Almost 20 per cent of students studying for British first degrees do not reside in the UK, but rather study at one of the country’s 13 branch campuses or, more likely, via franchise arrangements: more than 400 of them were reported in 2008.

In overseas branches, the home institution is, at least to an extent, “on the ground” and there is hands-on direction and supervision of teaching, but franchising is the provision of degrees without such involvement. It parallels what McDonald’s does.

McDonald’s sells the right to “brand” its products so long as franchisees adhere to strict standards and policies: thus, a Big Mac tastes the same in Chicago or Shanghai. “Inputs” (potatoes, meat, the “special sauce”) are carefully monitored. Business practices are stipulated and the “brand image” closely monitored, although there is modest latitude for local adaptation – a Big Mac in Riyadh is halal, and one can find a McPork in Bucharest.

One difference between a McDonald’s and a university franchise is that the former requires significant investment by the franchisee in facilities, equipment and the like. In many cases, an education franchise simply needs to rent additional space with little from either side, potentially leaving students in the lurch.

Franchising is yet another example of the commodification of higher education: the sole purpose of the operation is to make money. If one accepts that non-profit institutions at home should operate as profit-making businesses overseas, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with this. But there are a number of questions that must be raised.

Concerns have been expressed by quality assurance agencies and in the UK media that several universities have been caught offering substandard products overseas, or at least not adequately monitoring the degrees offered in their names. In a recent article in The Guardian, a senior administrator at the University of Nottingham, which has several Asian branch campuses, noted that in franchise or twinning arrangements, the overseas partner may follow the UK curriculum, but it may not be taught with the same ethos. An emphasis on interactive learning or critical thinking, for example, may be missing. In other words, the form but not necessarily the substance of education may be provided by the franchisee.

And quality assurance is not easy. Home evaluators may not be aware of conditions overseas, and in any case the logistics are difficult and often expensive.

All of this raises the question of whether the curricula offered for most specialisations in the UK and other rich countries are appropriate for the needs of developing nations. Yet the essence of the franchise arrangement is that the “product” offered be the same as at home.

There seem to be a variety of franchise agencies involved in developing nations. Some are private universities; others are business interests wishing to enter the lucrative academic market, or add an education facility to a new shopping mall. There may be nothing wrong with these sponsors, but they balance the educational mission against their business interests.

Higher education franchising is a growing phenomenon. As with all commercial investment in the sector, there are potential problems. So far, the franchisers seem to be working on the McDonald’s principle. It would be interesting to ask why no one is looking at the educational equivalent of Intercontinental Hotels – aimed at higher-end market segments – as a model.

Philip G. Altbach is Monan professor of higher education and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, US.

Caption box caption goes right here please thank you very much

Harvard can’t bring you that.”

The report, published in International Focus, the UK Higher Education International Unit’s electronic newsletter, argues that UK universities could tap into the demand from the Chaebol for well-connected graduates who are fluent in English.

British institutions could offer “an 18-month course beginning with language training and leading to an MA following their first degree”, it says.

“This can be taken immediately after Sky-KAIST graduation when the Korean network has been sufficiently embedded.”

The report adds that “we need to work with the Korean government to boost the recognition of UK qualifications as opposed to those from the US”.

49th parallel ties

But Aidan Foster-Carter, honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at the University of Leeds, noted the strong roots of the US-Korean relationship.

“South Korea is a country that was literally founded by the US,” he said. “It was the US that suggested the post-war division; there was three years of rule by the US military government before the Republic of Korea was founded. The US has been the abiding power and remains so.”

As such, he said, for Korean students heading abroad, the US “would be the automatic choice”.

Although Dr Foster-Carter said he had personal reservations about world university rankings, he added that British universities might offer their strong overall position in such tables as a carrot to Korean institutions and students.

There remains “a strong status element” in the Korean attitude to education, he said.

In addition, US and UK universities have further competition from China. Korean students make up 27 per cent of overseas students in China, according to figures from the IIE’s Project Atlas, more than from any other country.

Dr Foster-Carter said: “In a way, if you’re Korean right now, you’re placing bets as to which is the power [the US or China] to attach to.”

john.morgan@tsleducation.com