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Transnational Education as Enabler of Access to Quality Higher Education and Its Link to UN SDG4: The Case of Greece

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Purpose and Impact of TNE

The purpose and impact of TNE is a debated topic. At the one pole of this debate TNE activities are seen as a way for higher education institutions in developed countries to reach offshore markets. In this conventionalisation of internationalisation, higher education is seen as

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being like any other service which can be exported to another country or used to attract students from other countries. This describes, to a great extent, the main motive of the exporting countries that see international activities as a “third income stream” (Brooks and Waters 2011). In this context, some consider TNE as one of the pillars of neo-liberal policies for higher education. The reduction in public funding accompanied by developments in information technology and the opening up of global markets has contributed to the expansion of transnational higher education. The overall outcome of these developments is argued to contribute to the widening of the inequality gap between North and South higher education institutions. In this viewpoint, TNE falls under the neo-liberalist globalisation of core-periphery relationship where the core countries become stronger while the periphery weakens (Santos 2006).

At the other pole of the debate about the purpose and impact of TNE are those who consider this as a “capacity building” activity for host countries. Some TNE host countries adopt policies and actions which aim to encourage their students to study abroad while at the same time giving incentives to reputable foreign higher education institutions to offer their programmes locally. The logic behind this policy is to increase and improve a country’s capacity for higher education, for example, by improving the quality of human capital and expanding the in-country supply of quality higher education provision. There is evidence to suggest that this phenomenon is actually materialising in countries that have used partnerships between local education providers and foreign higher education institutions to convert them into private universities (Sidhu and Christie 2015; Ilieva et al. 2019). Some examples are Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Cyprus, and Malta.

Overall, the fast acceleration of TNE activity, have polarised researchers and practitioners about the TNE purpose and impact. Stella (2006, 258–59) summarises ‘trade promoters’, trade enthusiasts’, and ‘cross-border education defenders’ on one side and ‘revenue-generation approach’ critics and ‘sceptical reflectors’ on the other, as well as a minority of those who consider the above ‘a non-issue’.

This study does not focus on discussing the commercialisation of HE debate. Instead, by adopting a pragmatic approach, which “is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (James 1981, 26 in Cherryholmes 1992), this study emphasises on evaluating the impact of TNE in the host country local community.

TNE in Greece

Greece is a major TNE host country with approximately 17,000 Greeks studying on TNE programmes offered in-country (Tsiligiris 2019). The majority (>70%) of these students are enrolled at undergraduate level programmes. TNE provision in Greece is offered through franchise and validation partnerships in collaboration with, mainly (>90%) UK universities. Consequently, Greece is the top host country in Europe and amongst the top ten host countries globally for UK TNE (UUKi 2019). As shown in Fig. 5.1 below, the size of UK TNE provision in Greece has increased by 81% between 2007/08 and 2017/18 (Tsiligiris 2019).

The language of instruction and assessment of TNE programmes in Greece varies and it can be in (1) Greek; (2) English; or (3) a combination of the two. An example of the latter includes the first half of the course to be taught and assessed in Greek and the second half in English. This model aims to help Greek students improve their English language knowledge and enhance their post-graduation employability prospects. In some instances, knowledge of English is sometimes compulsory to comply with professional recognition requirements in the UK, as, for example, in Speech and Language Therapy.

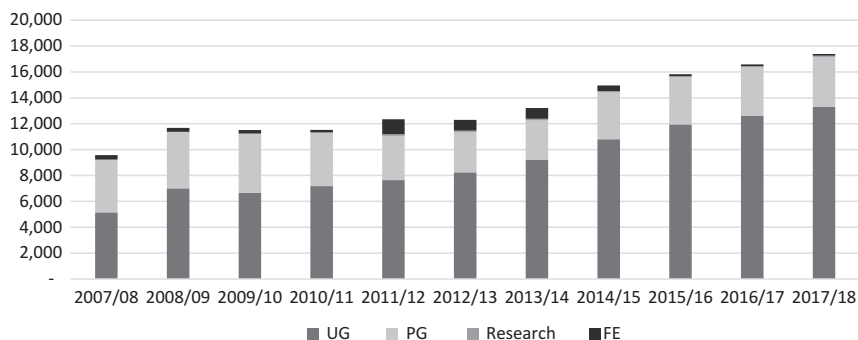


Fig. 5.1 UK TNE students in Greece

Greek Students Abroad and TNE Students in Greece

In the past, Greece used to be one of the major exporters of international students. For example, during the 1970s and early 1980s, Greece was the major source country of outbound students to the UK (Tsiligiris 2013). This was primarily because of the consistent gap between the demand and supply for higher education in Greece. Starting in mid-1990s, there was an expansion in the number of available places in Greek universities which contributed to the decline in the number of Greek students abroad. Also, in late 1990s there is a considerable TNE provision in Greece which emerges as an alternative route of access to foreign higher education. As shown in Fig. 5.2, the growth of TNE in Greece has contributed directly to the decline in the number of Greek students abroad and more directly to the decline in the Greek students who studied in the UK.

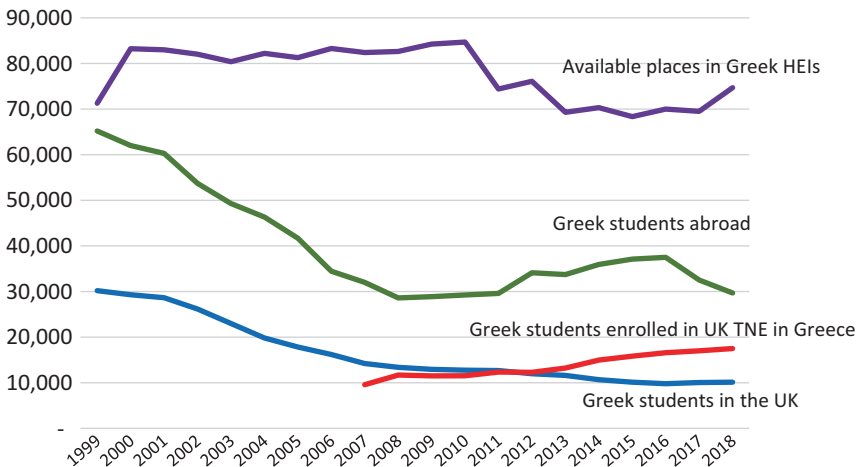


Fig. 5.2 Greek student outbound mobility, places offered in Greek HEIs, and Greek students in UK TNE. (Sources of data: Unesco; HESA; Tsiligiris (2019))

Why Students Choose TNE in Greece

Research has shown that the top three decision-making factors for TNE students in Greece and other students are employability in the international market, quality of education and prospects for further studies abroad (Tsiligiris 2019). Also, students choose TNE courses in Greece as a way to access higher education courses not available by Greek universities.

Employability Concerns

The structure and organisation of Greek higher education has been considered by the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency (HQAA) as lacking strategic focus towards employability (2012). Also, the problems of the employability of Greek universities graduates have been documented in existing research (Matsouka and Mihail 2016; Menon et al. 2018; Asonitou 2015). This lack of employability prospects acts as a push factor for Greek students to pursue studies in foreign higher education institutions, either abroad or in Greece via a transnational higher education partnership.

Lack of Available Courses

According to the Greek constitution, higher education in Greece may only be provided by public universities. This constitutional restriction does not allow supply to keep up with the volume and changing trends in the demand for higher education in Greece (Tsiligiris 2019). There is a strong intervention by the government around key decision on course development and the number of available places per course. For example, any new courses have to be approved by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, Greek universities are not able to move fast responding to demand trends by developing new courses and adjusting the number of available places on existing courses. This creates substantial imbalances between supply and demand on specific courses, particularly at

postgraduate level. As result, a number of Greeks pursue studies abroad, or at TNE providers in Greece, because the course they were interested to study was not available by Greek universities.

Cost of Preparation for Entry Examinations to Greek Universities

“Panelinies” refer to a nationwide written examination which takes place once per year taken by high school graduates who are seeking access to Greek universities. Despite that undergraduate higher education is free for all Greek and EU students, there is a substantial hidden cost for students and their families. The fierce competition between the applicants, especially for courses where places are limited (e.g. Pharmacy, Medicine) has created the need for private preparatory tuition support, called ‘frontisterio’ (Psacharopoulos and Tassoulas 2004). It is expected that to be successful and gain admission to Greek universities, one needs to attend at least two years of preparatory private tuition classes at a cost that exceeds 14,000 euros (Lakasas 2014). This substantial financial investment required by families to support the preparation of their children for the entry examinations, reduces the opportunities for students from lower income families to enter Greek universities. A number of these students find it more economical to study on a foreign university course provided in Greece via TNE providers.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and TNE

The seventeen UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) emerged as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ which is a plan of action structured around the dimensions of people, planet and prosperity. Each SDG is measured against a set of targets aimed to which aim to eradicate poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and protect the planet.

¹ More information here: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2019).

There has been substantial focus and research evidence on the progress of achieving the targets of SDG4 for primary and secondary education. Less emphasis has been placed on lifelong learning and higher education (Webb et al. 2017). Furthermore, despite the significant size of TNE provision, and its continued growth over the past 20 years, there has been limited evidence on how it impacts host countries, particularly in relation to SDG4.

Access, Relevance of Skills, and Capacity Building

SDG4 is particularly relevant to higher education and has direct links with transnational education. For example, target 4.3 aims at ensuring quality access to all women and men to affordable and quality education, including higher education (UN 2019). One of the key characteristics of TNE provision is its substantially lower cost, in comparison to the traditional international student mobility. Also, one of the main reasons why students choose TNE programmes is their affordability in comparison to other study options (Sin et al. 2017; British Council 2017).

SDG4 goes beyond the level of access to higher education to target the availability and relevance of student skills. For example, target 4.4 aims at increasing the number of youth and adults with the relevant skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship (UN 2019). Another reason why students choose to study on a TNE programme is that its content provides better employability prospects in comparison to local HE programmes (Sin et al. 2017; British Council 2017; Tsiligiris 2019).

Method

This chapter draws primary data from a TNE collaborative partnership case study which involves Queen Margaret University, a UK university, and Metropolitan College, a Greek private college based in Athens with multiple delivery sites across Greece.

The study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured personal interviews as the data collection method. A purposive sample of six graduates is used to explore the impact of TNE in Greece with a focus on SDG4.

A set of opening questions is used to initiate the conversation with each graduate. The key questions used in the personal interviews are:

- Why did you choose to study at a UK course offered in Greece? (imply and explore “why this against the other options you had” and “what were the other options you had”)
- What would have been the implication to you if this course was not available in Greece?
- What do you think is the major contribution of this type of arrangements (e.g. a foreign course being offered through a local partner in Greece) to students and more widely to the society in Greece?

One additional question is used to explore the post-graduation impact of TNE.

- What do you think has been the impact of your studies at Metropolitan College on your personal and professional life?

Graduates were chosen as the key focus-group, since it was deemed essential to be able to provide a full account of the life-cycle of student experience within a programme offered through a TNE arrangement. Of the six graduates interviewed, three were female and three were male, aged 22 to 27. Three graduates have completed a BA Culinary Arts and three graduates have completed a BA International Hospitality and Tourism Management. It is important to note that hospitality and food service count among Greece’s strongest and healthiest industries. All participants are currently employed in the industry, with four of them residing in Greece, one in the UK and one in France. Two out of six have advanced towards a Level 7/SCQF11 award in Hospitality Management, in a TNE setting.

All of the interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and key information was also written in a notebook during the interviews.

To secure confidentiality, the interviewees were assigned a random numbering of 1 to 6.

Four interviews were conducted in Athens and two interviews were held via Skype. Interviews were conducted by the research team after ethical clearance was granted by both the UK University and the TNE partner. Each interview was transcribed and then analysed using a thematic approach. Interviews were conducted in Greek, the latter being the native language of all participants and authors/researchers. The interview quotes used in this chapter have been translated from Greek by the authors/researchers.

The thematic analysis was carried out in four steps. First, a generic impression/familiarization was acquired by reading the interview scripts. Second, data was reduced to sizeable bits of meaning, identifying keywords, and facilitating primary groupings. Third, primary groupings were fitted into broader themes. Finally, overarching themes were reviewed, defined and interrelated (Maguire and Delahunt 2017).

Discussion of Findings

Reasons for Choosing a UK TNE Programme

The first thematic objective investigated the reasons behind the decision to attend a UK programme of study within a TNE context at a host country, namely Greece. Five participants predominantly emphasized the standing and reputation of UK HEIs, often in contrast to Greek (public) HEIs. One respondent (respondent 5) said:

'The education received is completely different from the education one can get in Greece; the way in which classes are taught, and the overall access to education and knowledge, go beyond the limitations set in Greece'

It is evident from the participants' responses that UK HE is viewed as well-structured, quality-assured, research-based and directly linked to employability. Hence, local and international recognition of skills and knowledge is seen as better served by a UK award.

Furthermore, graduates underlined the affordability of programmes relying on TNE arrangements. Choosing to study at a TNE host country was described by four graduates as a fine and cost-effective alternative to studying abroad or studying in a Greek HEI based far from Athens. As respondent 1 put it:

'I happened to find this particular college here and I did some research on the UK University to see what it had to offer. Since there was no money available to study in Britain, I chose to attend the course here, since this was an available option'.

In some cases, a programme of study similar to the one attended (e.g. BA Culinary Arts) was not available in Greek public HEIs. Thus, for all three participants graduating from a BA Culinary Arts award, the provision of the programme within a TNE arrangement was initially seen and referred to during the interview, as, quite simply, the only available option towards the desired award.

TNE as Route to Access HE

The second thematic objective invited graduates to seek what would be the implication if a course such as the one attended was not available, i.e. if a TNE arrangement was not an option available to consider in the first place. The majority of participants (four out of six) unequivocally stated that this would leave them with no other option than to seek to study abroad, with all the challenges (linguistic, economic, personal etc) such a decision might involve. Two graduates mentioned that, had TNE arrangements not been available, they would be forced to shift their object of studies, or concede to a study pathway perceived to be significantly inferior.

Impact of TNE on Students and the Local Society

The third thematic objective explored the contribution and impact of TNE arrangements to students and the local (Greek) society. Graduates

provided a wide range of responses that cannot be entirely and/or straightforwardly grouped. However, among participants, recurring loci of discussion emerged. With regard to the impact of TNE arrangements on individuals, four graduates prioritized the enhancement of critical thinking and research skills. UK TNE was depicted as a route facilitating engagement with the field of study, conducive to self-improvement and widening the scope of analytical and reflective skills. As stated by respondent 2:

‘...on a personal level, as a student, the programme completely transformed my mindset on research. Essentially, studying is all about searching inside yourself or conducting research on the object studied. It has completely changed my understanding of research and I now filter information in a considerably revised way’.

Again, this was often contrasted to the learning process within Greek public HEIs, where there is a risk for such principles to be overlooked or underemphasized. Participants viewed the Greek public HE system to be overly exam-driven, while the UK HE assessment practice relies heavily on assignments and group-work, which in turn helps to enable genuine engagement and critical thinking. Respondent 1 articulated this perception as follows:

‘(...) I have learned to study through coursework, I have learned to work as part of a team, and I believe that this process encourages you to not just read a theory and learn it by rote, but try to use it. So if anyone asks me now, I do remember what I did in my first year of studies, I’ve done so much coursework which I’ve put into practice, far more than it would have been the case if I just went to sit for an exam and have someone say ‘read these ten pages’ [...]. I think this is the huge difference between the British model and the Greek model.’

With regard to the impact of TNE arrangements on Greek society, UK TNE was particularly seen by four participants as a safe indicator of adaptability opposite career challenges and a positive influence towards discipline, professionalism and higher standards in working conditions. In the words of respondent 6:

'It is very important for the development of the profession in Greece (...) and it is not just about the knowledge. [...] ...there is more discipline, more respect. These are things you need to have to advance in your career'.

Half of the participants emphasized employability and the tightening of the links between higher education and the labour market. Moreover, participants emphasized the advantages brought by TNE arrangements to the overall Greek HE system, especially since public HEIs do no longer monopolize the options available, but a fine and accessible alternative is offered. As respondent 3 emphasized:

'It is important to provide an extra choice, to those who can make it. It is surely nice to have more options as this enables better judgment'.

Impact of TNE on Students' Personal and Professional Lives

The fourth thematic objective centered around the impact of participants' studies at Metropolitan College (the host institution) on their personal and professional lives. In most instances, this occasioned an animated commentary. Strikingly, participants' responses seemed to converge or overlap. Predominantly, all participants outright described their studies as a key enabler of meaningful and favorable employment in the industry. Various aspects of their studies were found to be relating to employment and career success. Three participants highlighted the added value of the qualification gained, in their CVs, for example. In the words of participant 4:

'...this award opened many doors to employment opportunities. It secured a much stronger CV and opened-up doors which would not have opened before. I was offered posts that I would not have been offered before. I was provided with opportunities which I would not have got before.'

Four participants emphasized the networking opportunities offered during their studies, either through the provision of paid placement or through college staff and services. Four participants also emphasized how

relevant and applicable was the knowledge and expertise gained during their studies to current and actual demands of the industry. As participant 1 put it:

'I haven't experienced what others describe, i.e. that, when actually at work, they are required to perform tasks completely unrelated to what they did during their studies. On the contrary, in most of the jobs I've had, I felt I had to go back to something taught at school.'

Three respondents particularly praised the team-building skills promoted through group-work during their studies, as a safe indicator of resilience and social skills in their careers. Respondent 5 said:

'When I completed my studies, I realized how important it was to learn how to cooperate with other people, whether successfully or not, because you surely have something to gain from each person, and this will definitely help you since, especially in the field of hospitality, you work with clients, colleagues, people.'

If not directly linked to employment and career perspectives, respondents' perceptions on the impact of their studies stressed the latter as an enjoyable and memorable experience (as stated by 3 participants) or as an enabler of transferrable and/or reflective skills (by three participants).

Overall, participants were very appreciative of UK HE and they would recommend TNE provision to their peers, friends and acquaintances. It is particularly striking that a sense of unique self-determination emerged from their studies within a UK TNE setting.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this case study suggest that TNE activity in Greece has enabled access to higher education in three respects: 1) affordability, in the form of the financial benefits deriving from the reduced cost of living/fees compared to taking the programme in the home country of the awarding institution (e.g. UK); 2) uniqueness of TNE course in comparison to range of courses offered by Greek public

universities offer); and 3) local language of delivery and instruction which is enabled by the validation model of TNE partnership.

From the findings of this study it appears that using the local language as the language of delivery contributes to the widening of access of HE, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Using a language other than English as the language of delivery in TNE is a sensitive topic for quality assurance agencies and education institutions in the UK. However, many scholars challenge the dominance of the English language in the TNE and suggest that using the local language improves the student experience and the soft benefits of internationalisation of HE (Hoey 2016; Yemini and Sagie 2016; Choi 2010; Knight 2016). The findings of this study add to the body of literature that supports a shift in the linguistic direction in TNE collaborative programmes. Using the local language or a combination with English, can promote intercultural education, empower host institutions and allow students to maximise their potential in meeting the learning outcomes and improve their attainment.

Most students in this study suggested that the added value of TNE is realised through a high quality education provision that is equitable to the provision in the UK. For example, the UK HE learning environment, unlike the Greek HE which is based in lectures and exams, it includes a variety of learning activities (i.e. group work, projects). Within this learning environment, students report that were able to develop their personal competencies that were relevant and valuable to them during their professional careers.

This study identifies that the TNE learning experience enhances critical engagement, promotes the practical application of theory, and facilitates direct links with industry. This strengthens TNE students' employability in the local labour market and, in some instances, creates opportunities for international mobility. Graduates celebrate their readiness for the market and are able to contribute to sustainable societies by conducting themselves professionally while knowledge and skills gained through their studies enable them to inform their professional practice.

The study findings also suggest that TNE in Greece has strengthened the capacity of the domestic higher education system. This includes the direct impact in the supply of higher education programmes as well as the

gradual emergence of TNE providers (e.g. Greek private colleges) as a valid alternative route to access higher education in Greece. Despite the constitutional limitations (see Tsiligiris 2019) that restrict the transformation of TNE providers to degree awarding institutions; the findings suggest that TNE supports a shift towards a more open and diverse higher education system which not dominated by Greek public universities.

Also, the study suggests that this particular collaboration generates tangible results in widening participation and in creating employable graduates who are able to make a positive impact in the economy and the society. It is worth noting that a social 'pillar' of sustainability is embedded throughout the core values of the awarding institution that is also committed to widening participation (QMU 2019, 10). Therefore, it seems that a well-defined sustainability strategy by the exporting institution is important prerequisite in achieving positive sustainability impact in the TNE host country through the local institution.

Overall, the findings that emerge from this case study suggest that TNE promotes access to good quality higher education and creates a number of benefits for direct participants and wider stakeholder groups with direct reference to UN SDG4. Despite the limitations of the study, which are unavoidable for this type of research approach and data collection method, the findings can be used as the launchpad of further research. More specifically, further research could be pursued in other major TNE host countries aiming to expand on the finding of this study about the impact of TNE in relation to UN SDGs.

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