summarised this by highlighting the importance of '*following market trends*' and '*diversifying to mitigate external risks*'.

One interviewee, who leads a campus with a mix of home and overseas students, suggested that the orientation of RMBCs – vocational programmes, block teaching and flexible entry routes, but limited social or recreational facilities – lent themselves towards serving overseas and non-traditional 'home' student groups that mainstream London-based universities would not want to '*work hard to support*', arguing that it was '*not possible to deliver programmes at a branch campus to a traditional 18-year old domestic market*' (Interviewee G).

There was a strong level of consistency between the interviewees as to why students choose an RMBC. In addition to being in London where '*demand for HE still outstrips supply*' (Interviewee B), many suggested that the small and personalised models on offer at these campuses were important, as well as the flexible and vocational nature of programme offerings. It was also acknowledged, however, that competitive pricing and a strong overseas agent network underpinned success. Typically, those RMBCs focusing on the international student market see other RMBCs as their main competition for students – and new market entrants as a threat – whilst campuses focused on the domestic – typically widening participation – market see themselves competing predominantly against large London-based universities.

4.4 | Curriculum and teaching models

As summarised in Table 1, the range of programmes provided by London RMBCs is clustered around business, computing and a small number of related subjects. Several interviewees cited Master of Business Administration

(MBA) courses as core to their postgraduate programme offering, whilst others described how their portfolio has grown from a generic set of courses into related but more specialist degrees. Eight of the Directors interviewed stressed the importance of market testing and responding quickly to local demand in the process of developing and modifying course offerings, with one claiming that at their RMBC *'programmes can be developed and validated in three months'* (Interviewee D). Two of the campuses have full autonomy over their academic portfolio. In five RMBCs, academic teams are entirely separate from the home academic structure and enjoy a strong level of influence over the programmes they offer – but central approval is needed – whilst at three, academic teams across campuses are integrated and the RMBC has little autonomy in curriculum matters.

Despite these different models for developing the curriculum, the programmes offered and approaches to teaching and learning share many commonalities. Most of the campuses seek economies of scale by running a small number of large courses, but do so using multiple cohorts to maintain relatively small class sizes. Regardless of the discipline or sub-discipline being studied, several RMBCs share a focus on employability, entrepreneurship, business engagement and immersive educational experiences. The agile nature of the programmes on offer at many of the RMBCs is also apparent in our interview data. In three cases, the curriculum has undergone at least two iterations to find a formula that is academically and commercially successful, whilst several cases of courses being brought to market rapidly were highlighted. Similarly, some have started with a focus on postgraduate programmes and ended up diversifying to undergraduate courses, or vice versa. The influence of the background of the home institution is also apparent. For example, one of our sample is focused on gaming and digital design – reflecting home campus strengths – whilst others play to historic reputations around digital technologies and sports business.

In seven of our sample, there is a strong emphasis on teaching, as well as what one interviewee labelled *'teaching scholarship'* (Interviewee F), whilst more traditional research and knowledge exchange activities are present but are still developing. The three Directors that consider their campuses more advanced in terms of research all highlighted the importance of links with academics in the home campus, as well as colleagues at other London universities.

Many of the interviewees cited the student experience as both a major priority and significant risk, with some mentioning the context of OfS B3 conditions around retention, progression and outcomes (OfS, 2022). To be able to cater for working and commuting students, concentrated block teaching has been adopted at six RMBCs. The dominant model is of intensive face-to-face teaching 2 days per week, which is being actively considered by two others in our sample. One Director emphasised that not only was this attractive from a pedagogical perspective, but it *'supported good attendance and allowed students to learn in a way that works for them'* (Interviewee C).

Multiple entry points across the academic year are also almost completely universal across the sample, with two or three starting points common and some campuses operating up to six across the academic year. The extent to which remote and blended teaching was available at RMBCs was variable, perhaps reflecting varying institutional policies across UK HE in general.

4.5 | Resourcing models

There is a good level of consistency in the physical resources reported by interviewees. Directors consistently cited the proximity to other HE institutions – including other RMBCs – strong transport links and good value for money as reasons for choosing campus locations. The result is that most are located in modern and highly accessible former office blocks in either the eastern fringe of the City of London or in the Docklands of east London and surrounds. There is clearly a focus on good-quality teaching spaces supported by an efficient timetable.

Two employment models are being used for permanent staff. Those campuses that remain legally integrated with the home campus retain the same staff terms and conditions between locations, save for a London weighting and different designated place of work. Those that have been created as wholly owned subsidiaries or as part of

joint ventures utilise the ability to vary London staff terms and conditions, including in some cases different levels of salary, pension arrangements and working hours. One interviewee (Interviewee C) remarked that *'we only want teachers who love teaching. We pay well but we require high teaching performance'*.

Whilst precise terms and conditions presumably vary between institutions and were not collected as part of this research, Directors of RMBCs with the autonomy to vary terms and conditions explained that these have been tailored to the London market in order to facilitate staff retention and a focus on teaching. Although most of those interviewed acknowledged some use of temporary staffing, they reported that a strong majority of staff at their RMBCs were employed on a permanent basis. Contrary to some of the models employed in IBCs during early years of development, there appears to be little cross-fertilisation of teaching staff between home campuses and London RMBCs. Interviewees generally felt that those universities that were already multi-campus pre-RMBC enjoyed no obvious advantages over their counterparts with a single home campus.

5 | DISCUSSION

The opportunity for demand absorption, and the financial benefits that it could bring to the home campus, is clearly a key reason why many universities have decided to establish a London RMBC. There are clear neoliberal justifications for this when examining the two most prominent markets targeted by these campuses. London is a huge draw for international students (Brooks & Waters, 2018). According to HESA (2022), between 2014 and 2022, the number of international students enrolling at London-based universities has increased from 106,815 to 179,425 (70%), compared to an increase of 49% outside of London.

In parallel, the general population of London increased by 7.4% between 2011 and 2021 (6.3% nationally), but parts of East London, such as Tower Hamlets (22.1%) and Newham (14.0%), have seen more dramatic rises (ONS, 2021), increasing demand from local students. This has contributed to the impressive levels of growth of some London RMBCs, with student numbers more than trebling since 2014 (QAA, 2014) and, as previously discussed, is leading to several new market entrants. The extent to which increasing demand will continue – and the impacts that evolving Government policy, particularly in relation to international students, will have – remains to be seen.

Whilst financial imperatives appear universally important and some campuses have evolved from legacy partnership arrangements, a range of other drivers has encouraged universities to create London campuses. It is difficult to quantify reputation and measure improvements to an institution's international profile – let alone ascribe causality – yet since opening an RMBC, six of these institutions have gained a Times Higher Education World University Ranking for the first time (THE, 2023). RMBC Directors in our sample felt that it was part of their role to drive the wider University's global profile, supporting Kleibert's (2021) assertions.

Similarly, it is difficult to quantify the strength of institutional business links and the benefits that this has brought to London-based RMBCs. Several interviewees claimed to be outperforming their home campuses in relation to student employability, and that this may be linked to industry exposure and bespoke employment related programme features, but disaggregated public data on this metric is not available. A more intangible rationale, relating to London being a test-bed for new ideas and ways of working, was expressed by some of the RMBC Directors. It is notable that four of the universities that have created RMBCs had subsequently gone on to establish IBCs across three different continents. The interviews were inconclusive in ascribing causality to this pattern, with some considering that the initial London project had played a role and others unsure; it would be instructive to explore this issue in more detail to understand whether an RMBC is a viable route to an IBC, as suggested by Kleibert (2021).

Visiting 10 of London's RMBCs reveals that they are diverse and distinctive in their character and culture. From an organisational perspective, three different models are in use: those that are legally integrated and part of the home university; those that are wholly owned subsidiaries but separate legal entities; and those that are owned jointly with

a partner. The latter two models have allowed RMBCs to tailor employment models to fit their needs in London, whilst implementing teaching and support models that align with the needs and expectations of their students.

Nevertheless, our research does not suggest that those RMBCs created as separate legal entities are necessarily more or less integrated with the home campus from an operational, teaching, research or knowledge transfer perspective. Whilst legal independence and autonomy go hand-in-hand in some cases, there are examples of integrated RMBCs that are almost entirely autonomous, and of subsidiaries or joint ventures that are substantially influenced by the home institution in matters of pedagogy, portfolio and strategic direction.

Aside from organisational models, it is possible to draw a broad picture of the typical London RMBC, which is applicable to most of our sample. This 'typical' RMBC would be situated in east London, or the eastern fringe of Central London, and would see a target market of international and/or mature, working local students, engaged at postgraduate, and sometimes undergraduate level. These students would be seeking degrees in business management, computing and related disciplines, and their courses would include a high degree of business engagement and experiential learning. There would be high numbers of students in their cohort, but they would learn in small groups. They may have started learning at the RMBC at various times in the year, and in many cases would learn in blocks of several weeks based on attending in person perhaps two or three, often consecutive, days per week. This would allow them to live in relatively affordable parts of London and the Southeast, work part time and accommodate other responsibilities such as caring for children.

Such students may have chosen an RMBC over a more traditional university experience because of the courses on offer, the personal nature of the campus and university experience, the fact that the learning style or format meets their needs, or, in some cases, simply because they wanted to study in London, and the RMBC was recommended by an agent.

This is possibly an overly simplistic attempt to characterise London RMBCs, but it demonstrates that by remaining agile and listening to the market, they have been able to grow and thrive, creating sustainable business models that meet the needs of certain segments of students.

As reported by the interviewees, however, there are several risks and threats on the horizon for RMBCs. With four new universities entering this market by 2025 – albeit with varying stated objectives, approaches and focus markets – the level of competition will continue to increase. Set against the possibility that the UK Government will impose further restrictions on international students – having already announced in May 2023 that taught postgraduates will no longer be able to bring dependent family members with them – there is a question over whether the level of demand will be sustained (Parker et al., 2023). In this case, there could be even more pressure on RMBCs to diversify and adapt to survive.

For their part, RMBC Directors are clearly becoming organised and sharing knowledge and best practice. In addition to many attending London Higher (a membership organisation for HE across the capital), a sub-group has been formed: London Centres, which focuses on issues facing RMBCs (London Higher, 2023).

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the relatively new phenomenon of the RMBC. Reaching a working definition has made it possible to distinguish new attempts at domestic geographical diversification from legacy regional multicampus arrangements and from domestic partnerships and coalitions. The growth of RMBCs in the UK, and specifically in London, warrants particular attention. It reveals that universities see RMBCs as another option for income diversification and financial sustainability, establishing physical sites in locations that are popular destinations for students, but that they are also a vehicle to improve institutional reputation, create valuable links with business and commerce and test new ways of delivering HE.

It also reveals a vibrant and growing sub-sector of the UK HE system with specific student markets overseas and domestically and a distinctive skew towards programmes in business, computing and related degrees. Unlike

most universities in the UK, RMBCs have the advantage of being created in relative isolation, with portfolios, pedagogy and learning patterns orientated towards the student, while efficiency and agility are built into their DNA. They compete with one another, with traditional institutions and with alternative and niche providers in London based on these features and are gaining a voice in London HE via established networks and their own forums.

This paper has been limited in its scope. It has sought only to define an RMBC, differentiating it from other domestic satellite campuses, and explore, using one location, the motivations for their establishment and the models employed. The extent to which the conclusions reached are generalisable to other locations would warrant further research, as would the reasons for RMBC failure and success, and the way this relates to general success factors within HE. It is possible that the transferability of the themes identified in London to other, global centres such as New York, Tokyo or Dubai may depend on several factors including their local student markets, their relative appeal to international students compared to regional universities in those territories, and their ability to boost the reputation of these regional universities. Whilst this paper has touched on organisational, student, teaching and resourcing models, more in-depth research on these would be of value, especially in the context of the other options available to universities to diversify. In this respect, more work comparing RMBCs with, for example, IBCs would be valuable.

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Rob Hickey: Conceptualization; methodology; data curation; formal analysis; validation; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Nigel Healey:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization; methodology.

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None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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