

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

Turkey and the UK

Findings and recommendations
from primary research

Part of Going Global Partnerships



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	/ 4
2. THE CURRENT POSITION	/ 5
3. VALUE OF TEACHING PARTNERSHIPS	/ 7
4. OVERVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS POLICY LANDSCAPE AND TNE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT	/ 8
4.1 Overview of the international collaboration policy landscape	/ 8
4.2 Regulatory framework for TNE	/ 9
5. CHALLENGES TO TNE PARTNERSHIPS	/ 11
5.1 The TNE regulatory landscape	/ 11
5.2 Financial factors	/ 11
5.3 Immigration requirements	/ 12
5.4 Perceptions and lack of mutual knowledge	/ 12
5.5 Scope for change	/ 12
6. RECOMMENDATIONS	/ 13
6.1 National-level recommendations	/ 13
6.2 Institutional-level recommendations	/ 13
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	

1. Introduction

This report considers the opportunities for collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) in Turkey and the UK to develop transnational education partnerships. This includes the provision of programmes from undergraduate to doctoral level. This research aims to identify areas where there is the potential to strengthen higher education engagement between the two countries.

The report aims to provide a better understanding of the environment for transnational education (TNE) in Turkey. 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. These 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. The research outlined within this report, therefore, explores the challenges to further developing higher education partnerships between Turkey and the UK.

Data in this report are drawn from the following sources:

1. Desk research into the regulatory and policy context of higher education in Turkey.
2. Semi-structured interviews conducted between April and June 2022 with seven expert stakeholders from UK and Turkish institutions.
3. An online survey collecting broad views on the environment for transnational education partnerships with Turkey. However, there were limited responses from Turkey.
4. Analysis of the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Aggregate Offshore Record (AOR) for 2022 to provide a background on the current position on transnational education provision for the academic year 2020-21.

2. The current position

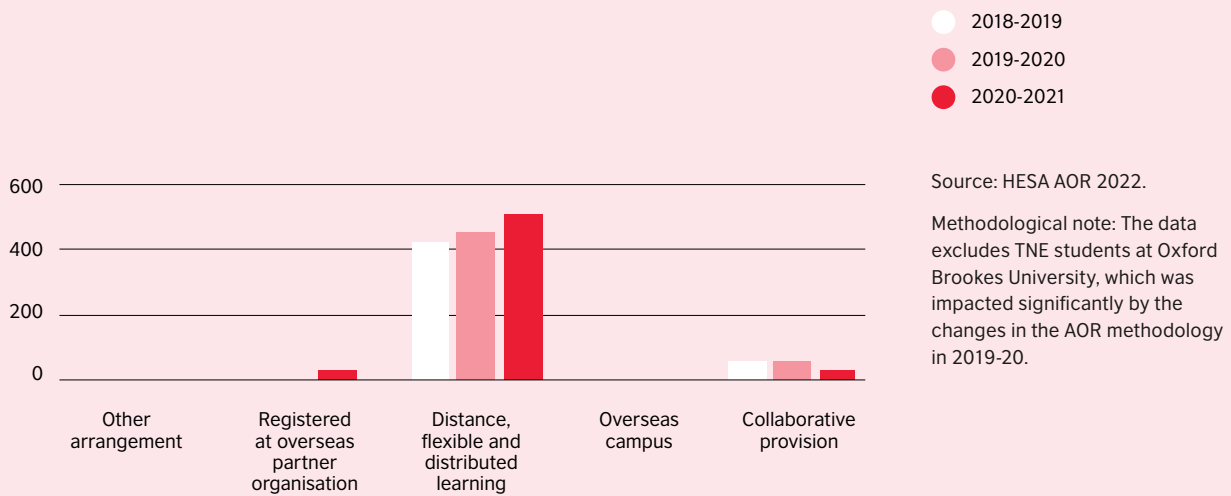
This report builds upon the 2021 British Council – Turkey baseline research, ‘Strengthening UK-Turkey partnerships in higher education: Baseline research’,¹ which explored how current partnerships in higher education could be strengthened at both the national and institutional levels.

TNE collaborations have become increasingly important to universities. More specifically, at the institutional level, TNE: strengthens the HEI brand; generates bilateral progression opportunities; enhances internationalisation activity; increases the research capability of the collaborating parties; and generates income. Collaboration between Turkey and the UK is longstanding, with intergovernmental agreements dating back to 1956, followed by many more recent activities seeking to strengthen partnerships between Turkish and UK higher education institutions. Although developing new partnerships is of considerable importance to both countries, as can be seen from the figures below, there is significant room for growth.

There is limited TNE provision in Turkey. Figure 1 shows there were 535 TNE students in 2020-21, 94 per cent of whom studied through distance, flexible and distributed learning in 2020-21. This type of provision increased by 22 per cent from 415 to 505 between 2018-19 and 2020-21.

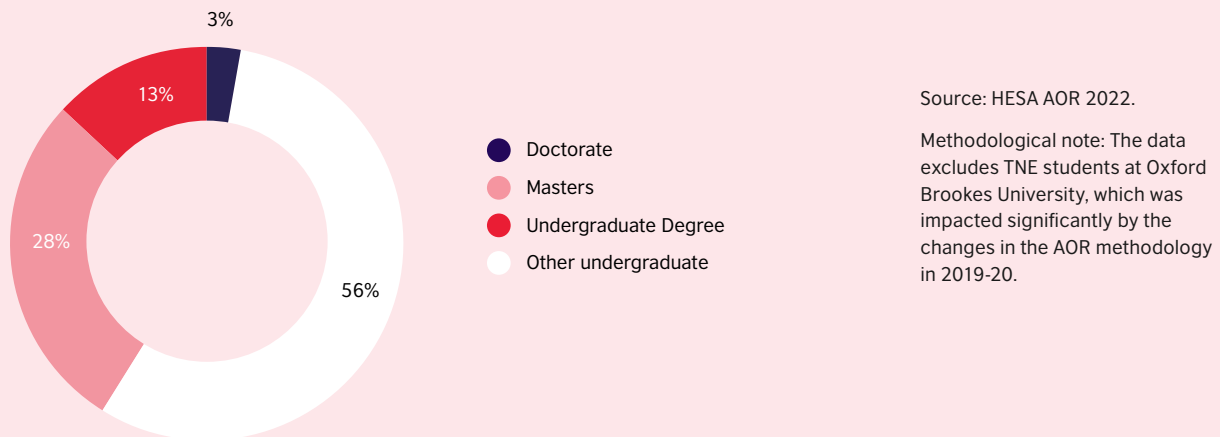
¹ See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/tr/en/he-baseline-research>.

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



More than half of the TNE students (59 per cent) were at the postgraduate level of study. Master’s students accounted for 56 per cent of the total TNE population. A further 28 per cent were studying towards other undergraduate qualifications.

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



There is an uneven distribution of TNE students across UK HEIs: 11 UK HEIs have more than 10 TNE students. Four HEIs account for more than half of the TNE students in the country.

3. Value of teaching partnerships

The British Council in Turkey commissioned the 2021 baseline research to explore how current partnerships in higher education can be strengthened. It provided recommendations on how to improve trust and understanding between the UK and Turkish higher education sectors by looking at opportunities, best practices, and ways to overcome barriers to expanding and diversifying higher education partnerships – at the national and institutional levels.

There have been positive relations between the UK and Turkey in higher education; however, their potential has not been fully utilised. The study drew on extensive research with 30 universities and 15 national policy-making institutions to provide a full understanding of the opportunities and challenges to TNE partnerships.² The report is extensive in its findings, and notes that the main opportunities relate to geopolitical factors, post-Brexit reconfigurations, geographical diversification, commitment to internationalisation, institutional learning, the impact of Covid-19, and specific areas of common interest.³

Turkey's higher education internationalisation strategy document for 2018 to 2022⁴ describes internationalisation as a tool for academic and scientific interaction in the context of benefits, and as a tool for cooperation in foreign policy, public diplomacy, and development between countries and cultures.⁵ The document details the following benefits of broader internationalisation:

- Improvement of institutional quality and capacity through the sharing of knowledge in academic and scientific fields.
- Increasing the international visibility and recognition of Turkish HEIs through academic exchange programmes, joint projects, collaborative research and joint publications.

- the significant role in enhancing public diplomacy generally played by international degrees, which accelerate graduates' careers to higher positions upon their return to their home country.
- Capacity-building, contribution to a culture of tolerating differences and developing a world view perspective.

These benefits are echoed by a recent British Council study on the value of TNE partnerships globally.⁶

At policy level, there is a positive attitude towards international higher education (IHE). This is reflected in the Council of Higher Education's 'Higher Education System in Turkey', wherein IHE is perceived as a valuable tool for building a global community, with cooperation among countries helping foster integration, knowledge and best practice in the sharing and collective solving of global problem.⁷

The value for institutions is seen to lie in IHE improving internal quality systems and the efficiency of internal processes. In addition, international partnerships improve the overall perception and status of the institution, which, in turn, enables it to attract more international students.

² Ibid.

³ See https://www.britishcouncil.org.tr/sites/default/files/strengthening_uk-turkey_partnerships_in_higher_education-_baseline_research.pdf.

⁴ See <https://policy.thinkbluedata.com/sites/default/files/The%20Eleventh%20Development%20Plan%202019-2023%29%20%28EN%29.pdf>

⁵ See https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/AnaSayfa/Yuksekogretimde_Uluslararasılasma_Strateji_Belgesi_2018_2022.pdf.

⁶ See 'The Value of Transnational Education Partnerships', <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/knowledge-centre/transnational-education/value-transnational-education>.

⁷ See https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Yayinlar/Yayinlarimiz/2019/Higher_Education_in_Turkey_2019_en.pdf.

4. Overview of the international collaboration policy landscape and TNE regulatory environment

4.1 Overview of the international collaboration policy landscape

The two main documents supporting Turkey's national priorities for the internationalisation of higher education are the Council of Higher Education's Strategic plan for internationalisation (2018 to 2022)⁸ and the Eleventh development plan (2019 to 2023).⁹ Both documents give internationalisation of Turkey's higher education system a prominent place. The focus is on attracting international students and academics to Turkey. The Eleventh development plan details the following as means to support the broader IHE agenda:

- increasing the number of international students
- attracting a greater number of international faculty members
- increasing the number of programmes in a foreign language
- improving accommodation facilities and capacity for international students.

In addition to the above, the Strategic plan identifies the following:

- increasing the number of cooperation agreements and participants in student and staff mobility programmes
- increasing the number of cooperation agreements with foreign governments and multinational institutions
- Increasing the provision of modern foreign languages
- Improving the accommodation facilities of higher education institutions for international students.

The support detailed above is seen as a significant contributor to improve the institutional capacity for internationalisation.

The Council of Higher Education (CoHE or YÖK in Turkish) is the main body responsible for the internationalisation of the Turkish higher education (HE) system, and its role is set out in the Higher Education Law. The Council has a specialised International Relations Unit in charge of bilateral and multilateral collaborations, including the Bologna Process, and working as the Turkish centre for the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility networks. Turkey's HE legislation allocates funding through the CoHE to support international mobility programmes for student and staff.¹⁰ A Eurydice report on Turkey's education system details the negotiations and agreements the country has signed.¹¹ It shows that Turkey was part of 102 agreements with 81 countries, which were still in progress at the end of 2018.

⁸ Council of Higher Education (2017) Strategic plan for internationalisation for 2018 to 2022. available online at https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/AnaSayfa/Yuksekogretimde_Uluslararasılaşma_Strateji_Belgesi_2018_2022.pdf (accessed 18 March 2022).

⁹ See <https://policy.thinkbluedata.com/sites/default/files/The%20Eleventh%20Development%20Plan%202019-2023%29%20%28EN%29.pdf> p144 (accessed 18 March 2022).

¹⁰ See CoHE, <http://www.yok.gov.tr/web/uluslararasi-iliskiler/anasayfa>, and also Section 5354-1 of the HE legislation <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.2547.pdf>.

¹¹ See https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/bilateral-agreements-and-worldwide-cooperation-85_en.

Given the country's strong focus on internationalisation and attracting international students and faculty to Turkey, the country has several agencies tasked with HE promotion. The most prominent are:

1. The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the government agency that promotes cooperation with regions that have historical and cultural ties with Turkey, including in the area of education.¹²
2. The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, which supports research collaborations.¹³
3. The Turkish Universities Promotion Agency, which is tasked with promoting Turkish universities around the world and attracting international students.¹⁴

'Study in Turkey' is a brand website developed by the CoHE to promote the higher education system in Turkey to international students.¹⁵

While most programmes at state universities are in the Turkish language, there are some programmes in English. The latter are particularly popular with the private universities that have become attractive to international students. If students' level of knowledge of English or Turkish is insufficient for admission, universities will still accept them but offer one-year preparatory programmes in the language before starting the course¹⁶.

4.2 Regulatory framework for TNE

While there is no regulatory framework for TNE in the country, some collaborative types of transnational education, such as joint degrees, are encouraged.

The broader HE regulatory provision prohibits the establishment of for-profit universities.¹⁷ The Law on Private Higher Education (which is legally based on Article 3 of the 2547 Higher Education Act and Article 130 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey) does not refer to, or provide for, foreign universities.¹⁸

However, Turkey has been positively reviewed as part of the Bologna Process for the establishment and recognition of joint degrees. There is limited evidence for TNE programmes, and the HESA AOR confirms the small numbers of such programmes. One example of a TNE partnership is between the Istanbul Bilgi University and the University of London, where the former is a recognised teaching centre. Under this collaboration, the aim of the Economics and Finance Honours Programme, which is administered under the academic direction of the London School of Economics and Political Science, is a gateway for individuals to a second bachelor's degree in Economics and Finance for their remaining three years.¹⁹

HE legislation has tasked the CoHE to oversee collaborative programmes between domestic and foreign institutions, including student entry, curriculum and graduation requirements, examination, and evaluation procedures. However, no provision details the process allowing foreign HEIs to operate in Turkey.

¹² See <http://www.ytb.gov.tr/>.

¹³ See <http://www.tubitak.gov.tr/en/>.

¹⁴ See <https://studyinturkey.com/your-future-university/>.

¹⁵ See https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Yayinlar/Yayinlarimiz/2019/Higher_Education_in_Turkey_2019_en.pdf.

¹⁶ See https://www.unipage.net/en/universities_turkey.

¹⁷ See <https://www.lawsturkey.com/law/the-law-of-higher-education-2547>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See <https://defjam.bilgi.edu.tr/en/academic/faculty-of-business/economics/economics-and-finance-honors/about/>.

The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council is an autonomous organisation founded in 2015, under the auspices of the CoHE, to manage and monitor the quality assurance dynamics of HEIs in Turkey.²⁰ However, no statutory body is specifically charged with performing the external institutional evaluation and assessment of foreign HEIs willing to engage in teaching partnerships in Turkey.

The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council is internationally active. It is a full member of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education,²¹ the Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education²², and the Asia Pacific Network.²³

The recognition of foreign degrees is streamlined in Turkey. The degree recognition requirements stipulate that the awarding HEIs should be locally accredited by competent authorities of their home country.²⁴ Turkey is a member of the European Higher Education Area and a signatory of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region.²⁵

20 See <https://yokak.gov.tr/Home>.

21 See <https://www.inqaah.org/full-members-list>.

22 See <https://www.enqa.eu/membership-database/status/member/>.

23 See <https://www.apqn.org/members/directory>.

24 See <https://www.yok.gov.tr/en/Documents/legislation/1.pdf>.

25 See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=165>.

5. Challenges to TNE partnerships

This section summarises the challenges identified in this research.

5.1 The TNE regulatory landscape

The British Council's 'Strengthening UK-Turkey partnerships in higher education: Baseline research'²⁶ identified the lack of TNE regulatory framework as the major challenge to setting up TNE partnerships between UK and Turkish HEIs.

The interviewees confirmed that the strict regulatory environment is negatively impacting the growth of TNE provision. They noted that national policy makers do not perceive TNE as a priority. Rather, their preoccupation is with attracting international students and ensuring a significant drive to promote Turkey as a destination. This research echoes the finding of the British Council's 2021 report that the main drive for developing TNE partnerships comes from HEIs rather than policy makers. This stems from HEIs' need to improve the quality and standards of teaching, to attract more international students and to fulfil their internationalisation ambitions.

CoHE is tasked with the approval of the curricula of joint and double degree programmes in Turkey. However, the lack of regulatory framework means the process that facilitates the delivery of these degrees is unclear. As a result, the interviewees reported that process were lengthy and bureaucratic in nature. It was suggested that it could take at least one year to gain approval for a joint programme.

5.2 Financial factors

TNE tuition fees can pose a financial challenge for students, in particular because they are higher than the very low fees at the state universities. In this context, it is important to differentiate between the role of the state in the provision of tertiary education through its publicly funded universities, and private education providers where the tuition fees are comparatively higher. Typically, TNE operates in the private side of HE provision, and as a result, the tuition fees aim to cover its cost. Compared with other countries, more of the TNE provision operates on a cost-recovery basis and involves private education providers.

In addition to the financial challenges experienced by students, funding for HEIs' participation in TNE programmes is problematic. Previously, joint funding has been available through the Newton-Katip Çelebi Fund,²⁷ with the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey being the main Turkish delivery partner. The programme has funded capacity-building, mobility schemes and joint centres, and research collaboration on development topics. However, it is now drawing to an end. Evidence from other global regions shows that collaborative TNE partnerships have provided strong support for capacity-building programmes. Most of them have focused on training local faculty to master's and PhD level through double and joint doctoral programmes. Examples of such initiatives include the Joint Development of Niche Programmes through TNE Linkages between the British Council and the Philippines Commission on Higher Education.²⁸

²⁶ See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/tr/en/he-baseline-research>.

²⁷ See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/tr/en/programmes/education/newton-katip-celebi-fund>.

²⁸ See <https://www.britishcouncil.ph/tne/about>.

5.3 Immigration requirements

Collaborative TNE programmes rely heavily on the international mobility of the UK faculty members who teach part of the courses. Interviewees pointed to challenges posed by Turkey's immigration system. These mainly affected state or Turkish foundation universities with difficulties relating to the local quota for foreign staff, contract hours and the renewals of the respective visas. This is additionally hampered by the lack of legal documents detailing these requirements.

5.4 Perceptions and lack of mutual knowledge

There is a perceived lack of commitment to developing partnerships. Turkish stakeholders perceive the UK as having different priorities, and mainly interested in other countries. On the UK side there is a continued view that the Turkish internationalisation strategy is mainly preoccupied with increasing the number of international students; therefore, there is little interest in developing TNE partnerships.

In addition, there is a lack of knowledge of each other's higher education systems. UK interviewees were unsure how to access information on the relevant regulatory provision, laws and legislations. While some are available in English, they are challenging to locate. Turkish universities tend to be the main source of help for UK partners. The British Council is currently taking steps to improve communication platforms and creating opportunities for policymakers to convene a dialogue between UK and Turkish HEIs and increase awareness of TNE.

Universities in Turkey are interested in the broader internationalisation of higher education. However, there appears to be little understanding of international themes beyond student recruitment.

5.5 Scope for change

In addition to HEIs, there are agencies and organisations operating in the education sector that are very motivated to work with their UK counterparts. For example, the UK is a perfect partner for quality assurance: the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council is already working closely with the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK. The British Council has also worked with the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council since 2018 to run joint projects. There is also a commitment to work with the UK's Advance HE. The most recent example draws on a joint project for the design, planning and delivery of an online training programme entitled Teaching and Learning Excellence Training Programme for Turkish Academics.

Another example of a joint project is the development of micro-degree credentials. This aims to develop systems that enable universities to run micro-degrees for their graduates.

6. Recommendations

6.1 National-level recommendations

At the national level, the following initiatives will strengthen the development of TNE engagement between the two countries:

- A shared commitment to HE cooperation should be articulated at the national level. There is a strong will to engage through higher education on both sides. A national-level agreement will signal the commitment to cooperation between Turkey and the UK.
- Both Turkey and UK are signatories of the Lisbon recognition convention, which facilitates the recognition of degrees and qualifications. Policy makers should investigate how this can be extended to include the recognition of some of the regulated professions.
- The main challenge that HEIs in both countries are grappling with is the lack of a regulatory environment for TNE. A possible solution is to explore what type of cooperation supports IHE priorities in Turkey. Previous British Council research on the value of TNE partnerships shows that TNE advances the internationalisation of local HEIs.²⁹ A pilot scheme should be instituted with the aim of gauging the effectiveness of TNE regulatory provision focusing on joint and double degrees.
- Relatedly, policymakers should consider setting up a jointly funded project on double and joint degrees in subjects considered of national priority for Turkey.
- Policymakers, with support from relevant agencies, should consider the development of a knowledge hub with translations in English of all relevant documentation around HE regulatory provision and related legislation. This resource could be used by all international HEIs willing to engage with universities in Turkey.

6.2 Institutional-level recommendations

At the institutional level, stronger collaboration and mutual knowledge can be built through the following:

- Including Turkey-UK engagement as part of the university engagement strategy.
- Building from existing research and student mobility initiatives to develop TNE partnerships where this is possible.
- Developing a community of practice for UK and Turkish HEIs with an interest in bilateral collaboration. The community should be tasked with convening events of mutual interest and sharing best practices.

²⁹ See <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/knowledge-centre/transnational-education/value-transnational-education>.

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.³⁰

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.³¹

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.

³⁰ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/how-can-africas-vast-appetite-higher-education-be-met>.

³¹ <https://nuc.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MB-17th-Sept-2018-optimize.pdf>.

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