

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

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# Nigeria and the UK

Findings and recommendations  
from primary research

Part of Going Global Partnerships



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# 1. Introduction

This report considers the opportunities for higher education collaboration between institutions in Nigeria and the UK to develop and extend transnational education (TNE) and other international partnerships. This includes the provision of programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level. The British Council facilitates education and cultural collaborations. This report aims to explore and add value to the ongoing dialogues and studies in strengthening Nigeria-UK international partnership agendas, and to provide a better understanding of the environment for such partnerships.

A review of the legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks for international higher education was undertaken. Interviews were then conducted with higher education stakeholders in both countries. To better understand the local context, interviews were carried out with higher education institutions in Ghana active in the recruitment of Nigerian students.

The interviewees included government representatives, sector agencies, higher education leaders, partnership managers and academic course leads. The report contains their views relating to the opportunities and the main challenges and how these might be addressed. Their contributions in the interview discussions inform the recommendations.

Data in this report is drawn from five sources:

1. Desk research into the regulatory and policy context of higher education in Nigeria.
2. Previous relevant studies published by the British Council.
3. Semi-structured interviews conducted in March and April 2022 with eight stakeholders, including higher education institutions (HEIs), government departments, overseas missions and national agencies. Of those, three interviewees were women.
4. An online survey collecting broad views on the environment for transnational education partnerships with Nigeria. However, there were limited responses from Nigeria.
5. Analysis of the following data sets from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA): the Aggregate Offshore Record (2022) (AOR), to provide a background on the current position on transnational education provision for the academic years from 2018-19 to 2020-21, and the HESA Student Record, which shows the number of Nigerian students in the UK.

## 2. The current position

Nigeria is home to Africa's largest population. The country is identified as one of the immediate priorities for higher education (HE) engagement by the UK government.<sup>1</sup>

There were 14,270 newly enrolled Nigerian students in UK higher education in 2020-21, up 66 per cent compared with 2016-17. Most students are enrolled in master's programmes.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, there were 21,305 students from Nigeria in higher education programmes in the UK.

Nigeria is the UK's third largest source of international students after China and India. Globally, the UK is the top study destination for Nigerian students. Previous estimates placed Ghana as the top study destination, with approximately 75,000 students in 2013.<sup>3</sup> While the pandemic has negatively impacted student flows to other regional study destinations, Ghana remains an attractive higher education opportunity. In this study, we have considered Ghana as part of the analytical framework for engaging with international students from Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

Nigeria is set to remain in third place as a higher education study sending country for the UK in the next year. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) places Nigeria as the third largest country for student visa applications last September, with 36,783 granted sponsored study visas. This is 347 per cent higher than in the previous year (September 2020).

In addition to sending students to study in the UK, Nigeria is a large TNE market. In 2020-21 there were approximately 5,400 higher education learners who were studying for UK qualifications. Almost 70 per cent of the students in 2020-21 were enrolled on distance, flexible and distributed learning courses.

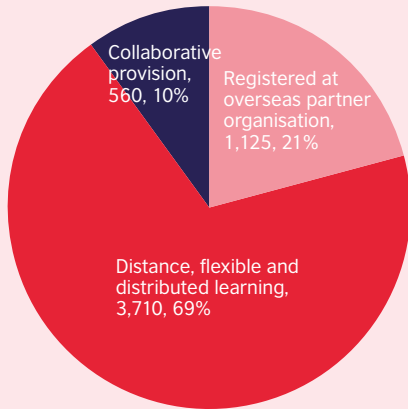
See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-2021-update/international-education-strategy-2021-update-supporting-recovery-driving-growth>.

HESA Student Record. For details, see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>

See <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20140529173131311>.

The most recent UNESCO Institute for Statistics data estimates just under 3,000 students from Nigeria studying at higher education level in Ghana in 2019. See <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>.

**Chart 1: Type of transnational education activity in Nigeria (2020)**

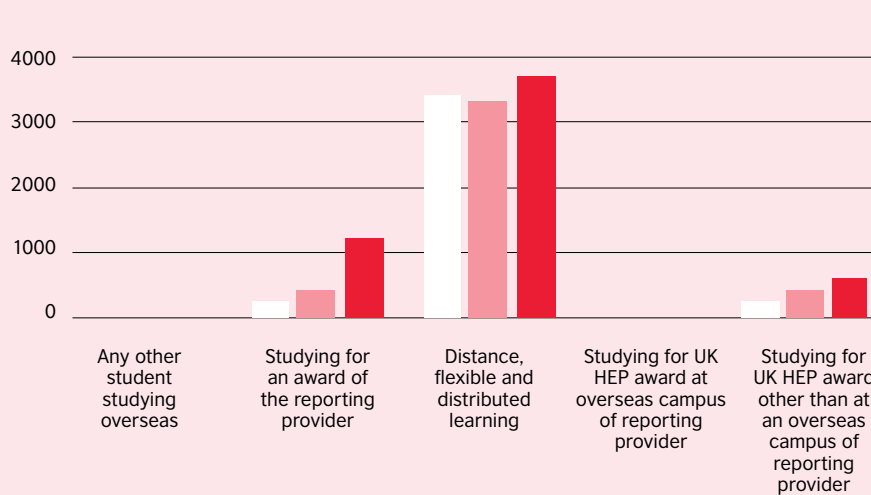


The number of TNE students in Nigeria increased by 49 per cent from 2018/19 to 2020/21, when it reached 5,400 learners. The most significant increases were noted in the number of students enrolled on distance and flexible learning programmes, and those registered for awards of the reporting higher education institution.

Source: HESA AOR..

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.

**Chart 2: Changes in TNE students over time by type of TNE provision**

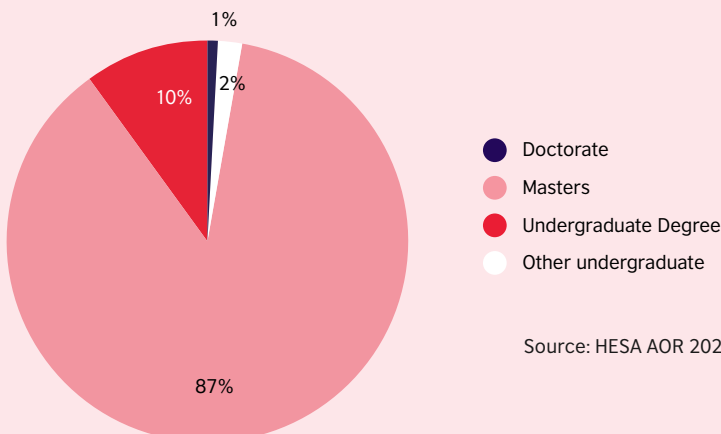


● 2018-2019  
 ● 2019-2020  
 ● 2020-2021

Source: HESA AOR..

Most of the students (87 per cent) were studying master’s level courses. This broadly mirrors Nigerian students in the UK, the majority of who are enrolled on master’s courses.

**Chart 3: TNE students by level of study**



Source: HESA AOR 2022.

# 3. Value of teaching partnerships and TNE

The Nigerian University Commission (NUC) is Nigeria's statutory body and regulatory agency. It is a parastatal operating under the Federal Ministry of Education. NUC has been actively exploring the benefits of TNE as a catalyst to unlock quality and affordable university education provision in Nigeria over the years.

NUC is in the process of publishing new 'Guidelines on transnational education in Nigeria', the draft of which is being consulted upon and revised accordingly. There is an expectation that the TNE guidelines will be officially published in 2023. The draft guidelines detail the value of TNE to the higher education provision in Nigeria; the scope of TNE and the permitted models; the eligibility criteria set for overseas HEIs willing to engage in Nigeria; the application process and approvals.

## 3.1 The provision of open and distance learning

In 2011, NUC set up a directorate of open and distance learning (ODL) to promote and regulate university education provision through open and distance learning, including cross-border education. In 2015, Guidelines for open and distance learning education in Nigerian universities<sup>5</sup> were issued by the NUC. However, the original guidelines detailed the eligibility criteria for universities that can offer ODL degrees, which at present are limited to Nigerian universities only.

The British Council has actively collaborated with NUC in exploring ODL as one of the options in meeting university education demand in Nigeria. Examples of previous collaborations included the TNE policy dialogue in 2009 and the TNE access and quality in Nigerian HE dialogue in 2017 that took place in Abuja.

There are multiple levels and numerous stakeholders of TNE in Nigeria. Given the complexity of the TNE landscape in Nigeria, a lot of the TNE activities are concentrated in Lagos – sub-Saharan Africa's largest city and home to 15 million population – and Abuja, Nigeria's capital (population 1.3 million).<sup>6</sup>

This report presents a snapshot of findings from eight stakeholders at the institutional, agency and government levels.

The case study below illustrates the value of teaching and transnational education partnerships in Nigeria. It draws on the five-year journey (from 2017 to 2022) of the partnership between the National Universities Commission of Nigeria and the University of London.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nuc.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/GUIDELINES-FOR-OPEN-AND-DISTANCE-LEARNING-IN-NIGERIAN-UNIVERSITIES.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Population data from Statist, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1121444/largest-cities-in-nigeria/>

## Case study: The University of London and the National Universities Commission of Nigeria

Nigeria's higher education sector is facing unprecedented challenges, with some 2 million applicants annually chasing around 750,000 university places, and there is a risk that the gap will continue to widen.

Nigeria's population of 195 million is growing at a rate of 3.2 per cent annually, which means it will double within two decades.

In 2017, NUC invited the University of London to scope long-term engagement in the development of ODL in Nigeria. This support is being provided through the University of London's Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE).

The NUC believes that ODL is vital for Nigeria, as it is the only feasible and affordable way in which it can meet current, let alone future, needs for higher education. Its plans for increasing the scale of university teaching through greatly increased use of ODL are enormously ambitious. Despite strong foundations on which to build in some institutions, the rate at which ODL can be scaled up nationally is limited by the availability of skilled practitioners and institutional experience. The supporting work of CODE aims to accelerate this process by focusing on capacity-building at the senior and middle management levels within institutions. Attention is being paid both to policy and to sustainable practice at institutional level.

Over the last five years, NUC and CODE have co-delivered four policy symposia and five practitioner workshops in London and Abuja, engaging with more than 70 Nigerian universities in providing a quality assurance framework that supports universities and regulators in resetting the national confidence in ODL; developing a strategic approach to upscaling ODL at national, institutional and department level; considering student support and wellbeing in the context of ODL; fostering student engagement and community-building; devising effective learning design; harnessing student voice; staff development; developing institutional capability for high-quality ODL; and researching ODL practice.

Our research on the impact of this multi-year strategic engagement has produced six key findings:

1. The most highly valued contributions have been about the modernisation of distance education methods, production of learning materials, development of learner support, and organisation of ODL systems.
2. Stakeholders' perception of the status of ODL on campus has improved since the start of the project.
3. The necessary NUC accreditation of some universities to offer ODL programmes has been gained as a result of quality enhancement following involvement in the project.
4. A wide range of ODL-related reforms in universities has been undertaken as a result of the project.



5. The digital transition is particularly challenging where there is poor infrastructure for staff and students – a challenge mentioned by the Nigerian High Commissioner in his address.

6. In terms of sector-level development of ODL in Nigeria:

- a. Many universities are still at an early stage in terms of ODL student numbers.
- b. There are significant opportunities to deploy new expertise, as dual-mode universities have ambitious plans to grow their ODL provision.
- c. Directors of ODL centres are an important professional grouping in Nigeria, who meet and support each other. They are starting to form the basis of a useful in-country network.

The NUC has referred to the ‘immeasurable impact that the partnership with the University of London has made on distance education in Nigeria’.

Author: Mike Winter, Director International Affairs, University of London

### 3.2 Staff development and capacity-building

Previous research for the British Council identified opportunities at the institutional level for teaching partnerships to support faculty development.<sup>7</sup> As an integral part of this, short professional and continuing development courses range across leadership development, curriculum development (to foster skills and entrepreneurship) and teaching skills (including online and ICT) could be made possible through blended learning.

There are significant capacity-building challenges associated with the number of new HEIs needed to absorb the current demand in Nigeria. Substantial faculty development will be needed to deliver the ambition set out by Nigeria, in delivering the targets of quality education, of its commitment to SDG 4: that is, by 2030, to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.<sup>8</sup> Interviewees see fit-for-purpose TNE as an opportunity to lift and help Nigerians into gainful employment. Several interviewees highlighted the opportunity to develop teacher training for local faculty regarding the development of innovative pedagogies centred on soft skills and new approaches that lead to greater employer engagement. Partnerships should consider the development of a graduate outcomes survey that tracks students' career progression with pilot schemes embedding placements and internships as part of the degrees.

<sup>7</sup> British Council Going Global Partnerships: Baseline study (2021), unpublished document.

<sup>8</sup> For details, see the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

# 4. Overview of the international collaboration policy landscape

Nigeria is on the cusp of opening up its TNE market.

While this study was under way, a UK delegation with representatives from the government, the higher education sector and national agencies visited Nigeria. One of the memoranda of understanding signed during the visit was between the British Council and the NUC, which detailed the international partnership between the UK and Nigerian universities 'with the aim of boosting Nigeria's cross-border higher education guidelines and programmes'.<sup>9</sup>

The NUC is expected to publish the Guidelines on transnational education in Nigeria in 2023. Subject to the outcome of consultations and the subsequent approval processes set out in the latest guidelines, the permitted TNE models in Nigeria will create a new chapter in Nigeria-UK TNE partnerships. These are expected to expand on the models of TNE partnerships detailed in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Nigeria Report (2019),<sup>10</sup> which include twinning and articulation agreements, branch campuses, and open and distance learning. The last of these excludes programmes offered exclusively online (e-learning), and must comply with minimum standards requirements.<sup>11</sup>

The Guidelines on transnational education in Nigeria articulate a cautious approach towards an audacious vision by exploring TNE's role in scaling up access to university education, improving and enhancing education quality, absorbing unmet demand for HE, and creating opportunities for Nigerians to progress into gainful employment.

## 4.1 Regulatory framework for TNE and labour market recognition of qualifications

The national regulatory environment in higher education means all recent graduates in Nigeria are eligible for the one-year mandatory national service with the National Youth Congress, which is a rite of passage from graduation to employment and further study. Students who completed their undergraduate education through TNE are not entitled to the national service, and are thus denied the opportunity to access the job market in the public sector and postgraduate education in Nigeria.

This explains why most of the students enrolled on TNE programmes are studying postgraduate programmes – the current regulatory framework for TNE in Nigeria has inadvertently limited students' choice to postgraduate qualifications. This is counterintuitive in terms of what successive administrations in Nigeria have consistently been working to achieve – i.e., to improve both accessibility and quality of university education to meet the unmet demand in undergraduate education at a price point both reasonable and acceptable to parents and students.

Given the restrictive regulatory framework for engaging in TNE, and for the recognition of TNE degrees in the country, there are no international branch campuses in the country. HEIs are responding to student demand from Nigeria by operating in neighbouring Ghana. In the interview with the deputy provost of Lancaster University Ghana, it transpired that early cohorts of undergraduate students from Nigeria were unable to register for the national youth service, an implication from the TNE regulatory framework in Nigeria that was unanticipated by the university.

9 See <https://www.nuc.edu.ng/nuc-british-council-collaborate-on-transnational-education/>.

10 See <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/nigeria-country-report>.

11 See <http://nuc.edu.ng/project/open-and-distance-education>.

Apparently, Nigeria did not recognise qualifications acquired from a satellite campus of established universities for the purpose of National Youth Congress, public sector employment and continued education in a public university. While the government of Ghana recognised Lancaster University, and Lancaster University was also recognised in Nigeria, Lancaster University Ghana was not. The qualification recognition and accreditation issues encountered were resolved through official channels and robust communications with the government of Ghana, the country's embassy in Nigeria, the UK Foreign Office in Ghana, the Nigerian High Commission in the UK and Nigeria's Higher Education Ministry.

Lancaster University Ghana is, thus far, the only branch campus of a UK university that caters to the needs of Nigerian students in a campus environment. Its experience in recruiting undergraduate students from Nigeria provides first-mover experience and valuable insight for UK universities. Whilst the recognition of qualifications and accreditation matter is now resolved for Nigerian students who pursued undergraduate education at Lancaster University Ghana, the university is currently working through the recognition of professional degrees with the relevant professional associations in Nigeria.

Recognition of TNE qualifications in the labour market is not an issue. Foreign degrees are well recognised if they are gained face-to-face. In addition, demand for TNE is mainly labour-market driven, and micro-credentials with certification are popular.

## 4.2 Perception of TNE by stakeholder groups

Interviewees from the UK, while encouraged by the recent senior UK delegation visit to Nigeria and the drive to diversify and the TNE opportunity in Nigeria, perceived TNE partnerships in Nigeria with great caution for the following reasons.

### 4.2.1 Operating environment

Infrastructure and security across the country remain uneven. Apart from Abuja and Lagos, which are accessible by regular international flights, face-to-face meetings with potential partners are prohibitive because of the security risks associated with travel by road. A stable supply of electricity and connectivity to the internet remains a challenge, and this was exacerbated during the pandemic. In addition, regular strikes and unionised activities inhibit normality at public universities that are important partners in TNE activities.

### 4.2.2 Regulatory barriers

Interviewees perceived the regulatory framework requirements as opaque, and expressed concerns about risk management, potential fraudulent practices and due diligence.

Nigerian stakeholders were optimistic about the potential and benefits of TNE. With the right price point, they perceive TNE as a conducive way to contribute to the diversification of local university provision. Private universities are seen to be in a better position than federal and state universities to engage in TNE and exploit the opportunities. An example is the Covenant University – Massachusetts Institute of Technology joint micro-master's programme.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://archive.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Covenant-MIT-Collaborate-on-MicroMasters-Pathway.pdf>.

# 5. Degree and qualifications recognition and other operational challenges

The recognition of foreign degrees and qualifications poses significant challenges in Nigeria. Other issues that TNE providers face in the country, relating to regulatory restrictions, delivery of online and distance learning degrees, student finance and others, are explored in this section.

## 5.1 Degree and qualification recognition challenges

The degree and qualification recognition issues are mainly concentrated at the bachelor's level of study, which is tightly regulated. This explains why 90 per cent of the TNE in Nigeria is concentrated at the postgraduate level.

Foreign degree holders are required to evidence their overseas study, for example by showing their student visa, which is problematic for those studying online. Many local students are opting to study with HEIs in neighbouring Ghana. This is also reflected in the composition of the student body at Lancaster University in Ghana, a large proportion of whose students are from Nigeria. Several interviewees highlighted the country's role in TNE delivery to Nigerian students.

The labour market is a significant driver of demand for TNE in Nigeria. Micro-credentials have gained huge popularity – interviewees described the

acceleration in demand as 'certificate-mad' buying behaviour. The shift towards online learning as a response to the pandemic normalised courses taught via distance and online methods.

The Directorate for Online and Distance Learning Education under the National Universities Commission has updated the regulations for online provision. While their enactment is imminent, they are not yet officially published.

While the higher education landscape in the country is challenging, it is opportune for those with an understanding of the operating environment and knowledge of the education sector. Formal recognition of degrees and qualifications between the UK and Nigeria has the potential to widen access to higher education for students whose needs are not currently met. In the aftermath of the pandemic and huge public spending on public health, national governments are tightening their public expenditures. As a result, many higher education systems globally are entering a frugal funding environment. A recent research study for the British Council found one of the main benefits of TNE partnerships at the system level to be widening access to quality higher education, alongside capacity-building and diverse models of higher education delivery.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.2 System-level challenges and opportunities for cooperation

Higher education provision in Nigeria has significant access constraints. The public HEIs focus on financially disadvantaged students whose studies are subsidised by the government. While there are some strong private universities, their capacity is limited. Interviewees described how a significant proportion of the affluent middle class is left out of the higher education system. Globally, Nigeria has one of the lowest gross enrolment rates in tertiary education, at 10 per cent. This is significantly below the world average rate of 39 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Most of the families appear left out of the system. Squeezed between those who have their children educated in private universities and a small proportion who can afford overseas education, a large proportion are left with no access to higher education. TNE offers the potential to absorb some of the unmet student demand.

Examples from other countries draw similar parallels. Typically, TNE can support the local higher education capacity, and governments tend to encourage it with the aim of widening access to higher education. However, as countries' participation in tertiary education improves, the focus of the regulatory bodies shifts from the supply of HE to improving the quality of education.

Added benefits of TNE, if supported by a liberalised and transparent regulatory environment, include firstly its potential to contribute to a reduction of brain drain from the country, and secondly, its potential to increase education-related expenditure within the country, by retaining students and also attracting international students to Nigeria.

In addition to its demand-absorbing function, wider recognition of online education and micro-credentials caters to the continuous professional development needs of the labour market by responding to the changing needs of industries. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the workplace and the job market. Specialist niche courses delivered to the learner's location evolve around the students and respond to their needs and can be studied in their free time (unlike delivery in a campus environment, which may not suit those with family and work commitments). While these are recognised and valued by employers, greater support and recognition are likely to result in a more skilled and resilient workforce.

Some interviewees mentioned that Nigeria might be held back by the culture of everything happening face-to-face. As such, the interviewees felt there may be a perception among policymakers that face-to-face education is superior to online.

# 6. Recommendations

## 6.1 Devise a robust engagement plan to embed the Guidelines on transnational education in Nigeria with key stakeholders and decision-makers.

To improve sector-wide understanding in tertiary education of TNE and how the guidelines will work once they are approved, an engagement plan is required that will help generate a consensus on TNE and secure buy-in from decision-makers, faculty, and relevant national professional bodies. The Guidelines aim to create a stable and conducive environment for the development of TNE activities. It would be opportune to create system-to-system policy dialogue, to share experience and reflect on the role of TNE as a vehicle to strengthen HE provision as means to contribute to Nigeria's capacity-building plans. In tandem, awareness-raising and targeted step-by-step TNE guides for university administrators, faculty, parents, and students would help clarify how to apply relevant policies and regulations. Communications with all stakeholders in Nigeria could support them in navigating the space between policies and implementation at the federal and state levels and engaging the private universities.

## 6.2 Targeted pilots at federal, state and private universities

Nigeria is one of Africa's most populous countries and offers a huge TNE potential. TNE caters to the needs of unmet higher education demand. At present, UK universities mainly engage in student recruitment in Nigeria and tend to shy away from TNE, because of exposure to residual risks associated with TNE activities. There are several 2+2 articulation arrangements, for example, with Robert Gordon University.

The Guidelines will likely approve the established TNE models, such as branch campuses, franchises, twinning and articulation, open and distance learning and joint and parallel degrees (also known as double degrees). Pilots of these models could be facilitated across the Nigerian tertiary education sector, using an action research approach with dedicated funding to fast-track shared understanding and co-create learning among HEIs engaged in TNE activities.

Some interviewees anticipate that NUC would value TNE programmes with high-quality curricula that are delivered using 21st-century technology and up-to-date pedagogy, and are fit for improving the skills and employability of graduates in Nigeria. The targeted pilots could also aim to understand how to balance the cost of delivering high-quality programmes in meeting the market demand at the right price point that is acceptable to students, parents, and partner institutions.

### 6.3 TNE as a vehicle to widen access and build capacity

In addition to widening access to higher education at the undergraduate level, supporting the labour market and upskilling local talent, TNE offers significant opportunities to reduce brain drain, strengthen faculty development and build research capacity in the country.

TNE programmes at the master's and doctoral levels provide a cost-effective way for Nigeria to train up existing and new faculty. Building institutional capacity will enable higher education institutions to address the country's higher education challenge.

For a long time, most of the higher education engagement in Nigeria has focused on student recruitment. While this enabled high-income families to educate their children overseas, many have questioned the moral basis of universities in high-income countries charging students from low-income countries significantly higher tuition fees than their home students.<sup>15</sup>

There is a significant opportunity for UK TNE to deliver collaborative double and joint degrees at the postgraduate level. These should be targeted initially for existing and new academic staff, addressing Nigeria's major need for faculty development. This will support Nigeria's commitment stated in the Blueprint to Revitalise University Education, calling for additional 10,000 university lecturers in the next five years.<sup>16</sup>

### 6.4 Recognition of international degrees and qualifications

In addition to existing memoranda of understanding between Nigeria's regulatory bodies and international agencies (e.g., NUC and the British Council), a system-to-system level of mutual recognition for degrees and qualifications is essential. This will strengthen bilateral flows of students for the purpose of credit and degree mobility. It will support and embed greater cooperation between tertiary education institutions in the UK and Nigeria.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/how-can-africas-vast-appetite-higher-education-be-met>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://nuc.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MB-17th-Sept-2018-optimize.pdf>.



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