
TNE - What we know

An enabling international environment

November 2024

Pulverness, A., & Carter, D. M. (2024). Transnational Education – What we know
(An Enabling International Environment). British Council <https://doi.org/10.57884/31ME-B279>
Series edited by Sarah Mount, TransformELT.

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Introduction

British Council has researched TNE for over two decades and has built up a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the role TNE plays and the environments in which it operates.

This brief summarises some of the findings from British Council research papers published since summer 2022 which relate to Action 2 within our TNE Strategy: “Create an enabling environment and promote the quality of UK TNE internationally”.

This is only a summary of a small window of our research – see the back page for how to find out more.



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An enabling international environment

The environment in selected priority countries

The enabling environment for transnational education (TNE) is highly diverse: tertiary education systems differ widely in their readiness to embark on TNE partnerships, the types of partnerships they are willing and able to negotiate, and their flexibility and capacity in developing various modes of delivery.

TNE is viewed by some principally in terms of export revenue. However, British Council research shows that its **value** to countries is perceived in many different ways, including: capacity building in teaching, learning and research; increasing English language competency; professional and technical knowledge transfer; and improved quality assurance and internal processes.

Our research into the **global environment** for TNE reflects this host-country perspective. Focusing on a cross-section of 15 selected countries, we identify key factors inhibiting the establishment of TNE agreements and signal the need for vigorous promotional activity to strengthen and develop existing partnerships and inform potential new relationships. While some of the research findings are context-specific, it is notable that many of the greatest opportunities and challenges – both ‘hard’ (e.g. policy and regulatory frameworks, strategic barriers) and ‘soft’ (e.g. perceptions about TNE and foreign degrees) – are replicated in widely differing regions (Europe, the Americas, South Asia, MENA, East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa).

The environment for TNE is constantly evolving. Much of the summary which follows is drawn from our series of **global environment** reports. Although specific details may change, this summary illustrates our knowledge and understanding of the complexities associated with enabling environments for TNE.

Challenges: changing contexts

Where tertiary education systems have expanded in recent years, for example in **China**, there has been a decline in the need for demand absorption and a consequent focus on quality and the growth of interest in internationalisation. In some contexts, such as **India**, where online solutions flourished out of necessity during the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a reduced appetite, post-pandemic, for distance learning.

A major obstacle in almost 50% of our representative selection of countries is the partial or total absence of a regulatory framework for TNE. For example, in **Indonesia**, which boasts one of the world’s largest tertiary education systems and offers a well-established regulatory framework, asymmetrical programme duration can be a major challenge for joint programmes.

In countries where the regulation of TNE is still in development, conditions for programme approval may lack clarity, or may be volatile and fluctuate in light of curriculum changes or changes in personnel, and it may often be necessary for agreement to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. In some contexts, the process of negotiation can sometimes take months, or even years.

In a number of European countries post-Brexit, notably in **Spain**, the disappearance of framework agreements for reciprocal mobilities and academic collaboration can pose significant challenges in terms of visas and immigration, management and administration costs, and relationship management.

However, there are signs of increasing receptivity to TNE partnerships. For example, **Indonesia** is increasingly opening up to international collaboration, with liberalisation observed with regard to blended learning, thus reducing the need for fly-in, fly-out teaching and consequently reducing delivery costs. There are 12 self-accredited private universities that are not subject to Ministry approval, and a handful of private universities that already have extensive TNE offerings.

Challenges: quality assurance and mutual recognition

Perhaps the greatest stumbling blocks in terms of alignment are quality assurance (QA) and mutual recognition of qualifications (MRQ). QA practices may differ widely, or as in Mexico there may be no mandatory QA regime, while MRQ is essential to strengthen bilateral flows of students for credit and degree mobility. MRQ features as a key component of embryonic frameworks in countries that are actively working towards comprehensive regulation.

There has been some significant development of MRQ frameworks in a number of countries. In **Mexico**, for example, detailed work was undertaken on implementation of the 2018 agreement, while in **Peru**, full implementation of the **2021 inter-governmental treaty** is imminent. But recognition of specific qualifications can still be challenging:

- In a post-Brexit climate, there may be a need to negotiate MRQ with European partners in the face of new restrictions.
- Extending existing MRQ to include online courses would be likely to improve accessibility, though there continue to be concerns in some countries around the validity of online delivery.
- In some cases, MRQ may be limited to specific subject areas.

Other framework challenges confronting UK universities seeking TNE partnerships include agreements whose duration may not outlast the tenure of a vice-chancellor or other key decision maker, or the need to enter into separate agreements with individual institutions. Where qualifications lead to entry into regulated professions, there may also be the challenge of negotiating distinct agreements for [micro-credentials](#) (short, on-demand, online courses, with certification on completion) with syndicates or professional bodies. Low levels of English language proficiency, amongst academic staff as well as students (e.g. [Brazil](#), [Indonesia](#), [Pakistan](#), [Peru](#)) may be an obstacle, whilst affordability of fees for students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds may also be an inhibiting factor (e.g. [India](#), [Indonesia](#), [Mexico](#), [Saudi Arabia](#)). As TNE has become established across diverse geographies, perceptions of the quality and portability of UK qualifications have become increasingly positive. In some contexts, however, such as [Egypt](#), attitudes to QA, assessment and academic standards are strongly grounded in local pedagogic traditions. The particular challenge for UK universities may be to overcome the apprehensiveness of staff and students about practices and expectations in UK academic culture, such as peer assessment, that are unfamiliar and may be perceived in a less positive light.

Risk management

When faced with this array of administrative and attitudinal challenges, a robust [risk-benefit analysis](#) is essential to balance risk and return. Given system-level approval, consideration of potential risks is a crucial dimension of institutional negotiation. Frank, open dialogue is key at the outset in order to assess motivation and mitigate against risk. But due diligence, including risk management, needs to be a constant process throughout the life of the partnership, so as to remain agile and prepared to respond appropriately to changing political environments. This process should include contingency strategies for winding down a programme and working collaboratively to achieve an appropriate outcome for enrolled students. Strategies should be updated, adapted or refreshed at cyclical intervals, to ensure that suitable arrangements are in place, for example for teach-out (an arrangement whereby students are given a reasonable opportunity to complete a discontinued programme).

Partnerships in different environments may be affected by risks ranging from individual safety to academic freedom, to costs associated with technical or financial resources. As well as the alignment of academic ambitions, consultation between key internal specialists on both sides should help to support and maintain specified standards across TNE partnerships.

Advice, support and information

UK policymakers and universities should advocate for government-level bilateral agreements and engage with sector agencies and tertiary education institutions. They should also consider how their approach to TNE can contribute to capacity building by providing faculty development: CPD for teaching staff; a broader range of specialisms; assessment training; research opportunities; and improved alignment with labour market needs. A constant theme running through the selected country reports is the need for more information. UK tertiary institutions need to be better informed about the regulatory environment, academic practices and development goals in host countries. They also need to be more proactive in providing information to overseas institutions about the benefits of UK TNE. This may take the form of promotional literature and case studies of successful programmes that clearly articulate the value of TNE and provide compelling narratives highlighting flexibility, employability and positive outcomes.



To find out more

British Council's research and insight on TNE (and other areas of international higher education) can be accessed via the following pages:

[Research and insight | British Council](#)

[Opportunities and insight | British Council](#)

On the shift from a Human Capital view of education to a Human Capability approach, see Choo, S. S. (2017). [Approaching Twenty-first Century Education from a Cosmopolitan Perspective](#) *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 50 (2), 162–181 (draft copy submitted for copy editing).

Our report on [The Value of TNE Partnerships](#) (2022) reveals differing, though not mutually exclusive, perceptions of value and benefits between UK Higher Education (HE) institutions and host institutions. Our environment reports present landscape studies across 15 selected countries:

Brazil	Mexico	Saudi Arabia
China	Nigeria	South Africa
Egypt	Pakistan	Spain
India	Peru	Turkey
Indonesia	Philippines	Vietnam

An overarching [Global Environment](#) report synthesises findings from the 15 studies, including the presence or absence of international agreements and regulatory frameworks for TNE on pages 23-27.

For more extensive research findings, see also our country reports on TNE in [India](#), [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Vietnam](#)

On the quality assurance of higher education in Egypt, and the implications for TNE, see our [country report](#) pages 10-15, 25-27 and 34.

British Council 2024

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