

Environment for Transnational Education
Partnerships and UK Qualifications:
Challenges and Opportunities

Vietnam and UK

Findings and recommendations
from primary research

Part of Going Global Partnerships



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1. Introduction

This report considers the opportunities for collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions in the UK and Vietnam. The British Council is keen to encourage greater collaboration, notably where this will support Vietnam's national higher education agenda.

This report aims better to understand the regulatory and operating environment for partnerships and identify barriers to collaboration. A review of the legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks for international higher education was undertaken. Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with higher education stakeholders in the UK and Vietnam in March 2022. Participants included government representatives, sector agencies and higher education leaders. The report presents their views on the opportunities and the main challenges and how these might be addressed. Broader views on the environment for transnational education (TNE) from partner institutions engaged in TNE in Vietnam were collected through an online survey. Ten Vietnamese universities responded to the study.

TNE in Vietnam has been developing since the early 1990s. During the period from 2009 to 2017, 531 TNE higher education programmes were legally approved in Vietnam. As of 30 July 2020, 408 were active, involving 85 Vietnamese institutions and 258 foreign partners from 33 countries, according to Ministry of Education and Training data.¹ The UK has the largest number of partnerships, with 101 programmes in place, followed by the USA, with 59 programmes. There is continuous growth in UK TNE programmes in the country. In 2020-21, Vietnam hosted 5,115 students in such programmes (see Figure 1). While there are many UK institutions active in Vietnam, 61 per cent of UK TNE students in the country are concentrated in just two UK institutions. Australia has the largest number of TNE enrolments, due to the scale of Vietnam's only international branch campus, Melbourne-based RMIT University, which enrolled nearly 12,000 students in 2021.

¹ Vu, NH (2020, pp84-85). Developing and Enhancing the Quality of Transnational Higher Education Programs. Ministry of Education and Training. *Proceedings of the National Conference on policies to promote international integration in education and training*, MOET, Hanoi, Vietnam.

This report uses data from the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Aggregate Offshore Record (AOR) 2022, which provides information on the current position on transnational education provision for the academic year 2020-21. To ensure consistency in the reporting of TNE programmes, we are using the programme typology used by the Universities UK International (UUKi).² In this report, we have substituted the term used by HESA, 'Other arrangements including collaborative provision', with 'Collaborative provision' to make it consistent with the sector reporting.

Figure 1 shows that 80 per cent of TNE students in Vietnam were studying as part of a collaborative provision in 2020-21. This number has increased by 61 per cent from 2,515 in 2018-19 to 4,050 in 2020-21. A British Council report (2019)³ identifies franchised degrees as the main form of transnational education partnership in Vietnam. Often, such programmes allow the students to transfer to the UK campus of the partner institution for one or two years. Transnational students make up a high proportion of Vietnamese first-degree entrants studying physically in the UK. In 2018-19, the British Council and UUKi estimated that 28 per cent of such students came through a TNE route.⁴

Earlier research carried out by the former Higher Education Funding Council for England established that many Vietnamese transnational entrants to first-degree programmes stay on to continue their education at the postgraduate level in the UK. In 2011-12, 40 per cent of the TNE students who articulated on UK programmes continued their studies at the postgraduate level.⁵

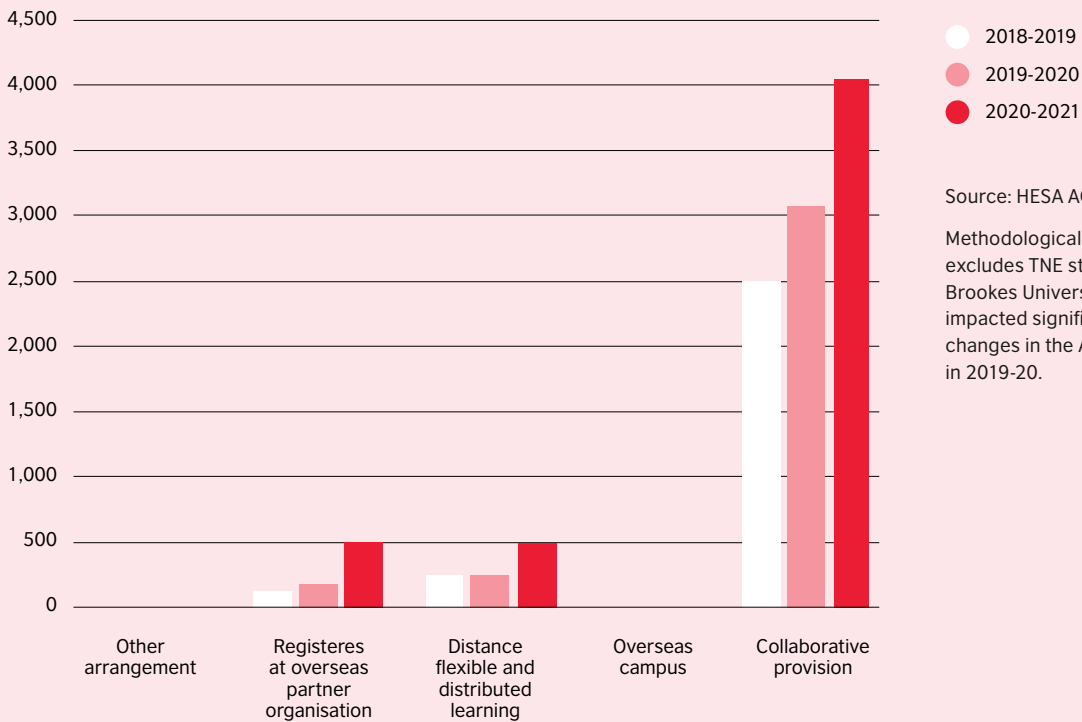
2 Universities UK International (2021, p8), The scale of UK transnational education provision 2019-20: Analysis of HESA data. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/UUKi%20reports/Scale%20of%20UK%20HE%20transnational%20education%202019-20_final.pdf.

3 British Council (2019), Transnational Education in Vietnam: Exploring Opportunities for the UK. <https://education-services.britishcouncil.org>.

4 British Council and Universities UK (2020). Transnational routes to on-shore UK higher education: A joint report from the British Council & Universities UK International. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/transnational_routes_to_on-shore_uk_he_study_-_2020-10-23_final_v2.pdf.

5 Higher Education Funding Council for England (2015), Transnational pathways to higher education in England. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23144/1/HEFCE2015_08.pdf.

Figure 1: Number of TNE students from 2018-19 to 2020-21

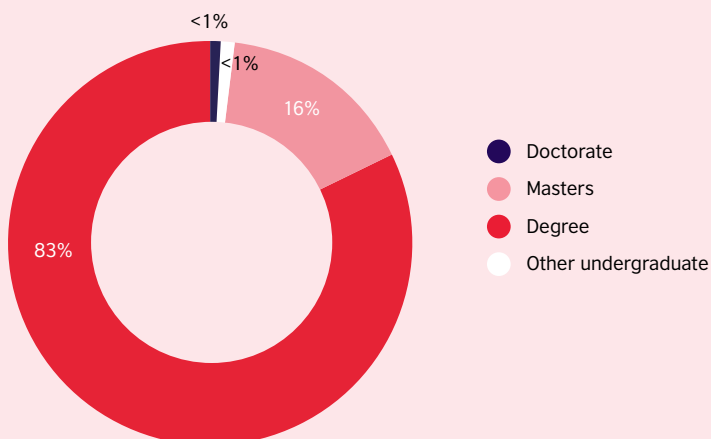


Source: HESA AOR 2022.

Methodological note: The data excludes TNE students at Oxford Brookes University, which was impacted significantly by the changes in the AOR methodology in 2019-20.

Figure 2 shows that 83 per cent of UK TNE students in Vietnam (4,225) were studying for a degree in 2020-21. In addition to this, a further 16 per cent were studying towards a master’s level qualification.

Figure 2: The level of study of TNE students in 2020-21



Source: HESA AOR 2022.

Methodological note: The data excludes TNE students at Oxford Brookes University, which was impacted significantly by the changes in the AOR methodology in 2019-20.

2. Value of teaching partnerships and TNE

The Vietnamese government has, since the late 1990s, seen TNE as a way to respond to unmet student demand and to build international linkages in the higher education sector. TNE engagement by public universities promises to enable local faculty involved in its delivery to learn from their foreign counterparts' teaching methods and improve their English skills.

Since that time TNE has increased access to international higher education and has contributed to the overall growth of the sector, alongside a significant expansion of public universities and domestic private institutions. Drawing on the interview findings, TNE often involves delivering high-quality programmes in niche subject areas unavailable in Vietnamese institutions.

TNE students are attracted to a modern study style and the opportunity to study part of their programme in the UK. This provides a cost-effective means of acquiring a UK degree. Twenty-eight per cent of all Vietnamese entrants to first-degree programmes in the UK started their course in Vietnam and then articulated to complete their degree in the UK.⁶

The interviewees highlighted the contribution of TNE to the internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education. In addition, they recognised the improved competitiveness of the local tertiary education institutions in recruiting better students. The tuition in English is also attractive to international students choosing Vietnam as their study destination. Interviewees saw TNE programmes contributing to developing students' global outlook and cross-cultural understanding. The cultural and social impact of TNE is further strengthened by students' improved analytical thinking and English language skills, and their application in their work and social life post-graduation.

While TNE programmes are more affordable than full-time study abroad, they are still comparatively more expensive than local programmes. However, the higher tuition cost in economic terms presents a revenue generation opportunity for the local institutions.

3. International collaboration policy landscape

Vietnam began its economic reform, often known as 'Doi moi' (renovation), in 1986. To implement this financial reform, a large number of high-quality human resources were needed. Since the first Education Law passed by the National Assembly in 1998, the government has encouraged international cooperation in education.

In the 1990s, there was no specific framework for TNE, and Vietnam learned some lessons when several unaccredited foreign universities entered the market. Therefore, in 2000, the government issued Decree 06/2000/ND-CP, providing regulations on for-profit cooperation and investment with foreigners in health, education, and research. In 2001, the government issued Decree 18/2001/ND-CP, providing regulations on establishing and operating not-for-profit foreign cultural and education institutions in Vietnam.

These two decrees did not provide specific regulations for TNE. Therefore, in 2012, Decree 73/2012/ND-CP was issued to replace Decree 18, providing more precise and more explicit rules for investment in education by foreign individuals and entities, TNE and the establishment of foreign

universities' representative offices. In 2018, under the Higher Education Law, Decree 86/2018/ND-CP was issued to replace Decree 73 to include TNE for the school level with streamlined procedures for foreign investment in education. Meanwhile, Decree 86 is under revision with the hope of providing better regulations for foreign cooperation and investment in education.

Vietnam has two government bodies responsible for tertiary education. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is in charge of higher education and teacher education, while the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs oversees vocational and technical education. For the latter, international cooperation is subject to the most recent Law on Vocational Education, and Training passed by the National Assembly in 2014 and Decree 48/2015/ND-CP provides a detailed implementation of the Law on Vocational Education and Training. There is a 30 per cent limit for the component of an undergraduate TNE programme that can be delivered online.

4. Perceptions of the environment for transnational education

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted international collaborations by limiting face-to-face meetings, conferences, and overseas studies. However, its positive impact on TNE cannot be overstated. Students who wanted to study overseas but could not because of the travel restrictions turned to TNE delivered in Vietnam.

4.1 Regulatory challenges

While the government is keen to expand TNE, its success has been limited to partner-supported programmes. Significant regulatory barriers have prevented the growth of online provision and international branch campuses.

4.1.1 Online programmes

The Vietnamese government does not recognise foreign universities' online or distance learning qualifications. This prevents graduates of international online programmes from having their qualifications recognised for purposes of public sector employment, professional licensure or further study.

Partially online degrees can be delivered through partnerships between foreign and Vietnamese universities under regulations issued in 2020.⁷ These may result in students being awarded either the qualification of the foreign university or qualifications from both universities. The Vietnamese partner must provide face-to-face teaching and facilities. In postgraduate and doctoral level joint programmes, online delivery must not exceed 30 per cent of the entire programme. It is unclear what limit is placed on online delivery in undergraduate programmes.

4.1.2 Partner-supported programmes

There are restrictions on which Vietnamese institutions UK universities may partner with. TNE partnerships must be between institutions at the same level and with existing specialisations, meaning a university may not partner with a private college, and a joint programme in computer science, for example, may only be offered by two institutions that already offer computer science programmes. This regulatory barrier prevents Vietnamese institutions from developing and diversifying their subject portfolio, which particularly impacts emerging fields that are in high demand from students and deemed to be of critical importance for national development.

If a programme falls outside of the official set of fields of study published by the government, (Circular 24/2017/TT-BGDĐT, 10 October 2017), the proposal must undergo an additional approval process, which can be lengthy.⁸

Foreign universities can partner with public or private universities. Prestigious public universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which have a high degree of operational autonomy, tend to have the largest number of partnerships. Private universities, including some internationally oriented institutions such as the British University of Vietnam (BUV) and FPT University, are less prestigious but are able to be more responsive to market conditions. Established in 2009, BUV now offers 11 undergraduate programmes and an MBA,

⁷ Ministry of Education and Training (2020) Circular No. 38/2020/TT-BGDĐT dated 6 October 2020 Providing for Joint Training Programs for Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate Degrees Delivered by Online and Blended Learning Methods. Retrieved from <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/EN/Giao-duc/Circular-38-2020-TT-BGDĐT-training-programs-for-bachelor-s-degrees-online-and-blended-learning-methods/455884/tieng-anh.aspx>

⁸ Ministry of Education and Training (2017) Circular No. 24/2017/TT-BGDĐT dated 10 October 2017 List of Education and Training at Level IV of Higher Education. <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/EN/Giao-duc/Circular-24-2017-TT-BGDĐT-promulgating-level-four-classification-education-at-bachelor-s-degree-level/369860/tieng-anh.aspx?tab=0>

providing students with the option of taking either the BUV award or UK degrees conferred by Staffordshire University and the University of London. The University of Greenwich entered into an alliance with FPT University in 2009, which now offers programmes in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Can Tho. These joint venture operations are described as ‘Greenwich campuses’,⁹ and have successfully operated at scale, with 15,000 current and former students, while avoiding the onerous conditions placed upon foreign universities seeking to operate independent branch campuses in Vietnam (see following section). More recently, BUV signed a memorandum of understanding with Australia’s Bond University, which enables BUV students to articulate on programmes taught in Australia and complete the last 16 months of their degree there.¹⁰

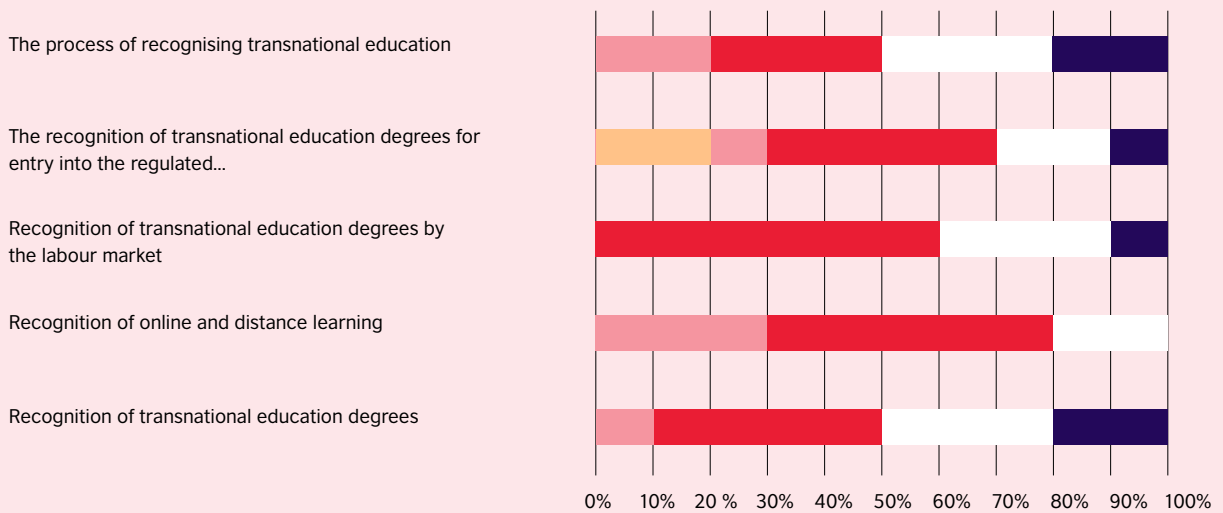
Qualifications awarded by legally approved TNE programmes are automatically recognised by the government, and the labour market readily accepts and values TNE degrees (see Figure 3). The one area where recognition of TNE is most difficult, according to this small survey, is entry into regulated professions. This is more of an impediment to the establishment of such programmes, because of differences in professional education, accreditation and licensing practices. Another area which the survey respondents identified as challenging is the recognition of online and distance learning, which 30 per cent of the higher education institutions (HEIs) identified as difficult. Similarly, 70 per cent say that recognising transnational degrees is not difficult.

9 <https://greenwich.edu.vn/en/about-greenwich-vietnam/>, <https://tuyensinh.greenwich.edu.vn/0>

10 <https://bond.edu.au/news/72202/hanoi-university-students-study-gold-coast> and also <http://ven.vn/british-university-vietnam-and-bond-university-sign-mou-46089.html>.

Figure 3: Survey respondents' views on recognition of TNE in Vietnam

How difficult or challenging is the recognition of transnational education degrees in this country?



Note: N=10

1 (very difficult) 2 3 4 5 (not difficult at all)

4.1.3 Branch campuses

There have been no new international branch campuses established in Vietnam in the past two decades, largely because of regulatory barriers. There is currently only one foreign university with international branch campuses in Vietnam, Melbourne-based RMIT University, which has campuses in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Despite a complicated path to its establishment,¹¹ RMIT Vietnam has proven successful, growing to become one of the world's largest international branch campuses, with 11,905 students across the two sites in 2021.¹² So what has prevented other foreign universities from establishing a standalone presence in Vietnam?

Overall, there is a lack of clarity in regulatory frameworks, with inconsistencies between various decrees and circulars. As a result, there are often differences in interpretation among government officials, and across ministries. There is no overarching unit responsible for international branch campus initiatives, meaning that interested universities must liaise with a range of ministries and local authorities, each of which may have little experience with educational investment proposals.

Capital investment

Foreign-owned campuses require a minimum investment of VND 1 trillion, approximately US\$45 million. Needless to say, this is a huge deterrent. Most international branch campuses involve a foreign university and a local joint venture partner which typically provides the bulk of the capital investment, but it is not clear in the regulations how much of this investment capital must be a foreign investment and how much can be contributed by a local partner.

Campus size

The regulations require that international branch campuses have a physical footprint of at least 25 square meters per student, which presents quite a challenge. A university aspiring to grow a campus of 3,000 students must establish a campus of 75,000 square meters. Finding such a site within one of Vietnam's metropolitan centres would present an enormous challenge, and the cost would be prohibitive. Unless an international branch campus is granted a long-term lease on public land at favourable rates, which other nations' governments have offered to lure new campus investments, the only option is to consider cheaper sites far from urban centres.

Staffing

All academics employed in an international branch campus must have a master's degree, and half must have a PhD. This requirement does not apply to domestic private institutions. Visa conditions, and in particular the absence of longer-term residency status, are a hindrance in attracting and retaining international academic staff and their families. Work permits have a duration of two years, after which they must be renewed, making long-term planning difficult.

11 Wilmoth, David (2021) *The Promise of the City: Adventures in Learning Cities and Higher Education*, Laneway Press.

12 RMIT University (2022) RMIT University 2021 Annual Report. Retrieved from [rmit.edu.au/about/governance-and-management/annual-reports](https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/governance-and-management/annual-reports)

4.2 Other TNE challenges

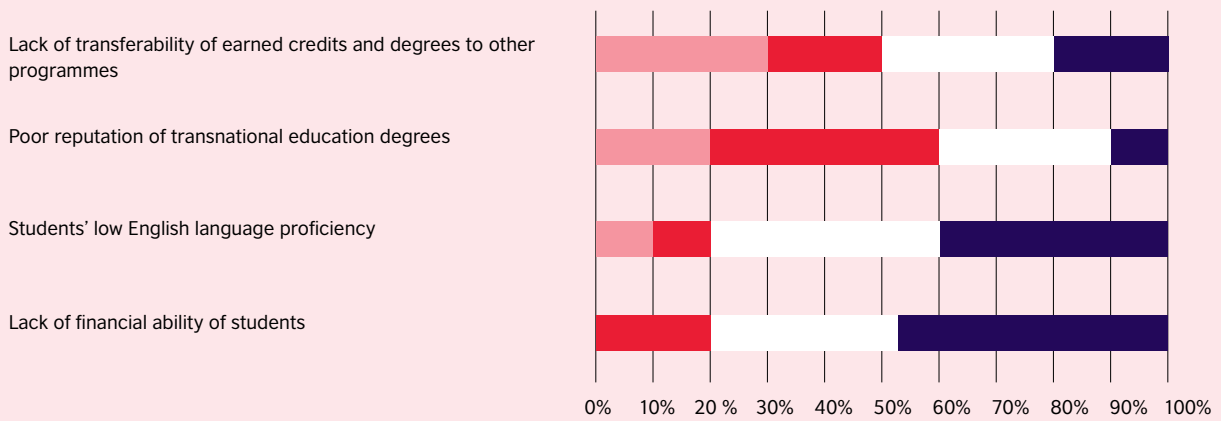
4.2.1 English language

The vast majority of TNE programmes in Vietnam are taught in English. Most TNE programmes require students with a score of 6 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). This is a barrier for many students, who need to spend almost a year studying English intensively to qualify for TNE entry. According to the survey shown in Figure 4, 80 per cent of the survey respondents state that students' low English language proficiency is a significant barrier.

The English barrier also applies to local teachers who want to teach TNE programmes. The English requirement for local teachers is a IELTS score of 7, which is a hard barrier for those who have not studied overseas.

Figure 4: Survey respondents' views on student demand for of TNE in Vietnam

How significant is each of the following barriers limiting student demand for transnational education?



Note: N=10

● 1 (not significant at all) ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 (very significant)

4.2.2 Financial effectiveness

In recent years, the government started to allow local HEIs to charge higher tuition fees on a cost-recovery basis for high-quality training programmes. These local programmes are delivered in English and Vietnamese, and students and local HEIs tend to consider the financial effectiveness of their choice of either TNE or local programmes. The cost for TNE is much higher than regular local programmes. As shown in Figure 4, 80 per cent of respondents said that students' lack of financial ability was a significant barrier. These findings echo earlier research carried out by the British Council, where the cost of education was the most important deterrent against pursuing education opportunities overseas.¹³

4.2.3 Transferability of credits

Students in Vietnam are admitted to local universities based on their school-leaving exam scores. There used to be a two-tier exam system in Vietnam – a school leaving exam and a further university entrance exam for those wishing to continue their study at that level. The Ministry of Education and Training recently decided to unify these and use the school leaving exam results for university admission.

Students may enter some TNE programmes even if their results in the school leaving examinations do not meet the benchmark to be accepted to local universities. If this is the case, their TNE qualifications may not be accepted by local universities, preventing these students from undertaking further study in the national system.

4.2.4 Finding the right foreign partner

Local HEIs find it challenging to find the right international partner. The regulatory framework requires the foreign partner to be accredited, but this information is not easily accessible. Events and initiatives that promote knowledge sharing of other countries' higher education systems and institutions and getting to know potential international partners will fill this information gap.

4.2.5 Capacity of local HEIs

There are nearly 400 HEIs in Vietnam, but only 85 institutions have had TNE programmes. Other HEIs are also interested in partnering with foreign institutions, but their internal capacity is limited.

5. Recommendations

This report identifies national and institutional-level recommendations.

5.1 National-level recommendations

At the national level, the following recommendations will contribute to a more transparent and clearer operating environment that enables TNE partnerships:

1. Timely revision of current policies and regulatory rules to adjust to the changing operating environment.
2. Mutual recognition of international degrees and credits to facilitate seamless and flexible transfers of students across different programmes.
3. Expanding scholarships to include TNE students.
4. Consideration in the regulatory framework of the implementation of timely quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms for local HEIs.
5. Development of searchable a national database that details TNE and international collaboration programmes.
6. Promotion of the value of TNE with local institutions, employers, students and their parents, and showcasing of its local impact.
7. Identifying training and professional development needs for university staff in charge of international collaboration at local HEIs.
8. Organising conferences and training workshops for local and international HEIs to share best practices in partnership development
9. Widening system-to-system cooperation between the British Council and MOET to organise education conferences and training events that enable wider networking and knowledge sharing between UK and Vietnamese HEIs.

5.2 Institutional-level recommendations

1. Strict compliance with current regulations on internationalisation policy, transparency and accountability in delivering TNE, and regular self-assessment of TNE programmes.
2. Approaching organisations such as MOET and the British Council for help with identifying the right partners.
3. Improving English proficiency through English language teaching and learning at local HEIs.
4. Investment in staff training in international relations.
5. Making use of professional advisory services.

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