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Capacity Building in Transnational Education: A Relational Capital Framework

Morris Williams

Introduction

TNE is one of many features of internationalisation in higher education. *Internationalisation* may be distinguished from *globalisation* as activities undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions and even individual departments to deal with globalisation (Altbach and Knight 2007). A key distinction between the two concepts is that of control. While globalisation and its impacts are beyond the control of any one actor or set of actors, internationalisation can be seen as the specific policies, programmes and strategy for governments and institutions to respond to the demands being made of them by globalisation (Altbach et al. 2010). Individual HEIs therefore respond to globalisation through ‘practical strategizing’ (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007) by undertaking some of the many activities that fall under the umbrella term ‘internationalisation’. These might be efforts to ‘internationalise’ the

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curricula, market and recruit internationally, establish research consortia and, for some, the development of TNE initiatives.

The report, *The Scale and Scope of Higher Education Transnational Education* by the British Council (HEGlobal 2016) provides a comprehensive account of the TNE that the UK delivers based on a survey of 54 HEIs. The report finds that there are only 15 countries in the world where the UK does not offer any TNE and that four in five UK HEIs that commented on their future plans intend to expand their TNE provision in the period to 2020. The report concludes that there is 'great diversity to delivery models, partnerships, strategic approaches and characteristics in UK outgoing higher education TNE' (HEGlobal 2016, p. 6).

The perspective of this chapter is that TNE, in which an institution in one country awards their degrees to students studying in another, is intrinsically an inter-organisational and inter-cultural phenomenon. As such, TNE has relationship and communication challenges with the potential for misunderstandings and contested meanings impacting on its key processes, such as the conduct of quality assurance. Many people involved in TNE provision at both sender and host institutions will have experienced these challenges and taken pragmatic steps to address them.

It is the intention of this chapter to present the conceptual framework and how it might be used to generate practical changes. Some examples of such steps are provided in the conclusion.

The focus is on the relationships between the parties in TNE (sender/host). The conceptual framework underpins the reasons for the importance of relationship management and communication.

Quality Assurance in TNE

The central tenet of quality assurance in TNE is that the sender institution requires the implementation of, and compliance to, a code of practice at a host institution where ideas, concepts and frameworks of quality assurance may be different.

The focus of the research which has led to the development of the framework is on quality assurance in TNE. It explored the understanding and perceptions of staff in three institutions engaged in TNE (one in the

UK and two in Sri Lanka). An argument is developed which places the concept of relational capital, built through socialisation, at the heart of effective quality assurance in TNE. Through the development of relational capital, shared meanings and values that are essential for achieving quality assurance in TNE can be developed and maintained.

Quality assurance in the UK has been described as the system 'designed to secure the quality of teaching and the standard of awards in higher education institutions' (HEFCE 2014).

Fiona Crozier, Head of International for the QAA, writing about the UK's capacity to export HE and the opportunity it offers UK universities, highlighted the critical importance of quality assurance regimes and the UK's participation in wider European and global quality authority alliances to the continued growth of UK TNE (Crozier 2015).

Quality assurance systems in TNE are a key element in the comparability and maintenance of standards and quality of the delivered programmes and for the identification and prevention of malpractice. They commonly require the host institution to adopt the practices of the sending/awarding institution which requires the compliance of the host institution and its staff implementing those practices. In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency has taken a lead in stating that institutions engaged in managing HE provision with others must implement 'robust' procedures to ensure collaborative arrangements are effectively managed and overseen by the awarding body. These are designed to mitigate the risks of such provision and protect the interests of all students regardless of where they are studying or their mode of delivery (QAA 2013, B10).

The 2016 report on TNE by the British Council and UK HE Global highlights quality assurance as a key challenge for universities, regulators and policy-makers. Providing education across borders, it proposes, exposes UK universities to varying degrees of reputational risk. The report suggests that partnership arrangements may be undermined by the 'principal/agent' problem with the partner colleges (agents) having different objectives (e.g. profit maximisation rather than academic quality) from the awarding UK universities (principals) (HEGlobal 2016).

Martin (2016) considers that the growth of TNE has increased opportunities for corruption and fraudulent diplomas and credentials and sees quality assurance systems as protecting the processes of HE services as

well as risks to academic integrity such as plagiarism and academic misconduct.

Quality assurance can be seen as a “configuration of control” within and between organisations that can be achieved in a number of ways (Jermier 1998). In discussing the purpose of quality assurance, Brown (2004, 2013) distinguishes between a purpose focused on accountability – in the sense of compliance with standards and rules – and a purpose focused on improvement secured through constructive and professional dialogue. The former approach is often seen as one in which quality is an emergent property of a well-developed and implemented process. In other words, compliance with the process leads to ‘quality’, or that quality is the outcome of a process carried out to plan.

The risk for TNE is that processes for conducting quality assurance in TNE may lead to ‘perhaps more compliance than continual improvement’ (British Council and DAAD 2014, p. 33), which the British Council and Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD) regard as a risk if understanding of, and commitment to, quality assurance is not shared and embraced. In such a situation, people may simply do what they are told to do and do it to a level necessary to “tick the box” but without necessarily understanding the values behind the process. It is of interest, then, for TNE projects to ask how the constructive and professional dialogue recommended by Brown can be conducted across many miles and cultures. According to the British Council and DAAD, ‘quality assurance and accreditation are two of the most hotly debated topics in TNE’ (2014, p. 33). This is due, in part, to the growing volume of TNE provision and in part to the reported concerns regarding the robustness of the quality assurance systems.

TNE, often implemented within post-colonial, cross-cultural environments, and within local HE systems which may be facing internal challenges, may be a sensitive issue. It may, in some contexts, be appropriate to import a well-developed and implemented process and see it complied with locally. In other contexts, or in tandem, the development of a shared “quality culture” with shared meanings might be developed to create a ‘normative’ system of control in which people are intrinsically motivated to carry out quality assurance processes and to commit to a process of reflection, enhancement and continuous improvement.

Methodology

Focus of the Research

The author of this chapter works in TNE at a UK university. The focus of this research is at an institutional level where the programmes are awarded and delivered and where institution staff carry out quality assurance through a defined process.

Using data collected via structured interviews at two institutions in Sri Lanka and at one in the UK, the study explored the understandings and perceptions held of the quality assurance process and its legitimacy by those staff enacting the process at both sender and host institution. The research design recognised, and took into account, the researcher's own role and position of power inside the collaboration and the research context.

The analysis was undertaken within a conceptual framework developed from inter-firm relationships, inter-cultural communication and inter-cultural competence literature and the key components are summarised below.

Relationships in TNE

All practitioners of TNE are engaged in cross-institutional relationships when initiating, developing, implementing and ending TNE partnerships. The individual contexts and practices will differ as each institution will take their own decisions with regard to their engagement with TNE, the models they develop, the practices they instigate and develop and the roles they create through which the relationship is conducted.

There is a substantial body of research, much of it deriving from the scale and early adoption of TNE by Australian institutions, that focuses on understanding the practice of TNE, usually through case studies, and recommending guidance on how that practice might be conducted (Heffernan and Poole 2004, 2005; Keay et al. 2014; Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Lim 2008; Martin and Stella 2007; Naidoo 2007; Smith 2010; Ziguas 2011).

Heffernan and Poole (2004) conducted research into 10 Australian case studies of TNE in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong in response to quality issues in offshore programmes and deterioration in, or termination of, partnership processes. Their findings highlight the significance of key relationship factors: shared vision, communication, trust, commitment and culture. They identify low internal commitment within the Australian university, a failure to identify key roles and responsibilities of the partner and the departure of key personnel as critical factors in TNE relationship success. In a later study, Heffernan and Poole (2005) examined the critical success factors for effective international partnerships and identified effective communications structures as key. They argue such structures enable the development of shared meaning, trust, higher commitment between relationship partners, resolving of disputes and alignment of perceptions and expectations, all pertinent to the conduct of quality assurance. Reviewing the literature at the time, they argued that effective relationships were amongst the most critical and least studied elements of international education partnerships.

The research reported in this chapter puts the core concept of relational capital at the heart of understanding effective inter-organisational relationships.

Relational Capital

The extensive literature on inter-firm relationships and relationship development and management is one that has focused on the ways in which firms manage the supply process and, through those processes, have dealt with complexity and globalisation. It is pertinent to examine that literature for theories and concepts that can help understand TNE.

Cousins and Menguc (2006) point to the importance of socialisation between individuals as a mechanism to achieve integration in supply chain management. Socialisation is said to form bonds and ties as individuals share information and understand how each other works thereby helping to build a culture of mutual commitment. They identify socialisation mechanisms such as cross-functional teams, exchange of personnel across projects, visits, conferences and team-building exercises to foster

communication and relationship building. Such socialisation is a mechanism to facilitate knowledge exchanges within and between firms and inter-organisational learning. They argue that communication should be established through both informal and formal links from ad hoc telephone conversations to regular meetings. They find a strong correlation between socialisation and operational communication leading to improved performance and contractual compliance through increased relational competencies.

The outcome of socialisation is said to be ‘relational capital’, argued as being distinctive from, although related to, the concept of social capital (Still et al. 2013).

In their formative study, Dyer and Singh (1998) argue that an important area of analysis for understanding competitive advantage is the relationship between firms. Relational capital is seen as comprising assets, knowledge, capabilities and governance processes created through a firm’s relational resources with other firms that could not be generated by either firm on its own.

Still, Huhtamaki and Russell state that relational capital is value that is created and maintained by having, nurturing and managing good relationships (2013). They argue that relational capital is:

- a key contributor to the success of quality in inter-organisational relationships;
- central to the development of shared meanings, understandings and trust;
- created through processes of socialisation.

An example of the application of the concept of relational capital is given by Cricelli and Greco (2013) who conducted a study into relational capital and performances in inter-university research consortia. They consider relational capital as representing an organisation’s relations and knowledge exchange with its stakeholders. They conclude that consortia with better relationships, as specified by indicators of ‘closeness’ and ‘betweenness’ in social network analysis, perform more successfully than those with lower levels.

Miocevic (2016) argues that the process of developing such long-term relationships is complex and requires time, effort and investment, especially when partners come from different cultures and business environments. The development of relational capital requires an investment, both economic and social.

The concept of “relational capital”, and its creation through socialisation activity, is proposed as a key factor in understanding TNE. Its creation through socialisation is, however, costly in the context of TNE. The development of relational capital is through the relational and intercultural competencies of those engaged in such work who are often located many thousands of miles apart.

Relational Competences and Competencies

Relational competence is described as an organisation’s ability to purposefully and actively build, maintain and develop collaborative relations and to contribute to their effective social functioning (Pauget and Wald 2013).

In their examination of the strategic supply chain, Cousins et al. (2008) distinguish between *competences* and *competencies*. Competences are organisational outputs or roles required to fulfil organisational goals. Competencies are the characteristics of the individual which result in effective performance in a role. Boyatzis (1982) develops the competencies required for a range of ‘competence clusters’ such as leadership, people management, a focus on others and specialised knowledge. For any such cluster, individual competencies can be grouped into four types (Cousins et al. 2008). Looking at these, we can see implications for the management of TNE provision:

Natural: underlying traits and personality dimensions, for example, sociability, engagement, empathy and ready communication with people from TNE partner. These competencies are seen to be difficult to develop and therefore individuals should be selected if they are judged to possess natural competencies seen as critical to the key competences for the relationship.

Acquired: knowledge and skills including professional knowledge and experience, for example, associated with TNE and quality assurance processes.

Adapting: competencies regarding an individual's ability to deal with change and ambiguity, for instance, the requirement to operate across institutions and cultures in TNE.

Performing: observable behaviours that are produced as a result of the combination of the previous three clusters. For example, in TNE these might be chairing partnerships academic award boards, problem solving, development planning and managing TNE exit.

Inter-Cultural Communication and Competency

Inter-cultural communication is concerned with behaviours when members of two or more cultures interact (Gudykunst 2000, cited in Otten et al. 2009). It is concerned with the interaction and relationship between meaning, language and beliefs, values and attitudes. The idea has arisen that there is such a skill-set as 'inter-cultural communicative competency' in which individuals can become more skilled in their inter-cultural communications.

Using the key concepts from this literature, the research explored how communication in the quality assurance process is conducted between staff in both participating institutions. The research explored whether the inter-cultural communication competency might be an important component in the socialisation processes leading to the development and maintenance of relational capital.

The Conceptual Framework¹

Using the above literature, a conceptual framework has been developed and used to frame the research questions conducted through interviews at the institutions. A focus on relationships came from initial interviews

¹Feedback on this conceptual framework is welcome and the original thesis, detailing the research design and findings, is available at Williams, M. 2018. *Quality Assurance in TNE*. DBA Thesis, University of Bath, Bath, UK.

in Sri Lanka, where face-to-face communication was seen as critical by the host institution staff, both academic and administrative, in learning how to deliver the provision and its quality assurance process. While the vocabulary of the framework was not used in the interviews, the findings showed strong correlation between the expressed feelings, experience and ideas of the participants about quality assurance processes and its challenges and the conceptual framework.

Two contributing models were developed from the research findings.

In Fig. 2.1 the individual competencies of those occupying the roles (competences) of each organisation are set out and can be used as a discussion tools with a view to identifying staff development needs and building capacity in both the sending and host institution. The proposed

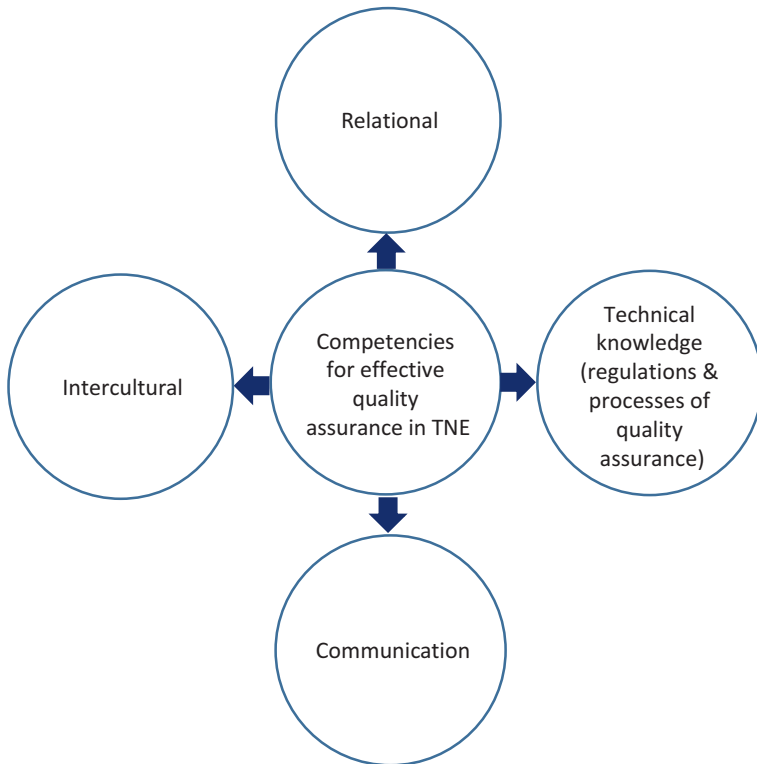


Fig. 2.1 Competencies for effective quality assurance in TNE (Williams 2018)

value of this model is to enable organisations to discuss and develop the presence of individual competencies and to address any needs through the appointment or development of staff to key roles.

Figure 2.2 shows the relationships between three key factors; firstly, organisational resources, especially finance and the impact on employment of staff and their allocation to competences, visits, staff exchange and staff development, which are often not equal between institutions. The research found staff visits were much more frequent from sender to host than from host to sender. The second factor is, the competences or roles required (leadership, relationship management and operations). These are mainly not full-time roles held by a single individual. More often, individuals will have many other roles competing for their time and attention. The third factor related to the individual competencies required for the role holders in both the sending and host institution (as shown in Fig. 2.1) and the extent to which those competencies are held

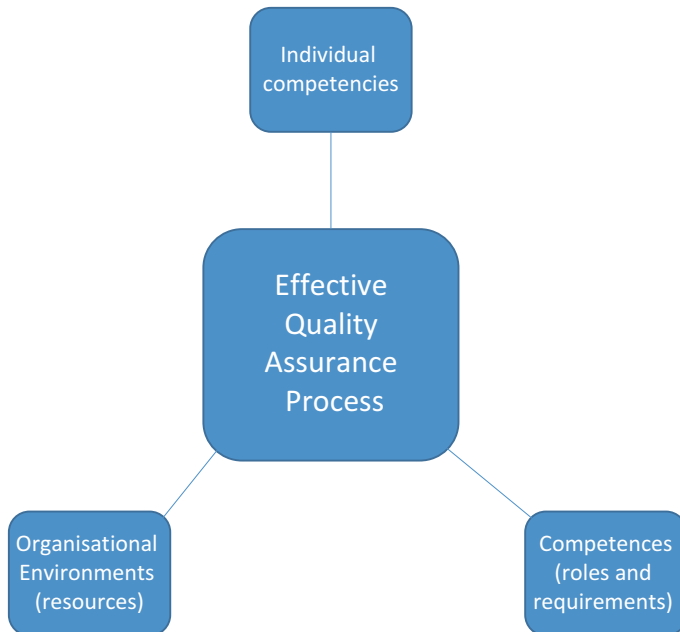


Fig. 2.2 Factor congruence for effective performance of quality assurance process in TNE (Williams 2018)

by individuals. This model can be used to discuss and develop the key role competences and the required competencies of the role holders.

Together the two models can be used as triggers to consider a range of issues pertinent to each individual TNE project such as the appropriate number of staff and the balance between full and part-time/visiting staff (resources), the roles into which they are deployed (competences) and the individual competencies which might be natural or acquired and will need development, especially in the critical areas of relational and inter-cultural competencies.

The overall conceptual framework in Fig. 2.3 is based on the development of relational capital as an essential pre-requisite for effective quality assurance.

Moving from left to right in the framework, resources, time and infrastructure lead to interaction (by multiple means: telephone, email, video conferencing) which needs to be built on through face-to-face socialisation.

Through this process, trust, shared meanings and understanding are developed over time which, in turn, creates relational capital which

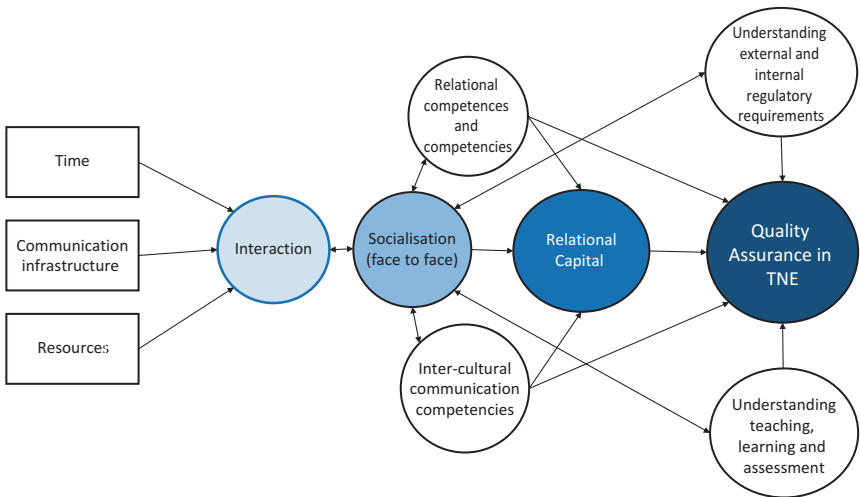


Fig. 2.3 Quality assurance in transnational education: a relational and competency framework (Williams 2018)

contributes to effective quality assurance through the development of shared meaning and values.

Socialisation and the building of relational capital is improved through the design of key roles (relational competences) and the competencies (both relational and inter-cultural) of the role holders in the unique setting of each TNE project. Key knowledge, on regulatory processes and the teaching, learning and assessment of students in higher education, is essential contextual knowledge held by role holders in appropriate configurations to enable the quality assurance process to be conducted.

Discussion

Choices taken in the approaches, models and practices of TNE impact on capacity building for host institutions and their staff. A range of governance issues within the remit of quality assurance processes include measures such as academic appeals and complaints processes, fair recruitment, selection and admissions processes for students, academic integrity guidance and procedures and the provision of accurate and transparent information. Close working in TNE partnerships can assist in the development of capacity building in all these areas. To achieve this requires conscious decision making and resource allocation by the providing institution and investment in relationships.

In 2005 UNESCO published their Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education. These guidelines marked a milestone in the collaboration of qualification agencies globally as a response to the growth in TNE. The context was a perceived 'education deficit' in the receiving countries, including the need for capacity building, skill development and better quality and diversity of HE provision. Naidoo (2007, 2010) discusses how the strengthening of HE as a vital engine of economic success faces a lack of resources and expertise in developing countries and requires capacity building, quality and standard assurance and comparability between state and private sector (Naidoo 2010).

Throughout the growth in TNE there has been a commercial imperative and reality in TNE which ensures close scrutiny of costs and balance sheets (McBurnie and Ziguras 2007; Lane and Kinser 2011). As TNE

can be interpreted as part of the commodification of HE as a traded service (Naidoo 2007; Ziguras and McBurnie 2008), institutional approaches to face-to-face socialisation in TNE will be influenced by how the institutions perceive quality assurance.

Socialisation, and the building of relational capital and the costs associated with it, may not be perceived as an important priority by either party if their perspective on quality assurance is the requirement of the hosting institution to simply comply with the rules, regulations and procedures of the sending institution. Likewise, socialisation will not be prioritised unless it is able to be associated with a benefit for the relationship and that may be difficult to demonstrate. If capacity building is a desired outcome then this research argues that TNE projects will benefit from developing an approach to quality assurance that develops relationships and shared understandings and requires investment.

Conclusion: Capacity Building in Host HEIs

The conceptual framework provides a lens with which to look at any individual TNE project. Any practitioner in TNE will recognise the importance of communication and relationship building and it is intended that this framework can help substantiate that case, trigger important discussion and enable the development of relational capital assets of the TNE relationship including trust, commitment, sustainability and shared meaning and values about quality and the student experience. Through the formal and informal sharing of knowledge and skills, the capacity of the host institution to succeed in the global HE market can be built. Indeed, such an approach to TNE might sufficiently empower local HE institutions to the extent that TNE may be a transitional phenomenon in some settings.

Institutions have choices in how they implement TNE. The transplant of rules, procedures and processes can be done with or without investment in relational capital. If capacity building is a goal, then this chapter argues investment in relational capital is key.

What practical steps does this framework suggest individual TNE projects might implement? The following arise from both participant responses in the research and application of the conceptual framework.

- Socialisation through face-to-face meetings, both formal and informal, must be built into the relationship, especially in the early days;
- Socialisation must be costed in to business models;
- Socialisation should be legitimate for all levels of staff, albeit attached to events such as staff development, team building and examination boards;
- Socialisation visits should be two way;
- Key roles, especially in relational management should be identified and filled with people with the right skills sets and high turnover of staff in those roles should be avoided;
- Training for individuals in those roles at all organisational levels should include inter-relational and inter-cultural competencies;
- Training should include developing understanding of the strategic purpose and benefits of TNE for staff at all levels;
- Over time, face-to face-socialisation can be partially replaced with other communication methods, both formal and informal,
- A robust communication infrastructure (email, telephony, video conferencing, one-to-one and group discussion) should be in place and clear communication structures and protocols established, especially those that welcome and encourage host to sender communication and enquiry;
- Communities of practice at both the sender and host should be established and resourced to build relational capital and practice in TNE provision including quality assurance.

Each TNE project will need to contextualise these recommendations to their own circumstances.

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