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Toward an Improved Shared Understanding of TNE

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Abstract

Transnational education (TNE) has experienced significant growth recently, with more students enrolling in TNE programs and more institutions involved in TNE. This article develops a framework that captures the impacts of TNE on local education systems and explores the host country's perspective on TNE. TNE is crucial in bridging the gap between supply and demand for higher education, supporting access for disadvantaged groups, and capacity building. It supports nations' aspirations for an international student hub.

Transnational education (TNE) has increased its reach over the past two decades: more students are enrolled in programs, and more education institutions are engaged in its delivery. Most notable developments include the following.

Collaborative forms of TNE have a growing prominence and have expanded at the expense of independently delivered TNE. Examples of collaborative provision include joint international branch campuses, dual and double degrees, and agreements for franchised education provision, among others.

COVID-19 appears to have acted as a catalyst of this development—program mobility made up for disruptions in student mobility during the pandemic. Most learners were pushed to engage with academic provision online and sometimes from their home countries.

Recent economic downturns have negatively impacted public funding for higher education, significantly restricting access to domestic higher education options. This resulted in a significant expansion of TNE in countries like Sri Lanka, where the number of TNE students reached almost 46,000 in 2021 from 30,000 in 2019.

There is a growing recognition of TNE at the national level. While this signals openness to engage in TNE, there is also an attempt to regulate it. The most recent examples of such policy shifts are noted in India and Nigeria. The introduction of regulations

suggests a need to harness market forces in order to bridge demand and supply, enhance quality or improve employability. Those are not new developments. The East Asian currency crisis in 1997 stimulated one of the early significant expansions of TNE across the region—such developments were noted in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, among other countries).

Growing Focus on the Host Country Perspective

Sustainable development and a focus on impact are becoming more embedded in universities' strategies, and the local impact of TNE is growing in prominence in the literature and empirical studies. These developments contributed to strengthened partnerships with benefits aimed at the wider society. Regulatory bodies are strengthening their rules to protect student interest, and TNE widens student choice.

However, there is a lack of internationally binding frameworks and taxonomies to regulate and measure TNE. In effect, TNE regulation is often managed at the individual country level by several bodies that supervise, audit or conduct the various regulatory and quality assurance processes. In some countries, all functions may reside within one agency, while in other countries, the responsibility for quality assurance may be shared and benchmarked with international agencies or standards.

Multiple instruments, mainly regional, support the mobility of programs and institutions through quality assurance and qualification recognition, from the European Standards and Guidelines and the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education to the different regional Qualification Recognition conventions and the recent Global Convention under UNESCO. While they enhance longstanding country-based efforts, no single set of international standards regulates TNE and its quality.

Development of a TNE Framework

To best capture TNE developments and to address a gap in our understanding of TNE, the British Council drew on expertise from Education Insight and the UK's Quality Assurance Agency to develop a TNE framework that reflects host country priorities and captures macroeconomic and higher education developments globally and nationally.

The study found that TNE can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between supply and demand in countries and territories with high demand but low supply of higher education. Similarly, TNE can support the diversification of local provision, supplying courses that are not available locally. The study utilizes Hans Rosling's GapMinder tool to plot together statistical resources from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Kingdom's Higher Education Statistics Agency. Bespoke data sets developed for this project complement these data collections.

During a QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) International Partner Forum held on November 2023 with the attendance of regulatory bodies from Bangladesh, China, Cyprus, Ghana, India, Kuwait, and Malaysia, participants identified different levels of maturity in data collection, recognition of TNE qualifications (particularly those delivered online), systems to assure quality, and the movement of partnerships beyond teaching-only validation-based to holistic, including research collaboration.

TNE Widens Access and Supports Access for Disadvantaged Groups

One example was the increase in online courses in Afghanistan, reported by FutureLearn, where most of the demand is believed to be from female learners. Similarly, more than 15,000 Afghan women applied to courses offered by Arizona State University and a Canadian nonprofit.

A case study from Sri Lanka shows significant constraints in meeting local higher education demand, which was exacerbated by the recent economic crisis.

In 2010, the country's gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education (GER) was 16 percent, and TNE students as a proportion of local tertiary enrollments were estimated at 2 percent. In 2020, Sri Lanka's GER increased by 6 percent and reached 22 percent, whereas TNE estimated 11 percent of the local tertiary enrollments. As Sri Lanka's policy focus shifts from the supply of higher education to safeguarding the quality of tertiary education provision, the shape and pace of TNE changes, too. The development of a TNE regulatory framework with a quality focus is imminent.

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The report will be available online at www.britishcouncil. org/research-insight.

Supporting Recruitment and Hub Aspirations

TNE can support the internationalization of local higher education provision. The rise of the United Arab Emirates to become one of the world's largest host destinations is evidenced by the 344 percent growth in its number of international students. Over the past decade, the number of international students in the United Arab Emirates increased from 48,653 in 2011 to 215,975 in 2020, ranking it ninth behind Japan and China.

Initially, TNE catered mainly to the education needs of the expat community, which accounted for approximately 90 percent of the population. Liberalization of international education provision became a policy preoccupation and a top priority for Dubai's Knowledge Human Development Authority (KHDA), the regulatory body for the quality of the overall education provision in Dubai, which has become one of the most recent examples of a talent hub and has the world's highest concentration of international branch campuses. Increasingly, international branch campuses and programs in the country are attracting international talent.

Next Steps

The most notable gap in our knowledge is the host country's perspective on TNE. The lack of knowledge covers several areas, including regulatory bodies' plans and considerations for the future of TNE in the country. While the major home country of TNE providers collects data and monitors TNE provision, activities in the host countries are not consolidated. Most TNE data collections are at the program level—local regulatory bodies monitor the local provision of programs through the reaccreditation process and the requirements for reaccreditation. However, robust data on student enrollments is not systematically collected.

To address this deficiency, this study has proposed convening an annual forum with national TNE stakeholders, where lessons learned and practices are shared. This forum would also present an opportunity to discuss changes in regulatory environments in countries where such changes are scheduled. Greater transparency of the process and improved data collection globally would contribute to an improved shared understanding of TNE and its impact.