

Anchor or Sail: Comparative study of how UK and US universities balance their local and international ambitions

Conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in partnership with the British Council, this comparative study provides an in-depth view of how six selected UK and US colleges and universities balance their civic responsibility to their local communities, especially in areas of higher socio-economic need, with their global ambitions for student mobility and international research.

The study aimed to:

- identify effective practices that the selected institutions use to support their local communities while also providing global opportunities for their students and faculty;
- highlight the various approaches taken by the institutions to address this challenge and the role of civic/private partners, both local and international.

The following higher education institutions (HEIs) participated in the study: [Heriot-Watt University](#) (Scotland, UK); [Miami Dade College](#) (Florida, USA); [Rutgers The State University of New Jersey](#) (New Jersey, USA); [University of California, Davis](#) (California, USA); [University of Liverpool](#) (England, UK); [University of Ulster](#) (Northern Ireland, UK).

Summary of Key Findings

- **Local is global**
Global engagement is viewed as part of a service to the local community – local and global are not mutually exclusive and can be achieved through integrating the student body, core curriculum and the relationship with the surrounding community.
- **Authenticity**
Local-global initiatives are most successful when the goals match the institutions' core values and principles and reflect their unique student populations and academic strengths.
- **Engage underrepresented student populations**
Both UK and US institutions noted the importance of ensuring that local-global initiatives include support for students underrepresented in this type of programming. Successful

engagement and implementation address not just financial support but a cultural shift in thinking about outward mobility while considering students' challenges.

- **Meaningful partnerships**

Institutions noted a shift from top down partnerships to those secured through the collaboration of faculty, resulting in fewer but arguably better relationships.

- **Investment in infrastructure**

Investment in new “umbrella” posts and resources ensured across campus buy-in for local-global initiatives and improved internal communication to faculty and students.

- **Local and global dimensions of research**

Multinational research teams provide a direct connection to the local community when they collaborate to solve a local problem with a global solution and vice versa.

- **National policy impact**

External factors, such as pending changes to national policy and the current political climates in both the UK and US, pushed institutions to get creative when thinking of ways their students, affected by various issues such as visa regulations or the inability to leave the country, could have an international experience.

Summary of Effective Practices

- Focus on global societal challenges by designing opportunities that look at local and global dimensions in research (Rutgers University and Heriot-Watt University)
- Design global education curriculum and opportunities that address specific student needs, particularly the needs of underserved students (University of Ulster and University of California, Davis)
- Select partners (such as vendors, service providers, higher education institutions) who share the same core values and have expertise working with specific student populations (Miami Dade College and Heriot-Watt University)
- Invest in a staffing structure that will implement local-global initiatives and cultivate relationships with partners across the campus (University of Liverpool)
- Invest time and resources to educate students, parents, and the local community about the value of global engagement and make connections between the local and global (Rutgers University)

Context

In both the UK and US there is a renewed focus on the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) and their place in the community. At the same time, HEIs have international strategies to increase student and faculty outward mobility and international research collaboration. As key contributors to a local community, HEIs need to be fully engaged on issues at the local or regional level while simultaneously educating students to participate in activities at the global level (GUNi, 2017).

Civic engagement is a traditional pillar in the mission of higher education institutions. In the UK, the University Partnerships Programme Foundation Civic University Commission (2018) defined a civic university as having a public-centered view, being truly local, and expressing commitment to the community through core or 'discretionary' activity that is 'rooted in a clear and coherent view of the needs of its place' (p. 5). Throughout their report recommendations on the future of civic universities is a thread linking the local place within an international community, most notably expressed in recommendation nine to 'Strengthen local impact alongside international excellence' (Civic University Commission, 2019).

In the US both land grant universities¹ and 'anchor' institutions² are recognised for their commitment to the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of their local communities. However, a 2012 National Call to Action challenged all HEIs to 'embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority' (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2012). As a result, US institutions created initiatives and renewed focus in this area. Engagement with communities is also recognised through designation of the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, held currently by 361 US higher education institutions.³

In contrast to the goals for civic engagement are those that drive institutions to participate at a global level. International research collaborations and networks have long linked institutions under formal and informal partnerships. Student and faculty mobility are at the foundation of international partnerships and the global exchange of ideas and information. The "*glocal university*"⁴ moves beyond mobility to look holistically at educating global citizens through academic, experiential, and other learning. The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi, 2017) urges institutions to reflect on how they can stay true to the principles that root them in tradition while being responsive to the challenges faced in the international community.

¹ The Morrill Act of 1862 gave states public lands provided the lands be sold or used for profit and the proceeds used to establish at least one college that would teach agriculture and the mechanical arts. Land grant universities focus on teaching, research, and the extension of higher education to broad segments of the US population (National Research Council, 1995).

² Anchor institutions are universities (as well as hospitals and other non-profit organizations) that are tied to the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of the communities they surround (Friedman, Perry, & Menendez, 2014).

³ For more information on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Community Engagement Classification and a complete listing of institutions: <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/newsroom/news-releases/carnegie-selects-colleges-universities-2015-community-engagement-classification/>

⁴ *Glocal university* is defined as "higher education institutions and systems that strive to address the demands of the local community within the context of an ever-expanding global reality for the good of all humanity" (GUNi, p. 30).

Key Findings

Local is global

All participants in this study view global engagement as part of their service to the local community. Integrating both local and global components into campus activities and initiatives is intentional and central to strategic planning. It does not represent a binary choice – local and global are not mutually exclusive.

Interviewees described a campus culture that reflected the local-global integration in everything from the student body make-up and core curriculum to the relationship with the community surrounding the institution. Many credited strong institutional leadership for emphasising the value of both local and global dimensions.

“We try to ground our work in the local community when we’re thinking about global. We’re bringing students abroad, but it’s all linked foundationally [to] what’s happening in our community here and how what we do here impacts the world and what happens in the world impacts local communities ” - Rutgers The State University of New Jersey

Authenticity

Initiatives aiming to bridge local and global communities were most successful when the goals matched those of their institution’s core values and founding principles. The culture of each institution is uniquely shaped by its history, location, and surrounding community. Interviewees remarked that campus community buy-in to initiatives was facilitated by staying true to the institution and aligning with their unique student population. Successful endeavours also built upon the academic strengths and specialisations at their institutions.

“Our initial focus back in 1821, ...was to deliver training to the poor and underprivileged of the time. ... Our history was rather transformative at the time and this sort of ethos runs to the present. [W]e view that knowledge is not ...geographically defined and that’s ...a key driver here at Heriot-Watt. ...we have these Scottish roots, and we have a Scottish education, but it is an international education and we took that approach to make the fees [in our Malaysian campus] local so that we could actually access and engage with local community. Because if we [had] charged our British rate fees in Malaysia, it would’ve been a very select, smaller cohort of students, who would have been able to study with us” – Heriot-Watt University

Engage underrepresented student populations

Participating institutions prioritised inclusion and access in their programming and had designed initiatives with the needs of low income, minority, or other underrepresented student populations, in mind.

UK stakeholders focused on support for Widening Participation students⁵ in study abroad as part of their efforts to meet the UK target for student global mobility. Interviewees noted that while financial support to fund study abroad was an essential part of the dialogue for this student population, it was only one piece of the picture. It was equally important to confront perceptions about higher education in general, and the value of study abroad for the development of intercultural/soft skills for future employability.

Some US interviewees also mentioned the need to create a culture of study abroad among a local community comprised of immigrant parents who viewed study abroad as a luxury. In some cases, US HEIs focused on domestic initiatives that expanded global education for undocumented students unable to leave the country.

Meaningful partnerships

HEIs were revisiting their partnerships⁶, both local and international, and investing in infrastructure and staff to nurture long-term relationships. Interviewees stated that partnerships secured with the support of faculty were more successful than those initiated previously from the top down approach. Although this results in fewer partnerships, those which remain are more productive for faculty, students, and the university community.

Investment in infrastructure

Some institutions built capacity (new offices, staff, additional resources) to support global initiatives which would have local impact. High level support for infrastructure allowed staff to focus on buy-in across the campus community (faculty, staff, students, alumni, etc.) and improved internal communication so that everyone was aware of changes, new procedures, or new opportunities. Effective communication between academic and student service departments was particularly critical and resulted in improved support for student and operational efficiencies.

Notably, some interviewees felt it was important to emphasise that investment in infrastructure was not purely focused on building an affiliate or branch campus overseas. In some cases, institutions had jumped too quickly onto this bandwagon, only to result in less than satisfactory results or closure of the branch campus.

“The big lessons learned from the outside world [is] how many of those things fail and for a variety of reasons. For legal reasons, financial reasons, but also spectacular failures because faculty were not engaged, students were not engaged. So, we’re moving slowly—there was a deliberate decision to engage people from the beginning and communicate, communicate, communicate.” – University of California, Davis

⁵ In the United Kingdom, Widening Participation is a government initiative designed to offer higher education opportunities to individuals from lower socio-economic groups, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.

⁶ Partnerships include both formal partnerships solidified through memorandum of understanding or other similar contractual agreements as well as less formal partnerships established based on relationships and trust. Partnerships included those between institutions as well as with vendors, service providers, and other organisations.

UK institutions have established various models of transnational education⁷. The University of Liverpool favours the joint-venture model where an institution partners with another university overseas, rather than an affiliate or branch campuses. Joint-venture partnerships serve multiple goals for both entities: increased opportunities for student, faculty, and staff mobility, student access to full degree programmes in both locations, as well as collaboration across research networks.

“We have a collaboration between Xi’an Jiaotong University in China and Liverpool. It’s a joint venture. So, it’s not a branch campus. There is quite a lot of faculty and staff mobility to and from the China campus, ...to exchange best practice and effective practice between the two institutions. ...There’s a lot of infrastructure in place to support the partnership. ...it’s embedded throughout our community structure... There’s a lot of will to work together and that makes a big difference in terms of the day to day nuts and bolts and operations of the partnership...Those links are at a very senior level and it filters right down to nearly every member of administrative staff. It’s very much embedded in both the cultures of both campuses working together collaboratively to support the students and also trying to look for new opportunities, new ways of working together beyond their student traffic.” - University of Liverpool, England

Local and global dimensions of research

International research collaborations inherently drive partnerships and connect local and global communities. Interviewees shared a mixed picture of their multinational collaborations. In many cases, partnerships are formed organically between two faculty members. The informal partnership is contingent on numerous factors such as the relationship between the researchers, access to funding, and research quality or expertise. In some cases, these partnerships lasted for decades. In a few cases, these partnerships led to agreements between institutions or collaboration in other areas. Interviewees noted that top down initiated partnerships are often driven by factors such as location or prestige (the wish to align with a better-known institution) and that it is rare for projects that bring together specific researcher expertise to align with these types of partnerships.

National policy impact

External factors, such as national policies, were drivers for institutions to think about local and global engagement in creative ways to better support their students. This played out differently in the UK and the US, although HEIs in all locations linked pending changes to domestic policy and the current political climates with uncertainty around global initiatives.

In both countries, more stringent visa regulations led some institutions to consider ways to better leverage their global presence to accommodate students who may not be able to acquire the necessary visa. In the UK, the continuing lack of clarity on the outcomes leaving the

⁷ Transnational education is defined by HE Global (2016) as “the provision of a higher education degree programme leading to a UK qualification for students based in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is located. This includes joint, double or dual awards.”

European Union (Brexit) has created uncertainty not only for students and faculty at the institution, but also for their European partners, particularly around mobility, research collaboration and funding.

The US HEIs sought to address global education for students who fall under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme and are unable to go abroad. This has led to creative approaches for developing global skills in a domestic US location through study away semesters, domestic based internships with foreign or global organisations, and a renewed look at ways to internationalise university curriculum beyond mobility.

Effective Practices from the Case Studies

- **Focus on global societal challenges by designing opportunities that look at local and global dimensions**

Rutgers University noted that its “Jersey Roots, Global Reach” permeates through initiatives on all four campuses of the institution. Driven by a strategic plan that focuses on “cultures, diversity, and inequality – local and global,” Rutgers University has one of the most diverse student bodies in the United States and considers the local community a global village. Rutgers University Center for Migration and the Global City works with the immigrant community, largely stemming from the student body. The Center’s Newest Americans Project chronicles the immigrant experience, through local documentary and story-telling, to better understand migration, both the sending and receiving contexts. The project is expanding to Colombia and Malta with local partners. For the project in Malta, Rutgers University partnered with a local NGO, Spark 15, and National Geographic to document Malta through the eyes of young refugees who are now living in Malta. Through their involvement in this project, Rutgers University students can do research in another country and gain a different perspective on the pressing global issue of refugees and migration.

Heriot-Watt University’s establishment of campuses in Dubai and Malaysia with full degree programmes aligned to the curriculum in Scotland led to enlightening conversations among faculty about the curriculum content. Bringing faculty together to review and discuss curriculum allowed Heriot-Watt University to make adjustments that reflect a more inclusive curriculum that brings together perspectives from different parts of the world. In one example, engineering faculty questioned the emphasis on heat loss in the curriculum. While heat loss is a concern in the colder climate in Scotland, heat gain is a greater concern in Dubai and Malaysia. This conversation informed the curriculum and teaching, allowing the faculty to integrate perspectives from all three regions of the world into the engineering curriculum. Adjustments, such as this, are important at Heriot-Watt where the Go Global inter-campus transfer programme allows students to easily move from one campus to another while completing their degree.

Miami Dade College, Rutgers University, and University of California, Davis recently adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework to focus on global issues that are already a part of local university engagements. In December 2018 the

Sustainable Development Solutions Network for universities launched a US chapter to encourage US universities to offer innovative solutions for the SDGs.

- **Design global education curriculum and opportunities that address specific student needs, particularly the needs of underserved students.**

University of Ulster recognised the challenge in Northern Ireland to engage students in outward mobility. The student body at Ulster draws largely from the local population, resulting in a significant number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who receive support through the Widening Participation (WP) initiative. The university identified that the best way to support WP students was a two-prong approach:

- create managed experiences of varied duration;
- change the culture around mobility.

Managed experiences guide students who are less self-sufficient and less confident than others. The study abroad experiences can last from 1-2-weeks or for a full semester. For Ulster, this approach better supports students who come from the local community, do not live in student residences, and have not had prior access to international experiences.

Initiating a shift in culture is no small feat. However, University of Ulster is tackling the challenge by winning the support of academic colleagues who are in a position to encourage student participation in overseas mobility programmes: building student testimonials after their return home and sharing research that demonstrates the benefit of study abroad to future success and employability.

University of California, Davis (UC, Davis) initiated *Global Education for All*, a programme designed to ensure that all degree-seeking students engage in global learning prior to graduating, no matter who they are, where they are from, what they study, their financial means, or their ability to cross national borders. This is particularly relevant at UC, Davis where the student population is largely comprised of first-generation college students, students of colour and includes those who are undocumented.

Born out of a Campus Big Ideas Initiative, *Global Education for All* is a top priority at the institution with working groups to ensure input from all stakeholders (leadership, faculty, staff, students, and alumni). Guided by a commitment to diversity, equity and sustainability, and enriched by the tremendous cultural wealth of the region, UC Davis seeks to integrate global learning into academic, experiential, and co-/extra-curricular learning.

UC Davis drafted a global learning framework, conducted an assessment of global learning opportunities available on campus, and developed a communications strategy for students, faculty, and staff, to actively engage them in a conversation about what global learning means to them.

- **Select partners (e.g. vendors, service providers, higher education institutions) who share the same core values.**

Stakeholders from Miami Dade College described how the institution stayed true to itself not only in the design of its initiatives, but also through the partnerships and providers who help to implement initiatives. For its *Educate Tomorrow Abroad Program*, designed to give homeless students the opportunity to study abroad, Miami Dade College identified vendors who were better positioned to meet the needs of this specific student population. Miami Dade College found that large vendors, with a strong presence in the field, were often more expensive and unable to modify the supports needed for this student group. In many cases, selecting vendors that reflected attributes of Miami Dade College - more flexible, less expensive, and able to customise service – led to a better experience for the students. Miami Dade College also selected vendors that share an interest in social impact and sustainability practices and noted several partners who have similar initiatives to support homeless students in the United States and abroad.

Heriot-Watt University described how a focus on the secondary school pipeline into university was implemented as a priority on campuses in Scotland and Malaysia. In both locations, emphasis was on the relationship with the local community and exposure to higher education as a future opportunity, whether at Heriot-Watt University or elsewhere. The practice in Scotland initially focused on exam preparation and showcasing research and potential career paths through Heriot-Watt University for secondary school students. In contrast, the Peer Assisted Learning Support programme in Malaysia is designed to support every student to realise their full potential through engagements focused on smart goal setting, teaching self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Each location is learning from the other and adapting aspects of the secondary school programming to better enhance the relationships and impact in secondary schools across Scotland and Malaysia.

- **Invest in staffing to implement initiatives and cultivate relationships with partners.**

University of Liverpool described investment in faculty and staff positions designed to carry out the *Employability in a Global Context* initiative outlined in the university's 2026 Education Strategy. The university established Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor (APVCs) positions that have both an institutional role and a faculty role as part of the overarching strategy to bridge the conversation between all faculties. APVCs sit on university level committees, panels, strategic boards, exchange projects, while also serving as a faculty member. An International Opportunity Advisory group, comprised of one representative from each academic department, was established to implement concrete actions for increasing the number of students going abroad. Furthermore, partnerships formed between academic departments and other offices, previously considered student services, to implement specific initiatives such as *Employability in a Global Context*. By connecting an academic faculty member with a senior staff member in the student career division, their collaboration resulted in more targeted communication and customised

support to individual students. An increase in staffing across the University of Liverpool meant that staff could focus on the partnerships necessary to implement the initiative and meet the goals of the 2026 Education Strategy.

- **Invest time and resources to educate students, parents, and the local community about the value of global engagement; share local-global connections.**

Rutgers University infuses a global perspective in the local community through connections with international visitors. Rutgers University hosts the Mandela Washington Fellowship, a flagship programme of the Young African Leaders Initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. This fellowship brings 50 young professionals and scholars from African countries to Rutgers each summer to participate in academic and hands-on training and networking. Local faculty and students, along with the local community, have opportunities to meet with the fellows. During a one-day event, Newark high school students work with the fellows on global issues that impact both the New Jersey community as well as the African countries represented by the fellows. In some cases, students stay in touch with the young African leaders well beyond the programme period, including visits to their home countries.

Conclusion

Despite cultural differences and ranging vastly in size, specialisation, and student body, all six of the institutions participating in this study took similar overarching approaches to balancing their local commitments and their global ambitions. While the activities vary at each institution, they are all making progress on their goals by prioritising expansion of their reach, increasing access and participation, while addressing the challenges of working in this way.

To achieve this balance, universities and colleges should integrate local responsibilities and global ambition into their institutional culture, made evident in their mission statement, leadership structure, curriculum, policies, and committed resources. A *glocal university* commitment actively engages stakeholders at all levels (students, staff, faculty, leadership, alumni) and in all areas (teaching, research, and lifelong learning).

Data Collection Methods

IIE conducted 16 virtual interviews of key stakeholders from six UK and US colleges and universities in January 2019. The British Council announced the study through an open call to its HE sector network, following up with emails and calls to interested participants. Similarly, IIE selected institutions based on their civic engagement activities, global mobility achievements, geographic location, and unique student population. Every effort was made to select a range of institutions addressing the tensions of local and global engagement in different ways.

Interviewees represented their institutions from a variety of different offices associated with civic engagement and global education. Interviewees included Vice-Provosts, Directors, Heads, and Associate Chancellors from offices such as Student Recruitment, International Development, Global Student Programmes, Faculty Engagement, and Study Abroad.

For More Information:

[Educate Tomorrow Abroad](#), Miami Dade College

[Global Education for All](#), University of California, Davis

[Go Global Intercampus Transfer Program](#), Heriot-Watt University

[Mandela Washington Fellows Program](#), Rutgers University

[Newest Americans Project](#), Rutgers University Center for Migration and the Global City

[Sustainable Development Solutions Network](#)

[University of Liverpool Strategy 2026](#)

[Xi'an Jiaotong – Liverpool University](#)

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