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## How a Misplaced Attention to the Student Experience Can Limit the Progressive Impact of TNE

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### Introduction and Context

Transnational education (TNE), in addition to being a way for education institutions to internationalise, build international reputation and partnerships, and increase student recruitment, has inherently progressive potentials for host locations. TNE is a way to make available education programmes to people who would not otherwise be able to access them because they are unwilling or unable to move internationally, be it for financial, family, cultural, work, or visa related reasons. It can thus play an important role in contributing to widening international access to quality and relevant education, in particular in locations where there is unmet demand, as well as contributing to the development of strategic skills needed to support social and economic development, whilst avoiding the consequences of brain drain associated with outward student mobility. TNE can thus play an important part in making progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 of ensuring

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‘inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. (United Nations 2015).

Education providers can also benefit from TNE, not only financially (an often over-estimated benefit and motivation), but also by gaining insights into different cultures, societies and education systems, being exposed to different approaches to teaching and learning as well as different ways to address shared challenges. Through TNE delivery and partnerships, providers can expand their knowledge base and their international networks, and ultimately diversify and enhance their academic offer and their capacity to develop innovative solutions in today’s global world. This can help providers better serve their core mission of educating people for the benefit of communities in a context of globalisation.

It is therefore promising, and not surprising, that over the past twenty years TNE has witnessed a significant growth, in terms of number of education providers offering their programmes overseas in an increasing variety of delivery models, number of students studying on TNE programmes, and number of countries and territories in which it is being offered.<sup>1</sup> Growing TNE now features as a key strategic objective of many education institutions, as well as sending and receiving countries’ governments’ international strategies.<sup>2</sup> The strategic importance of TNE for education is also demonstrated by the increasing attention it is receiving internationally by regulators, qualifications recognition agencies, sector bodies, information and media platforms, and academic publications such as the present one.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK has traditionally been a leading country for TNE, with over 80% of all UK universities now involved in some or other form of TNE – ranging from different types of collaborative partnerships, to distance learning and branch campus delivery. At the last count, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported 139 universities delivering TNE provision in 225 countries and territories to 693,695 students (UUKi 2019). Significantly, the number of students studying for UK degrees overseas (TNE students) now well exceeds that of international students coming to the UK, by over 50%, and this number has continued to grow year on year.

<sup>2</sup> Recently for example the UK (HM Government 2019) and Australia (Australia Government 2019) have developed new international education strategies supporting the growth of national outbound transnational education, and the Philippines (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines 2019; Philippine News Agency 2019) and Egypt (Egyptian Official Gazette 2018) have introduced legislation to open up their countries to TNE partnerships and branch campuses respectively.

However, there is still suspicion and unclear evidence about the actual benefits of TNE. From a host location perspective in particular – the perspective taken by this publication – there are continuing concerns about the quality and relevance of foreign education offered in the receiving territories and to the local communities. These concerns, if left unaddressed, might present obstacles to harnessing the potential benefits associated with innovative ways of delivering education across borders. They may induce receiving or sending locations to disallow the delivery of or deny the recognition of qualifications gained through TNE, or certain types of TNE provision. Typical examples of TNE facing recognition challenges include all forms of distance learning with no face-to-face delivery component, different types of partnership arrangements, such as with local colleges without degree-awarding power or private education providers or foreign providers outside university world rankings, and educational programmes developed only for the local context.

This chapter, focusing on higher education, aims to explore the rationale behind these concerns about TNE provision, by looking at some of the key underlying quality assurance and qualification recognition challenges. It explores the thought that these concerns ultimately rest on a ‘traditional’ understanding of, or expectation about, the type of student experience that should be associated with acceptable higher education learning. It puts forth the argument that by de-linking expectations about ways of learning and the student experience from the learning outcomes expected from graduates, it will be possible to develop a more progressive stance to education. A stance that would allow our globally interconnected communities to fully harness the potential of innovative forms of education, such as TNE, for widening international access to quality and relevant education.

## The Comparability of Learning Outcomes and the Learning Experience

The challenges associated with TNE are several, but it is with a firm sight to its potential benefits that they need be looked at. Delivering education programmes at considerable geographical and often cultural distance poses obvious challenges. In particular, with an ultimate view towards the delivery of quality and relevant education, how can education providers satisfy themselves about the standards of their education programmes and the quality of the student experience when they deliver those programmes in different and distant locations and through different and often complex delivery arrangements? The generally accepted expectation, what can be regarded as the international golden rule for the quality assurance of TNE, is that the standards and quality of education provision offered overseas should remain comparable to the standards and quality of similar education provision delivered at the home campus (see for example the UNESCO/OECD 2005).

While equivalency of standards is generally undisputed and relatively straightforward to assess, looking for instance at how learning outcomes are set and assessed, it is the expectation of comparability of the learning experience that can be challenging and lead to difficulties. This is due to both the necessary variations in student experience when studying in different locations and in different cultural and educational settings, and different views about the experiential preconditions for achieving expected learning outcomes and gaining a higher education. It is precisely the difficulty involved in developing an internationally shared understanding of the required comparability of the learning experience when programmes are offered in different locations, and more broadly the lack of a shared understanding about the defining features of a higher education student experience, that lies behind the existing obstacles to the recognition of TNE qualifications, or certain type of TNE qualifications.

Keith Sharp (2017) has similarly suggested that 'a lack of attention to the logical distinction between standards and quality has hampered efforts by regulatory régimes around the world to develop coherent

policies with respect to hosting transnational higher education provision'. As he eloquently points out, the conceptual distinction between standards (i.e. the learning outcomes to be achieved) and quality (i.e. the way in which learning outcomes are achieved) means that it is possible 'to set and maintain robust academic standards whilst offering poor learning', and vice versa:

quality teaching, carried out by well-qualified and experienced teachers, an excellent learning environment and the provision of first-class learning resources will not guarantee high academic standards unless the intended learning outcomes and, crucially, the associated forms of assessment are set at the correct level and are robustly and reliably applied. (Sharp 2017: 142)

The lack of appreciation of the conceptual distinction between learning outcomes and the student experience, and the related view that a certain type of learning experience – such as comparable experience to the home campus, face-to-face delivery or delivery in institutions with degree-awarding power – is necessary to enable the acquisition of the required learning outcomes, are some of the most common considerations behind the refusal to approve the delivery or recognise TNE qualifications.

## **The Comparability of the Student Experience in TNE: Achieving Learning Outcomes Vs. Meeting External Expectations**

Comparability of the TNE student experience with the experience of students studying at the home campus of the TNE degree-awarding body will not only be difficult to achieve, given the necessarily different contextual circumstances of delivery, but might not even be necessary. What will generally be necessary for providers, and this applies to all education not exclusively TNE, is to provide the enabling support required by students to achieve the expected learning outcomes. What is to be regarded as required support to the learning experience will depend on a number of considerations, for example the type or specific needs of students (e.g.

language support for foreign students), the subject of study (e.g. certain areas of studies such as engineering or medicine will require specific practical experience), the mode of study (e.g. technical support for distance learning provision), and importantly students' expectations. The recent focus on the student experience in higher education policy circles, at least in the UK, is for example very much linked to increased students' fees, and how to drive and measure excellence beyond threshold standards.

A recent review of UK TNE in Malaysia I was involved in, brought the issue of the variability of the student experience, and its relation to standards and expectations, particularly to the fore. TNE in Malaysia takes many different forms, including established sizeable branch campuses, small and expanding branch campuses, and different forms of collaborative partnerships of the franchise and validation kind, as well as supported distance learning delivery. While it was apparent by looking at institutional processes for programme development, monitoring and review, practice for assessing learning outcomes, and data about student achievements, that the UK universities involved in the review exercise had a firm grip on the standards of their degrees offered in Malaysia, students were receiving very different learning experiences depending on the type of model of TNE they were studying on, and of course the cost of their investment.

Reassuringly, students were clearly communicated with from the start, as to what type of experience they would receive in support of their studies, and this showed in comparable student satisfaction level despite the very different student experiences provided. But it demonstrated that no single model of student experience was required to ensure that students achieved the same expected standards – although different models of provision and different financial investments by some of the students were associated to different levels of expectation about the learning experience.

This is not to say that host countries' requirements regarding the student experience for TNE provision are unreasonable. Different host countries have different strategic priorities for their societies, their economies, and their education systems, and they are not only entitled, but expected to place first their own requirements on the education offered to their communities. For instance, host countries might want foreign providers to contribute to the capacity development of local institutions, or

to expose students to an international and excellent learning experience, thus requiring from them specific commitments in terms of the quality of the student experience and teaching resources. Local expectations might also extend to standards, requiring the inclusion of specific content and learning outcomes in programmes of studies, or indeed that the learning outcomes and the content of programmes are exactly the same to those delivered back home.

The Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee back in 2001, already pointed to the need of the comparability requirement for academic quality and standards to take into account both the sending and receiving country of TNE provision (Council of Europe 2001).

However, the focus of this chapter is on requirements related to the student experience that authorities place on education provision with a view to safeguarding students and societies from low quality education, but which end up hindering the provision of relevant and needed qualifications. These requirements might include for example the need for delivery to be exclusively or predominantly face-to-face, or for foreign degree-awarding bodies to partner only with local providers with degree-awarding power or for local providers to partner with top-ranked foreign providers, or again delivering only programmes that a foreign provider already delivers back home.

These requirements pose obvious limits to the delivery of innovative education capable of meeting the education and skill needs of local and global communities. For instance, modes of delivery relying on new information technologies have the potential to reach a wider spectrum of the population, enabling access to education to disadvantaged or less represented sectors of societies, contributing to inclusive and lifelong learning, while keeping a lower carbon footprint than other modes of international education requiring long distance travel.

Partnerships involving local colleges without local degree awarding power also have significant potential to widen access to education to students who might not be able or not feel at ease in studying at traditional local or international universities, as well as being able to contribute to developing the local higher education capacity. This type of partnership is a well-established and respected model in the United Kingdom, where

many of today's universities have started as validated colleges of other institutions with degree-awarding power.

A number of host countries, in the attempt to secure the quality of inbound TNE, also pose limits to the type of foreign providers being allowed to offer qualifications in their jurisdictions, or on the type of qualifications, accepting only top-ranked universities and qualifications that are already run at the home campus. The former requirement might prevent foreign providers with excellent reputations in teaching, or in very specific subjects, to offer their expertise in-country, given the primary focus on research and whole institutional performance of leading university world rankings. The latter might prevent the delivery of qualifications better suited to meet the local skills needs, as demand in the host country of delivery might be different from demand at home.

These restrictions seem to boil down, on the one hand, to a reductive view of the student experience associated with acceptable learning and the required comparability between TNE and home campus delivery. On the other hand, they relate to the lack of reliable measures to reassure international stakeholders that standards of TNE are being safeguarded across borders and are relevant to the local contexts of delivery. Without such reassurance, host countries' authorities might be inclined, in order to stay on the safe side, to adopt blanket policies that might prevent the delivery or recognition of qualifications which are both relevant and of good international standards.

It is therefore argued that by de-linking the achievement of the learning outcomes associated to a programme of study from the modality in which students achieve those learning outcomes it will be possible to unleash the progressive potential of TNE provision. This however requires, all key international stakeholders, including ministries, qualification recognition bodies and accreditation bodies as well as education providers, to work together to develop a shared understanding of the requirements for quality education provision, and to develop innovative and cooperative solutions to the quality challenges posed by TNE. It also requires developing trusted international processes for benchmarking TNE qualifications against both home and receiving countries' expectations and reference points.



## Conclusion: Cross-Border Cooperation and the Global Recognition of Qualifications

In previous publications I have argued for the importance of inter-agency cooperation for improving reciprocal understanding of expectations about quality cross-border provision, building trust between different education systems, and exploring innovative ways to address regulatory gaps, unnecessary regulatory hurdles, and reap the benefits of international education (Trifiro' 2018, 2019).

The Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education project, managed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), led to the development of a toolkit which offered practical advice for strengthening cooperation in securing the quality and the international recognition of quality cross-border higher education (ENQA 2016; Trifiro' 2015). As outlined in a follow-up study carried out for the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the regulatory framework within which national agencies operate sometimes does pose obstacles about the extent to which they can actually join forces to simplify the regulatory jungles associated with cross-border education (Trifiro' 2018). Being aware of these obstacles is essential in order to develop realistic strategies for cooperating internationally to facilitate the development of TNE provision capable of meeting the needs of our increasingly interconnected communities and ensuring qualification holders can be truly mobile.

The recently signed Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (UNESCO 2019) clearly indicates that this is a high priority for the international higher education community. The ENIC-NARIC network working together with international recognition and accreditation bodies, can play this all-important role of ensuring that TNE remains about the delivery of education leading to qualifications that will be recognised internationally for their relevance and standards.

In this context UK NARIC, building on its established expertise in international qualifications comparison, its wide network of sister organisations and regulatory bodies worldwide, and its international membership covering higher and vocational education institutions from over 60

countries, can play a key role in taking forward this progressive agenda. Working with like-minded providers, qualification recognition agencies and regulatory bodies worldwide, UK NARIC has developed a learning-outcomes based approach to the quality assurance and benchmarking of TNE qualifications aimed at supporting their international recognition and portability. The TNE Quality Benchmark scheme (TNE QB) is an international external and independent peer-review service aimed at reassuring international stakeholders that TNE providers through specific TNE operations are capable to offer TNE provision that: (1) is of comparable standards to that offered at the home campus; (2) provides a learning experience that support all student to achieve the expected learning outcomes; (3) takes into account the education, training, and skills needs of the local context of delivery. This peer-review reassurance is carried out against a set of international standards and indicators, aligned with existing international reference points and guidelines, which apply to all TNE delivery, regardless of country of origin or delivery; and it is informed by international engagement with international regulators, quality assurance bodies, and credential evaluators (UK NARIC 2020).

The unparalleled potential of UK NARIC is that it is able to address three key aspects:

- Linking quality assurance with the recognition of qualifications
- Covering all education levels
- Servicing all TNE, regardless of nation of origins

I have argued in this chapter that the lack of recognition of TNE qualifications is often due to a lack of a shared international understanding about the essential features of quality cross-border, and specifically about the type of student experience that should underpin acceptable quality cross-border education. I have argued that a primary focus on ensuring that students achieve the expected learning outcomes of their programme of study, from both a sending and receiving location perspective, might help developing such minimum shared understanding, facilitating the recognition of innovative forms of cross-border cooperation that can contribute to meeting the education and skills needs of contemporary global societies. UK NARIC's learning outcomes based approach to

benchmarking qualifications can support the development of such shared understanding about the minimum thresholds for the comparability of quality and standards of TNE qualifications with similar qualifications delivered at the home campus, and their relevance to the local context of delivery.

The focus of this chapter has been on TNE at higher education level, but there is also much TNE at vocational and skills level, which also requires quality assuring and whose comparability with host countries' education systems and qualifications frameworks (where they exist) can be less understood. Many host countries are in fact directing attention and funds to the vocational and skills sector, and to the need to develop better links between the different educational levels and sectors. UK NARIC, again, is well placed to address this strategic area of education and TNE, facilitating better understanding and seamless articulation of different types of international qualifications at different levels, international partnerships and progression arrangements.

And thirdly, with its international membership, and its understanding of different national qualifications frameworks and education systems, UK NARIC can further help in reassuring stakeholders about the quality and comparability of TNE from different sending countries. This can be extremely valuable in particular for those receiving and sending countries that do not have or are still developing regulatory frameworks for TNE.

As UK NARIC's approach to TNE qualifications benchmarking will start to be implemented it will be possible to describe and disseminate the key features of its process, its main outcomes and lessons learned in future publications and events of the TNE HUB. Through continuous engagement with international stakeholders, this approach could act as catalyst for the development of the required shared understanding to facilitate the international recognition and portability of TNE qualifications, and with this the growth of TNE capable to address the specific education and skills needs of different host locations, and our shared global communities.

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