

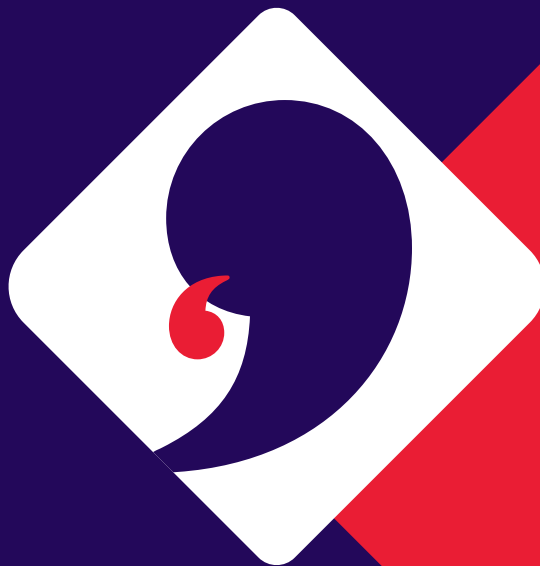
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# The Value of Transnational Education Partnerships:

Executive  
Summary

Part of  
Going Global  
Partnerships

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# Introduction

This report was commissioned by the British Council with the aim of better understanding the value and impact of transnational education (TNE) partnerships with policymakers, sector agencies and higher education institutions.

‘Value’ is interpreted within the research as the importance, or worth, of the benefits resulting from the partnership. ‘Impact’ refers to the longer-term changes that result from TNE partnerships.

This research involved an extensive literature review and analysis of the existing body of knowledge. It drew on 79 interviews conducted across 12 geographies with higher education stakeholders, including ministries, regulatory bodies, and higher education institutions (pro-vice chancellors, academic programme leads and international partnership managers); a survey of over 100 higher education stakeholders involved in the delivery or regulation of transnational education in both host and provider countries; and 23 impact case studies from 21 countries, including 13 designated official development assistance (ODA) countries.

In addition to stakeholders from the UK, evidence was primarily gathered from Egypt, Greece, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan. A more comprehensive set of countries was included in the survey and the call for impact case studies.

# Key findings

The findings below are the most widely reported contributions of TNE, and those for which there is significant evidence. We found that value and impact vary across and within countries.

## **TNE partnerships are a key driver of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

TNE partnerships' value in widening access to education and the workforce is a common recurring theme, pointing to international teaching partnerships as a significant driver of education and the workforce, a common recurring theme pointing to international teaching partnerships as a significant driver of education and the workforce, and ultimately, of social and economic mobility. They play a critical role in education, gender, and inequality.

Evidence from the case studies is supported and supplemented by the stakeholder interviews in partner countries, providing a rich and nuanced picture. As expected, it illustrates the complex interrelationships and dependencies between the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But, above all, it points to the overriding importance of context (national, economic, cultural) in the value and impact of TNE. While the most substantial contribution is to quality of education (SDG4), TNE is a catalyst for achieving broader SDG-specific impact, such as good health and wellbeing, and promoting collaboration to achieve all 17 goals. The research provides evidence of the direct contribution of TNE partnerships to 15 of the 17 SDGs (illustrated below in the impact case studies).

## UN SDGs reported in TNE impact case studies (frequency of SDG reported)



## Value of TNE to partner countries

There is significant evidence of TNE's value and impact across countries. Key areas are:

### I. Capacity building and institutional development

**Increasing the supply of higher education**, specifically in local systems where demand exceeds supply. Government stakeholders in several countries highlight **widened access to international higher education and reduction in brain drain** as an explicit value of TNE partnerships. Students can gain an internationally recognised qualification much more affordably, and tuition fees are invariably much lower at the TNE partner than if they studied at the home campuses. This has widened access to international higher education beyond the small proportion of globally mobile students, estimated to be just over 2 per cent of the world's tertiary education enrolments.

The research found extensive evidence of TNE's value in **improving the quality and diversity of higher education**. Over 90 per cent of the survey respondents rated an improved quality of higher education as an essential or very important factor associated with TNE for partner countries. For governments, this may be about adding value to, or diversifying, their domestic systems, such as attracting highly ranked international universities to set up campuses or programmes to contribute to national competitiveness while expanding choices for students. Where countries do not have a national policy framework that supports and encourages TNE, this limits its potential impact.

**Widening access for particular groups of students** is a critical driver across many countries. Sixty-eight per cent of survey respondents pointed to TNE widening access for students from underrepresented socioeconomic groups, contributing to better gender balance (63 per cent), and widening access for underrepresented ethnicities (37 per cent). For some UK universities, TNE has become an international extension of their domestic widening participation mission.

National governments are using TNE to **attract international students** from surrounding countries, boost educational exports and attract international talent. Institutions are using it to attract high-level international students and to drive up their place in the global rankings.

**Enhancing the internationalisation of institutions:** Over 90 per cent of the higher education institutions (HEIs) that responded to the online survey rated 'improved international outlook' as an essential factor associated with TNE. Just under 90 per cent of respondents rated 'internationalisation of the curriculum and the institution' as important to very important. There are several examples of policymakers choosing to use TNE as a vehicle to internationalise their country's domestic higher education sector.

### II. Developing teaching capacity in institutions and strengthening the academic talent pool in countries

Many international partnerships provide training for young faculty members through part-time and split-site PhD models. 'Brain circulation' between UK TNE providers and

local partners is reported as strengthening the pool of academic and research talent in-country, exposing academics on both sides to new pedagogies, assessment methods and quality assurance systems.

### III. Enhancing student experience and improving graduate employability

There is evidence of standards of student experience being imported from UK partners, along with student-centred learning approaches and flexible curricula. These are deemed by staff and students to hold significant value. Evidence points to TNE graduate employability being generally higher than for local graduates. One reason highlighted is that courses focus on developing professional skills needed by local and international employers. UK partners are also bringing a different industry engagement approach, encouraging closer links with employers.

### IV. Enhancing research capacity

Collaborative teaching and learning at the postgraduate level are widely valued for contributing to capacity building in niche subject areas. Producing collaborative research outputs is seen as a natural extension. Some policymakers identify this potential link as a rationale for supporting UK TNE.

### V. Reputational value

The reputation of the UK TNE provider institution is an essential factor for partner institutions. For some, the value lies in the partnerships' ability to raise their global profile and league table position. For some governments, TNE partnerships play a critical role in 'soft power', contributing to

building their national brand through high-profile educational linkages with prestigious institutions.

### VI. Building sustainable communities

From the examples provided by local institutions, we conclude that TNE has the potential to generate a substantial impact on local communities in partner countries. However, the evidence suggests that a prerequisite for building sustainable communities is for TNE activities to be designed and implemented so as to emphasise impact. Also, for impact to be maximised and diffused across the local communities, TNE activities must be supported by the local government through funding or other initiatives.

### VII. Economic development

TNE's economic development function is secured through the following means:

**a. National competitiveness:** Government strategies worldwide recognise that a quality higher education sector is necessary for national competitiveness. The value of TNE is seen to be its contribution to building capacity in local institutions and producing graduates with knowledge and skills directly relevant to local or regional economic development.

**b. Revenue generation and diversification:** There is little evidence of governments looking to TNE to generate or diversify revenues. There is more evidence at the institutional level, where there are examples of TNE being used to maximise revenue, e.g., private, for-profit colleges without degree-awarding powers partnering with UK institutions to offer their degree programmes for a licence fee.

## Value of TNE to the UK

TNE is both a government and institutional priority.

### I. Increased exports as a government priority

The UK's International Education Strategy (2021) focuses on an export agenda, aiming to grow education exports to £35 billion annually by 2030. TNE is included in those ambitions. In this context, 'value' means TNE's monetary return to the UK economy. The evidence also points to the significance of financial contributions for UK stakeholders compared with other benefits. Fifty-two per cent of UK survey respondents rate TNE export revenue as a very important driver; a further 19 per cent saw it as fairly important. Interviewees note that TNE is nearly always intended to generate a surplus or, at least, to be financially self-supporting.

### II. Recruitment of international students to the UK as an institutional priority

Most UK universities report that TNE is an essential pipeline for international student recruitment. Sixty-eight per cent of UK survey respondents rate international student recruitment as a very important driver; a further 15 per cent as important.

### III. Revenue diversification

In some universities, TNE is primarily about converting TNE enrolments into a revenue flow back to the UK university while mitigating financial and reputational risk. Focusing on revenue in a sustainable way requires the UK university to protect its brand, in both its home and host markets, by maintaining the quality of the student intake, the academic experience and the employability of its TNE graduates.

### IV. Institutional and national reputation

Sixty-two per cent of UK survey respondents rate expanding the global reach of their home institutions as a very important driver, followed by enhancing institutional reputation (53 per cent). Interviews with senior university managers confirm that building an international profile is important for many universities. In some cases, TNE activity is primarily about establishing the home university as a global brand, with a reach that extends far beyond its national base.

### V. Research growth

TNE partnerships are about recruiting the most gifted students. Over and above their contribution to the university's research programmes, they also help to position the home university to build research teams offshore and to access new sources of research grants from the host government. Fifty-eight per cent of the UK respondents rated research growth as a very important or important factor motivating their institution to engage in TNE partnerships.

### VI. Institutional internationalisation

All survey respondents and interviewees from the UK perceive TNE as an essential means of internationalising their institutions, beyond simply providing an internationalised learning environment for their students.

### VII. Strengthened knowledge base and knowledge diplomacy

Building soft power through TNE partnerships is rated by 47 per cent of UK survey respondents as very important, and by a further 23 per cent as fairly important.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-2021-update>



# Key insights from the evidence

The research presents extensive evidence on the value and impact of TNE partnerships. Motivations and drivers for institutions and countries to engage in and support TNE partnerships also shape how they measure value and benefits.

## Perceptions of value differ, but they are not mutually exclusive

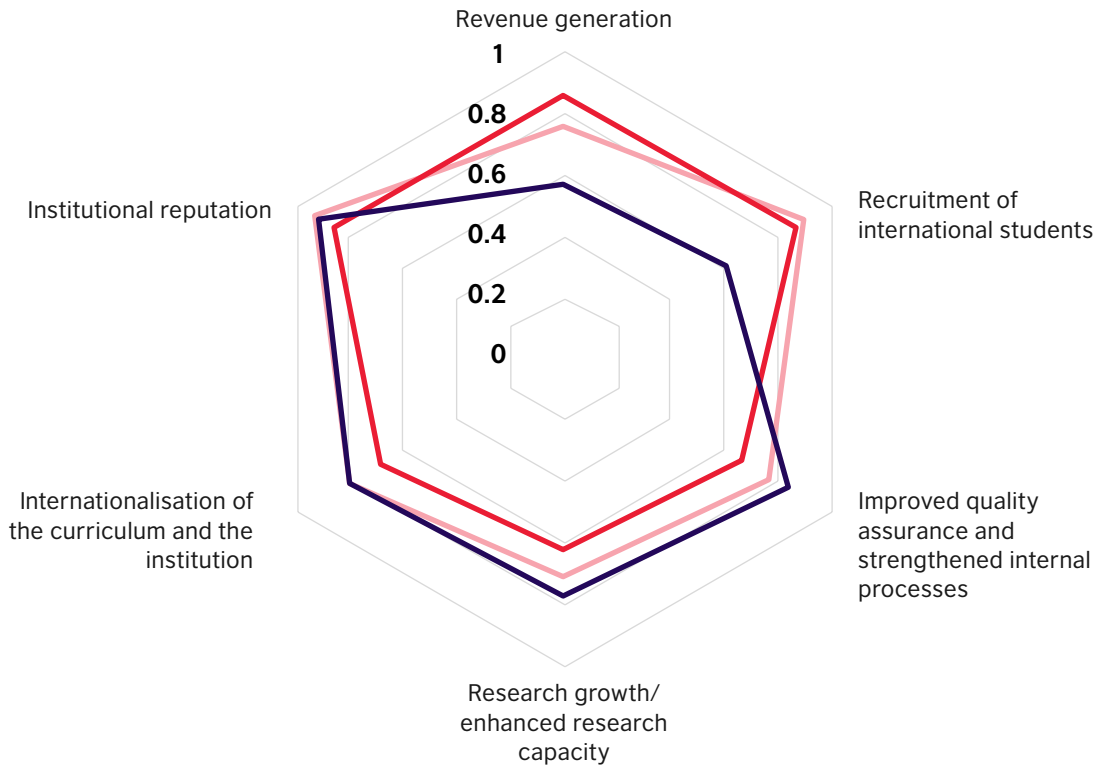
Perceptions from three different stakeholder groups are compared: (i) HEIs exporting TNE programmes; (ii) HEIs hosting TNE programmes and (iii) international branch campuses (IBC).

**Perceptions of value differ**, and are affected by a variety of factors, notably the context of the country (economic, cultural, political) and the strengths of higher education institutions

For example, most survey respondents from the UK perceive TNE's value to countries to lie in absorbing excess demand for higher education. However, institutions hosting TNE programmes perceive its primary value to be about the quality of TNE, followed by the promotion of different higher education delivery models and improved international outlook. UK institutions also perceive revenue generation to be of much greater importance to their overseas partners than is the reality. The latter place much greater value on capacity building in teaching, learning and research, increasing English language competency, professional and technical knowledge transfer, and improved quality assurance and internal processes.

A fundamental lesson from the evidence is that benefits are not mutually exclusive. There are many examples where all the partners have obtained value, albeit of different types, from TNE.

### Value of TNE partnerships to the institutions



- International branch campuses (IBC)
- HEIs exporting TNE
- Host HEIs

## Motivations and values change over time

Generally, the balance of motivations evolves as higher education systems mature. So, while the value for countries initially lies in the demand absorption function of TNE, as national and educational contexts change, TNE plays an increasingly significant role in counteracting brain drain and contributing to local economic and urban development. UK TNE providers do not always recognise this.

## Regulatory and government support are critical

Regulatory and government support are critical at the national level in generating benefits associated with the broader value and impact of TNE activities. At the institutional level, there is a clear link between the strategic emphasis on impact by UK institutions and the realisation of value for partner countries, local communities, and key stakeholders.

The research reveals a **transformative journey of the TNE landscape**, wherein there is a shift from commercially oriented outcomes for institutions (the UK and overseas partners), to broader value and impact for almost all key stakeholder groups, especially in partner countries.

## Covid as a catalyst of change

**Covid has changed the landscape:** distance and online learning have significantly boosted the incidence of institutions and governments investing considerably in IT infrastructures and developing online methodologies. Many governments also have liberalised regulations for online, distance and blended learning. There is evidence that this is already having a significant, positive impact on relationships and working practices between TNE partners. There is a considerable opportunity to widen access and upskill many more individuals.

# Implications of the research findings

The research provides evidence that TNE contributes significantly to the global, national and local agendas. It suggests that, given the right conditions, it has considerable potential to deliver much greater value. There are important lessons for policymakers and institutions.

## Implications for the UK government

1. UK policymakers should recognise the potential of TNE partnerships to deliver effectively and efficiently across a range of key strategic areas for the UK. Hitherto, there has been a primary focus on the ability of research activities to contribute to the UK's global ambitions. There should be a similar focus on transnational education partnerships.
2. The UK government (as well as UK HEIs) should explicitly recognise and respond to mutually beneficial agendas. This should involve shaping policy interventions around shared benefits for the UK and the partner countries. While UK policymakers have export revenue and soft power agendas, UK HEIs will not be able to deliver these through transnational partnerships unless partner governments see those partnerships as contributing value to their country. Currently, the agendas of the UK and partner country governments are insufficiently aligned to achieve maximum benefit for both.
3. Examples where there is a much greater potential for TNE to contribute to strategic priorities beyond the UK export agenda include:
  - a. Enhancing research partnerships by developing government-supported dual and double postgraduate programmes, particularly at the PhD level. This would support overseas governments' capacity-building strategies through high-quality yet cost-effective faculty training. For the UK, it would help mitigate the risks stemming from reductions in global demand for PhD studies in the UK, and widen access for bright researchers unable to study in the UK full-time.
  - b. Broadening existing teaching partnerships to deliver on higher levels of national and institutional priorities, such as research collaborations and student and staff exchanges funded by the Turing scheme. This will be particularly impactful at the postgraduate level, where greater mobility of doctoral students and researchers will strengthen teaching and research partnerships.
  - c. Explicitly responding to SDGs and partner countries' government agendas through transnational education. There is a significant untapped potential to generate SDG-related impact from existing and new TNE partnerships. This would be an impactful and cost-effective way for the UK to strengthen its reputation and diplomatic value as a partner committed to long-term sustainable development.
  - d. Increasing and targeting reciprocal funding. Overseas governments

fund several dual and double degree programmes at the doctoral level. The impact and reach of these programmes will expand significantly if the UK government reciprocates and financially supports such programmes. This will strengthen the long-term partnerships between HEIs in the UK and those overseas, and position UK HEIs favourably as partners of choice.

- e. Greater system-to-system engagement for improved degree recognition for undergraduate degrees acquired through TNE and career-advancing professional qualifications, especially those delivered online. The research reveals a huge potential for continuous professional development, microcredentials and qualifications required by labour markets globally.

## Implications for higher education institutions

1. HEIs should seek to understand their partners and what drives the partnership from their perspective. While benefits for each partner may differ, they are not mutually exclusive. Good communication is needed to ensure that expectations are well managed.
2. HEIs must understand the broader national and educational contexts of partners. The research reveals the transformative journey of the TNE landscape. Understanding this is critical to institutional strategic and operational decisions on TNE partnerships.
3. TNE partnerships are a natural extension of the HEIs' strategic priorities. Securing the visibility of TNE in institutional mission statements and strategies should contribute to whole-university support.
4. The long-term value of TNE needs to be well understood to dispel misconceptions about its transactional nature. For example, while many UK institutions use TNE for student recruitment and revenue generation, the long-term benefits often remain invisible to HEIs' senior teams.
5. Research collaborations should be enhanced to utilise TNE partnerships fully. Many research partnerships can benefit from stronger collaborative teaching cooperation.
6. Mobility schemes can be enhanced to strengthen TNE partnerships. One example is the UK's Turing scheme, which can be extended to support the mobility of researchers at the master's and doctoral levels.
7. TNE can contribute to sustainable student recruitment where the student can choose the location and the studied modules, and programmes are flexible and evolve around the students.
8. TNE programmes are likely to attract much greater scrutiny in future, and they may fall under the regulatory oversight of two countries. Students' outcomes and employability are critical both for the regulatory bodies in the UK and those overseas.

