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**TNE - What we know**

# **TNE students**

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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 developing a better understanding of TNE students: who they are, why they study and what they do next.

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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# TNE students

## Overall profile

In 2022-23 – the most recent year for which we have data – the UK higher education sector had 576,705 TNE students across 228 different countries and territories. Of these students, 66% were undergraduates, 32% were taught postgraduates and 1% were research students.

Our analysis of the data indicates that undergraduate students are more likely to be in some form of partnership provision (whether it is collaborative provision or validated provision) than postgraduates; whereas postgraduate students are more likely to be learning through distance, flexible or distributed learning than undergraduates. (See note on data sources in 'To find out more' below.)

Choosing from a range of options, 19% included 'flexibility with current schedule' among their reasons for going down the TNE route. We know little about specific social groups or characteristics among TNE students, although there is a credible view that TNE has the ability to diversify access to higher education. For example, *in some countries, families are reluctant to allow female students to study abroad, resulting in more male than female students being internationally mobile. The result is that the female participation rate in TNE programmes can be higher than among internationally mobile students and within the domestic higher education system* ([The Value of TNE Partnerships](#), page 28).

	Distance, flexible or distributed learning	International branch campuses	Other arrangements (including collaborative provision)	Registered at overseas partner organisation	Total
<b>Undergraduate</b>	55,500 14.7%	28,180 7.4%	188,075 49.7%	106,885 28.2%	<b>378,645</b>
<b>Postgraduate</b>	81,535 42.2%	11,880 6.1%	60,635 31.4%	39,185 20.3%	<b>193,230</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>137,035</b>	<b>40,060</b>	<b>248,710</b>	<b>146,070</b>	<b>571,875</b>

Source: British Council analysis of HESA Aggregate Offshore record data (2024)

These headline data hint at the broad diversity of academic provision, and students, in UK TNE. Beyond that, our information is inevitably patchy, with a basis in individual reports that focus on specific countries or regions of the world. This makes it very hard to generalise across such a large number of students. But we can begin to build a picture.

In some countries, there is the perception that TNE students come from cities more than from rural areas. This may be because urban students in these countries are more likely to be able to afford the fees charged by TNE providers. It may equally be that providers in the UK are attracted to larger population centres when seeking to deploy their academic programmes abroad.

## Personal characteristics

TNE students are often a bit older than home students in the UK. They may pursue their degree studies while in employment, or alongside family responsibilities. The flexibility of TNE courses attracts some students who move from one country to another in order to study, alongside others who continue to live at home. For example, a study (published in 2023) of 352 UK TNE students in mainland [Europe](#) found that 45% of respondents were studying away from their home country, but 18% were living with their parents. A further study (published in 2024)<sup>1</sup> is based on a survey of 1,355 TNE students in France, Greece and Spain, of whom 28% are enrolled with UK providers.

## Motivation to study

We find that TNE students tend to be highly motivated and have a clear idea of what they want from their studies. TNE students are likely to take an instrumental view of higher education. They choose to follow a UK degree programme because they consider that it will enhance their career prospects. We have evidence that South Asian students, in particular, are strongly motivated by the prospect of economic advancement. Interviews with students in Sri Lanka reveal a recognition of the practical skills they can gain from TNE studies, giving them a head start in the race for rewarding jobs when they graduate.

<sup>1</sup>"Transnational education in France, Greece and Spain: Research on student choices and motivations" is due to be published by British Council December 2024.

South Asian undergraduates, in addition, see TNE as a stepping stone to in-person postgraduate study in the UK. They are seeking a transformative effect, not only for their own long-term financial position, but also for their families.

TNE students in mainland Europe, although the economic context may be different, show a similar interest in skills that can be transferred into the workplace. Our 2024 study of students in France, Greece and Spain found that TNE students with UK providers were significantly more motivated by career prospects than TNE students with other international providers. Among the 352 European students surveyed in our 2023 report, 87% reported that their course had a positive impact on enhancing their skill sets and on deepening their knowledge and expertise. However, these students were slightly more likely to move on to further study (37%) than to seek immediate employment following their studies (26%).

Given this instrumentalism, TNE students are careful in their choice of where and how to study. Above all, students are attracted to UK tertiary education because of its reputation for quality. They expect modern teaching methods, access to careers advice and to gain an international outlook. At the same time, they want to know that a degree awarded through the TNE route will be recognised by employers in their own country. For this reason, many prefer programmes that lead to double degrees (awarded both by the UK provider and a local partner). International agreements for the [mutual recognition of qualifications](#) (MRQ) can reassure students that their UK degree award is portable.

## Affordability and access

TNE has an important role in widening access to tertiary education. It makes the UK offer accessible to students who cannot travel abroad for financial or family reasons. The affordability of TNE programmes, however, is double-edged. On the one hand, students join degree programmes usually at a much lower fee than they would pay in the UK. On the other hand, this fee may still be off-putting: either because it is more than they can afford, or because it goes against the grain in countries where higher education is supposed to be free. In [Mexico](#), for example, there is a mismatch between the fees applied by TNE providers and the government policy of free higher education. Similar issues are presented in parts of [Europe](#).

These issues notwithstanding, TNE adds diversity to local tertiary education markets. In some developing economies, demand for tertiary education is growing much more quickly than the supply of places; therefore governments encourage TNE investment by UK providers as a way of adding capacity. Equally, TNE is a way for UK tertiary education providers to educate students who they would not otherwise reach.



## 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](#)

Data sources: Headline data on UK TNE participation are supplied on their website by the [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(HESA\)](#). More detailed data are available for UK HE providers through data mining portals on our [Opportunities and insight | British Council](#) pages. Note that: although the data mining portal is based on the HESA Aggregate Offshore record, the overall numbers are slightly different because of the rules under which data are compiled; and the way in which HESA accounts for TNE students among English and Welsh providers will change, yielding [more granular data](#) from 2026-27.

The view that TNE students are slightly older than home students in the UK is captured in our report on [The Value of TNE Partnerships](#) at page 17. Compare also insights from reports on [Europe](#) (page 7) and [Bangladesh](#) (page 47). The potential of TNE to increase female participation in higher education is addressed in the report on Value, at page 28 with relevant supporting case studies. Further insight on gender parity in TNE can be found in reports on Bangladesh (pages 49-51) and [Sri Lanka](#) (pages 32-34). On perceived urban/rural splits among TNE students, see the reports on Bangladesh (page 51) and Sri Lanka (page 31).

On the motivation of South Asian TNE students, see reports on Bangladesh at page 48 and [Sri Lanka](#) at pages 31-32. On TNE as a stepping stone to postgraduate study in the UK, compare the view of students in [India](#) (page 38).

On the quality of UK TNE provision, see [The Value of TNE Partnerships](#) at page 42; and case studies in our collection of essays on [TNE in East Asia](#) (pages 60-85). Among students surveyed in [Europe](#) over three-quarters rated their course as having a very positive or positive impact on their confidence, their personal interests and their view of the world (page 10).

Issues of affordability for students are summarised, across a range of countries, in our report on the [Global Environment for TNE](#) (pages 15-19). These issues of affordability appear in reports that draw on the student voice as evidence: for example, our reports on Bangladesh (pages 39-40), [Sri Lanka](#) (page 36) and [Egypt](#) (page 33).