The student experience of transnational education

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Foreword

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As the demand for higher education increases around the world, transnational education (TNE) is also growing. Various delivery modes and levels of engagement exist, depending on the types of programmes and where they are delivered. Wherever and however a student studies for their UK degree it should be of an equivalent quality and experience to the UK and they should have the opportunity to feedback to the institution to allow for continuous improvement and enhancement.

In the UK, students are given the opportunity to take part in national surveys and provide feedback on everything from the teaching on their course to resources and equipment. UK-wide independent surveys allow institutions to consider changes to improve their courses for future students and help anyone looking to study at university-level to make more informed decisions based on peer feedback.

The same is not true for transnational education programmes, where although institutions will have their own internal mechanisms for feedback and capturing the student voice, it is not made public in the same way.

Student experience is at the heart of what we do as universities and we all ensure we have robust quality assurance mechanisms in place to provide a high-quality education to all our students, wherever they are based. But would wider sharing of insights and best practice improve this? Should stakeholders involved in transnational education be provided with more information, allowing for a more informed student choice and encouraging continuous improvement of delivery?

Executive summary

The UK has over half a million students in transnational education. Living in other countries, they study for degrees and other awards of UK higher education providers. Transnational education brings considerable benefits not only to the higher education sector, but also more broadly for British influence abroad. It widens participation in UK higher education by making it more accessible. And it drives economic growth in the countries where UK providers operate.

We know very little about these students. An aggregate offshore record currently gives overall student numbers for each provider, broken down by location, level of study and type of provision. Reforms to the record, starting in 2026/27, will improve the picture to an extent. It will be replaced in England and Wales with a report based on individual student records, while a more detailed aggregate offshore record will apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Behind the numbers, however, there is a bigger story to be told about students in transnational education: who they are, how they learn and what changes in their lives. We know from occasional student surveys that they are likely to be satisfied with their academic programmes. What is missing is a more systematic approach, which takes into account the full complexity of offshore provision. Higher education providers hold a good deal of relevant information, only a small part of which is publicly available.

This report considers what we know about the student experience of transnational education and makes the case for greater public availability of data. This, in turn, will increase the profile of students and provide assurances about the quality of transnational education. The conclusion makes recommendations in three areas:

1. **The Office for Students should consult on the best way to provide public information and reassurance about the quality of English transnational education.** One possibility is an exercise like the Teaching Excellence Framework, but on a smaller scale and a different cycle.

2. **There should be wider engagement with the Quality Enhancement of Transnational Education (QE-TNE) scheme.** This scheme is run by the Quality Assurance Agency as a membership scheme, funded by providers that subscribe to it. As an ideal, the scheme should be expanded to include all UK transnational education providers, and its reports should be free to access. It will be useful to commission student and graduate surveys in each country reviewed.
3. **Providers should consider making greater use of external student surveys for transnational education.** This will improve the ability of survey providers to draw insights across countries and regions of the world.

These measures will increase the availability of information in a targeted and useful way, as well as unlocking a good deal of the learning that lies within the sector. There are potential gains for accountability, the continuous improvement of academic provision and the global reputation of UK higher education.

The following is written from my perspective in the development of transnational education at the University of Reading, and from advising on similar projects elsewhere. It draws on conversations with colleagues from other UK providers. The report and its conclusions are limited to transnational education offered by UK higher education providers in countries around the world.

1. What is transnational education?

Transnational education (TNE) is defined by UNESCO and the Council of Europe as:

> *All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based.*[1]

A UK TNE student, therefore, is a student located outside the UK while studying for an award of a UK higher education provider.

There are over half a million students in UK transnational education. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes their number annually through its aggregate offshore record.[2] This shows a steady increase in TNE students to 576,705 in 2022/23. Roughly one-in-six of the students in UK higher education is educated offshore.

The total number of UK TNE students

Year	Students
2019/20	432,500
2020/21	489,285
2021/22	532,460
2022/23	576,705

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Transnational education raises the profile of UK higher education, and British influence more generally. Done properly, it improves the financial sustainability of providers, both on its own terms and by stimulating international student mobility to the UK. On government estimates, revenue to the UK from transnational education was £2.4 billion in 2021, representing growth of 123.9 per cent on current prices since 2010.[3] Transnational education also widens access for students by making UK higher education available locally, and usually more affordably, than in the UK. TNE providers can move quickly to respond to local needs (see,

for example, the case study in this report from Queen Mary University of London). There are potentially enhanced employment outcomes for students, leading to gains in economic development.[4]

We know very little about these students. The aggregate offshore record tells us how many there are, and at what level: 66 per cent of them are undergraduates, 33 per cent are taught postgraduates and 1 per cent are research students. It also includes the type of provision and where students are located. But:

- there is no public record of the subjects they study, their chances of continuation within programmes, degree outcomes and graduate prospects; and
- there is limited sector-wide information on the quality of the TNE student experience.

Reforms to the aggregate offshore record will, from 2026/27, largely address the first set of issues given above. In England and Wales, the aggregate record will be discontinued and providers will be asked to submit individual student records. This will, for example, allow us to compare continuation and completion outcomes between TNE providers. Scotland and Northern Ireland will retain a more detailed version of the aggregate offshore record.[5]

This report, therefore, is on the second issue: the quality of the TNE student experience. This issue is addressed in different ways by different actors within the UK higher education sector. Much of the information lies outside what is publicly available. I hope to explain why this should matter, and what the implications are for the regulation, continuous improvement and reputation of UK transnational education. It concerns a range of stakeholders in the UK and overseas, not least the students themselves.

The complexity of transnational education

Part of the difficulty is that the TNE student experience is not one thing. Transnational education is frequently associated with international branch campuses, which account for only 7 per cent of the whole. The fuller picture is more complex.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency captures student numbers within four broad categories of provision. Of the 576,705 UK TNE students in 2022/23:

- 25 per cent were studying through distance, flexible or distributed learning;
- 7 per cent were at overseas campuses of the reporting higher education provider;
- 43 per cent were in other arrangements including collaborative provision; and
- 25 per cent were registered at an overseas partner organisation. The commonest example is validation, whereby the curriculum and assessment are set locally, and the role of the UK provider is to make a degree award based on their judgement that academic content and standards are equivalent.

Behind this typology of transnational education lies a variety of provision, so that hardly any two TNE activities are the same.[6] There are two key issues:

1. Whose students are they? In the first three categories listed above, students are registered with the UK provider, which is also the awarding body (in collaborative provision they might, additionally, take an award from the local partner). In the final category, students are registered with an overseas partner while studying for an award made in the UK.
2. Who else is involved? Transnational education almost always involves partnership. This is most obviously the case in collaborative provision or validation (the third and fourth categories), but it can apply in the first two categories also. Distance learning may be delivered with a specialist partner, which provides a platform and can also get involved in the production and marketing of academic programmes. International branch campuses often rely on partnership, for example where facilities are rented by the UK provider, or where student services are outsourced locally.

Collaborative provision often takes the form of franchised provision, where the UK provider licenses its programmes to an international partner. The franchising of higher education between UK-based partners has been the subject of some debate, including concerns about the quality of the student experience.[7] The same concerns have not, to my knowledge, been raised about offshore franchising. It is worth pausing to ask why. One reason is the issue identified by this report: sector regulators do not always have enough information to make quality judgements about transnational education. A second reason – certainly on the evidence of Chapter 4 of this report – is that providers are alive to the academic risks and work actively with partners to address them. Thirdly, not every franchised programme is completely subcontracted to the partner. The UK provider may contribute to the delivery of a programme as well its development.

Transnational education is therefore a complex business. This complexity is reflected in partnership agreements, which set out who is responsible for what. There are examples of collaborative provision that are much closer to validation because the UK provider gives its partner freedom to set their own curriculum and assessment. Equally, validation is not always done at an arm's length, especially if the UK provider agrees to fly in academic staff to contribute to teaching. Further complexity comes with the division of responsibility for student services, including (but not limited to) admissions, timetabling, libraries, study advice and careers support.

The quality assurance of transnational education

For these reasons, any TNE activity is an exercise in advanced three-dimensional quality assurance. The first dimension is found in UK-led expectations of academic quality.[8] The second dimension comes from in-country regulation by government departments or national agencies.[9] The third dimension is the extent to which the UK provider is directly responsible for the TNE student experience, and how much is delegated to partners. As a rule of thumb, the more delegation there is, the greater the academic risks. This is not because other countries are somehow less good at education and the student experience. Rather, the UK provider as the awarding body has a responsibility to maintain quality and standards.

The quality assurance of higher education is not – and has never been – simply a box-ticking exercise based on the expectations of sector regulators and other agencies. The underlying issues matter to students, and to the people who teach them and support their learning: academic rigour, fairness and opportunity. The word 'quality', however, is highly contested.[10] It is understood differently by different jurisdictions in the world, and even – as we shall see – between different nations of the UK. For the purposes of this report, academic quality assurance embraces three issues:

1. Academic standards: What must students do to get a degree?
2. Quality assurance: What steps do providers take to give students a fair chance of success?
3. Quality enhancement: What steps do providers take to improve academic provision?

The student experience is central to all this. It includes engagement with learning, and also the structures put around degree courses to promote successful academic and employment outcomes. Good higher education providers work in partnership with students for the continuous improvement of academic provision. We shall see in Chapter 4 – and through the three case studies in this report – how the TNE student voice is captured by providers, and where this information goes.

Case study: Queen Mary in Paris

Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) offers its LLM Law programme to students in Paris as well as London. London-based academic staff visit frequently to deliver teaching at the University of London Institute in Paris. QMUL works in partnership with the Institute to provide the full range of student services.

The Paris-based offer, which includes five pathways in commercial law, is comparable and in most respects identical to the LLM programme in London. In other respects, it is an enhanced offer because students have access to additional resources. For example, students have access to Parisian libraries as well as electronic access to libraries in London. The team supporting Paris-based students has a mission to 'celebrate, not compensate' for these differences.

The delivery of teaching in short, intensive blocks makes the Paris-based programme accessible to students who are already in employment. This, in turn, is reflected in the diversity of students, some of whom are based in other European countries and come to Paris for teaching and assessment. The student intake in Paris differs from LLM cohorts in London, partly because it is much smaller (around 50 students a year) and also because they can join the programme in either September or January.

These features have their influence on how the student voice is heard. A group of course representatives is elected by students each year, with at least one from each intake. With rolling membership, the group can speak to immediate issues. QMUL responds rapidly to student concerns and has made adjustments over the years, including: more frequent and timely communication with students; changes to examination processes (allowing out-of-town students to plan their visits further in advance); and the introduction of a career mentoring scheme. This scheme draws on the experience of alumni of the Paris-based programme to meet the needs of students in a French context.

2. Why should this matter?

The central claim in this report is that we do not know enough about the TNE student experience in the UK higher education sector. The 'we' includes multiple stakeholders, not least the students themselves. Wider society has a stake too, especially where transnational education has an impact on economic development and graduate employability.

Why should this matter? To answer this question, we can consider three stakeholder groups in particular: sector regulators, providers and wider society. The interests of all three are inseparable from the quality of the student experience and outcomes.

The regulation of transnational education

The first stakeholder group is comprised of sector regulators. Higher education is a devolved matter, so there are four regulators in play. This allows us to observe differences in approach to quality assurance. In England, the Office for Students takes a data-led approach, with an emphasis on continuation, completion and progression outcomes. Providers must meet basic quality conditions in order to register with the Office for Students. Providers demonstrate excellence above this baseline by engaging with the Teaching Excellence Framework once every four years. The data set for the Teaching Excellence Framework includes the indicators mentioned above, alongside data from the *National Student Survey* and the narrative in provider submissions.

This distinctively English approach has its origins just a few years before the creation of the Office for Students in 2018. English providers were previously subject to institutional reviews on a five-year cycle, conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). This model is still preferred by the Scottish Funding Council, Medr (the Welsh tertiary education regulator) and the Northern Irish Department for the Economy. In the following, I hope to be forgiven for ignoring Northern Irish universities, which have small numbers of TNE students.

The Quality Assurance Agency is independent of government and funded by higher education providers. The assumption behind QAA reviews is that

universities are independent institutions, capable of regulating themselves. The role of an institutional review panel, therefore, is to check that internal quality assurance mechanisms are doing their job. This leads some to characterise QAA reviews, perhaps unfairly, as process driven in contrast to the outcomes-led English system. However, a distinctive feature of the QAA model is the obligation on providers to enhance academic provision. Review panels, in other words, are not satisfied unless they observe a culture of continuous improvement.

It is not the job of this report to say which quality assurance system is best. The Quality Assurance Agency's work is aligned to European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance of higher education. The English system – which diverges from the European model in some respects – might be seen as the outlier.[11] Defenders of the English system would say that it is less prescriptive, allowing universities to define for themselves what teaching excellence is. We can say, however, that either system would benefit from better data on transnational education.

The Office for Students is committed in its Regulatory Framework to the regulation of transnational education:

> *on the basis that the obligations of the registered provider extend to students for whom it is the awarding body wherever and however they study*.[12]

A 2023 briefing note on transnational education adds that the 'universities and colleges that register with the OfS are based in England, but our remit to regulate them is not geographically defined', and that they take a risk-based approach, intervening where necessary.[13]

The Office for Students has limited information about TNE students, although this is set to change. The 2023 briefing note lists two sources of information that they already have, and one in progress:

- *Information submitted to us by the registered providers themselves in 'reportable events', such as a shortfall in student recruitment to a course leading to financial consequences, or the withdrawal of professional accreditation for a course.*

- *Notifications submitted to us directly by students, staff and members of the public who believe that a course may be failing to meet our requirements.*
- *The aggregate offshore record … The dataset is currently limited compared with the individualised records held on students based in England, but we are … expanding and improving future data.*

The move to individual student records for TNE students from 2026/27 is briefly discussed in Chapter 1. This will certainly give the Office for Students more information to go on. What is still missing is a systematic means of understanding the TNE student experience. The *National Student Survey*, which is completed by more than 70 per cent of onshore final-year undergraduates, is not available to TNE students. And the Teaching Excellence Framework includes only undergraduate students taught in England. Where providers address transnational education in submissions to the Teaching Excellence Framework, it is largely for institutional context. Provider submissions to the Teaching Excellence Framework yield the occasional nugget of information about transnational education, but only if you are prepared to read them carefully.[14] This issue is addressed in Recommendation 1.

The Scottish and Welsh regulators have access to larger amounts of data, although indirectly. QAA review teams can ask providers how they gather information on TNE students and feed this into the enhancement of provision. The evidence of QAA reports suggests that panels take a close interest in transnational education.[15] If there is a weakness in the system, it would be that reviews work on a five-year cycle. This, as one colleague in a Welsh university explained to me, means that the reviews are individually rather than collectively useful; it is hard to compare insights about transnational education across providers.

Sharing insights and good practice

The second stakeholder group is the UK higher education sector. We shall see in Chapter 4 how providers collect information on their TNE students. The move to public data based on individual student records, from 2026/27, will allow English and Welsh providers to set this information in a wider context. However, continuation and completion data on their own

do not allow providers to share insights and good practice.

The sector currently fills this gap in three ways. In the first place, there are networks of TNE providers, including the following:

- Universities UK International hosts a TNE network and an overseas campus network. It organises an annual TNE Forum and includes TNE panels in its annual conference.[16]
- The TNE Hub, which has wide membership among providers in the UK and around the world, regularly holds symposia and publishes insights on its website.[17]
- The Joint Institute Alliance is a group of UK and Chinese providers that have joint institutes in China.[18]

Secondly, the British Council has a crucial role in the development of TNE projects. British Council offices around the world advise on local regulation and operating conditions. Globally, the British Council organises TNE events and publishes frequent reports on country-specific and other issues. The British Council promotes transnational education as a force for good in the world. The individual student interest is not lost among the issues, but – as we shall see in Chapter 3 – it sits within their broader consideration of economic development and impact.

Thirdly, the Quality Assurance Agency is well placed to focus on the student experience in transnational education. Their current mechanism is the QE-TNE (Quality Enhancement of TNE) scheme.[19] This scheme was commissioned jointly by Universities UK and Guild HE in 2021, and runs for five years until 2025/26. The scheme is intended to complement the national regulation of transnational education in two ways. First, and as the name implies, it has an emphasis on enhancement rather than baseline quality assurance. Secondly, it takes a country-by-country approach, considering UK transnational education in three locations each year. This horizontal approach to the issues sits next to the vertical perspective given by QAA institutional reviews in Scotland and Wales.[20]

The QE-TNE scheme, however, cannot take a complete overview of transnational education among UK providers. It works as a membership scheme, funded by providers that subscribe to it. At the time of writing, the scheme has 78 members. To put this in context, the 2022/23 aggregate offshore record includes 187 providers, of whom 141 have more than 100 TNE students. Publications of the scheme sit behind a paywall, including country reports and thematic reviews. An interim report was made free to access in August 2024, containing useful insights alongside tantalising glimpses of what lies beneath.[21] The future of the QE-TNE scheme is addressed in Recommendation 2.

The wider benefits

The third stakeholder group is everyone else: governments in the UK and abroad; non-governmental organisations; and wider society including employers. A good deal of literature exists on the wider benefits of the UK's TNE presence in the world, which I try to summarise in the next part of this report. Key to these benefits is the quality of education that TNE students get, and the graduate attributes that they bring into the workplace.

Another stakeholder group, therefore, sits behind all three of the groups described above. That group is, of course, the students themselves.

Case study: Xi'an-Jiaotong Liverpool University

Xi'an-Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU) is a Chinese-based joint venture university, created in 2006 by Xi'an-Jiaotong University and the University of Liverpool. Although working in close partnership with Liverpool, XJTLU is an independent Chinese tier 1 institution.

From Liverpool's perspective, the partnership is a validation arrangement. XJTLU delivers programmes to its own students and Liverpool recognises this by awarding degrees at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Undergraduates also leave with a degree from XJTLU. Education standards are guaranteed through internal and external moderation in both universities. XJTLU is Liverpool's biggest TNE partner, with around 19,000 undergraduates and 6,000 postgraduates. Students from both universities can transfer to the other as part of their degree programme. This exchange of students has a recognisable impact on the academic culture in each place.

XJTLU captures the student voice through module and programme evaluation, and through student representation at all levels. Since 2015, the student-staff liaison committees for every programme have been chaired by students. The influence of these student-led committees has been felt in:

- assessment mapping in each degree programme to avoid the bunching of coursework deadlines;
- moving the mid-term break from the middle of each teaching period to the beginning of the examination period, where it is felt to have more value; and
- reinvigoration of the principles behind problem-based learning in all programmes.

The success of these student-led committees relies on an academic culture where students are sufficiently well informed and empowered. XJTLU fosters this culture of empowerment by asking students to make life choices at every level of study. This has beneficial consequences for engagement in their studies and beyond.

3. What do we already know?

The existing literature in UK higher education policy shows a keen interest in transnational education and covers a broad spread of issues, including: the strategic case for deploying higher education offshore; the value of transnational education both to UK providers and to partners; and the positive impact for sustainability and development. However, if we want to know what it is like to be a student in transnational education, we must read more carefully and selectively. There is a growing body of research, much of it based on one-off surveys.

Higher education policy and transnational education

The UK's policy on transnational education is set out in three places. The first of these, coming soon after a general election, is work in progress.

- In September 2024, the Labour Government announced a review of the previous Conservative Government's *International Education Strategy*, which set targets for growth in education exports including transnational education. At the time of writing, the direction of travel signalled by the Government appears unchanged, although we do not know exactly what the place of transnational education will be within a reformed strategy.[22]

- The British Council *Transnational education strategy 2023-25* aims to 'to facilitate and develop scalable and sustainable UK transnational education globally'. It sets out four actions, aiming to:

    1. *Contribute to better data and insight on UK TNE.*

    2. *Create an enabling environment for TNE in other countries and promote the quality of UK TNE internationally.*

    3. *Contribute to a better understanding of the local context and facilitate a regulatory and operational environment to best support TNE partnerships.*

    4. *Support TNE, to contribute to the transformation of local education systems and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*[23]

- Universities UK International publishes an annual TNE report, based on the aggregate offshore record.[24]

Students are in the middle of all this. To increase education exports probably means educating more students. The reports by Universities UK International are an effective means of counting students and thereby measuring progress. The British Council TNE strategy has an implicit focus on students, with its emphasis on academic quality.

Being able to count students, however, is not the same thing as understanding the student experience. One is left with the impression that policymakers would take a greater interest in the TNE student experience if there was better information about it. This impression is confirmed by other recent literature on transnational education.

- The British Council published a report in 2022 on *The value of transnational education partnerships*. The report aims to 'develop an evidence base on the value of TNE beyond the economic', based on a survey of providers and interviews with stakeholders in the sector. It has a page on the student experience and three pages on graduate outcomes. A concluding section notes the 'need for further research into capturing the transformative value of TNE for students and graduates'.[25]
- The International Higher Education Commission published a report in 2023 on *The role of transnational education partnerships in building sustainable and resilient higher education*. The report includes a good overview of current TNE policy and strategy, alongside a lot of data. It has a short section on benefits for students.[26]
- A joint report by the British Council and Universities UK International from May 2024 focuses on *Managing risk and developing responsible TNE partnerships*. The six groups of risks listed in the report are: financial risks; reputational risks; risks to academic freedom and freedom of speech; security considerations; relationship and personnel management; and cyber, intellectual property and data management. Risks to academic quality and standards are not prioritised, although the report includes relevant detail on aspects of the student experience.[27]

This gap in the policy landscape will be filled to some extent by the Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc). At the time of writing, Jisc has commissioned research into the digital experience of international students in UK higher education. Phase 3 of this project focuses on TNE students.[28]

Some insights

There is also a growing body of research into the TNE student experience, although this research tends to be specific in focus.

- A 2014 report for the British Council and DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service) considers the impact of transnational education, based on a survey of 1,906 stakeholders, including 912 TNE students in 10 countries.[29]
- A 2017 report for the Department for Education includes information from telephone interviews with 100 alumni of TNE programmes. The report records high levels of satisfaction with distance learning and at branch campuses, alongside more varied experience of collaborative provision. It notes that 'the existing literature contains little evidence of graduate outcomes or experiences of study for those on transnational education programmes'.[30]
- A 2018 report by the Quality Assurance Agency presents outcomes from a survey of UK transnational education students in Dubai and Singapore. It concludes that 'students in both locations are generally satisfied with the academic side of their experience', while 'improvement is needed in the areas related to work experience, engagement with industry and employability, and the broader student experience'. The report shows how a single student survey can be used in more than one place, with 'minor differences to accommodate the specific features of each location'.[31]
- A study published by Universities UK International in 2021 considers transnational graduate outcomes in the United Arab Emirates. Its authors note that plenty has been written about UK transnational education 'in terms of its global scale, rapid growth and evolving scope of provision. Far less is known, however, about the impact UK TNE has on its graduates.' The report is based on 217 survey responses from graduates of nine UK

TNE providers and 13 follow-up interviews, finding that 86 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with teaching and learning.[32]

- A report commissioned by the British Council in 2021 presents outcomes from a survey of 71 TNE students in selected European countries. A follow-up report in 2023 considers survey responses from 352 TNE students, also in Europe. Both reports reveal a positive impact on career prospects and international outlook.[33]

These reports, taken together, suggest a different student profile from what is often found in the UK. TNE students tend to be older, and are more likely to combine work and study.[34]

- The 2014 British Council / DAAD report found that TNE students are 'generally older than the traditional secondary school leaver entering higher education'.[35]
- The 2017 Department for Education report notes that a high proportion of TNE students study alongside paid employment, many of them studying part time.[36]
- The 2018 QAA report finds some satisfaction with 'the flexibility in programme delivery … allowing students to pursue their studies while in employment'.[37]
- In the 2021 report by Universities UK International, focusing on the United Arab Emirates, the mean age of postgraduate respondents to their survey was 36, and the mean age of undergraduates was 24.[38]
- In the 2023 British Council report, which looks at undergraduates and postgraduates in Europe, 45 per cent of respondents were aged 31 or over.[39]

These insights should be put into context. Between them, these reports cover a 10-year period, during which UK transnational education has continued to grow and evolve. They are based on targeted surveys of individual slices of TNE provision. The two reports published in 2021 were intended as pilot studies for what might become a more systematic approach. Nonetheless, we can take encouragement from apparently high levels of satisfaction in general among students and graduates.

Among other sources of information:

- British Council country reports increasingly draw on surveys and focus groups with in-country students. This includes recent reports on (for example) Egypt and Sri Lanka.[40] A common theme in these reports is the instrumental attitude taken towards higher education by many students. They see UK transnational education as a stepping stone to further degree studies, economic advancement or both.
- Academic papers, based on surveys of TNE students, provide further insight. They tend to be interested in branch campuses above other types of TNE provision.[41]
- Some providers engage the International Student Barometer to survey their offshore students. Etio (formerly I-Graduate), which owns the International Student Barometer, occasionally publishes TNE insights on its website.[42] The use of external surveys is addressed in Recommendation 3.

However, by far the largest and richest store of information on TNE students is held by higher education providers. We can now consider the role of providers in greater detail.

Case study: Middlesex University

Middlesex University, based on the aggregate offshore record, has over 19,000 students in the UK and 14,500 students in other countries around the world. Nearly 7,000 TNE students are in branch campuses in Dubai and Mauritius, while others are in various forms of partnership provision.

Middlesex's approach to student engagement reflects this global presence. Students make their voices heard in the same way, regardless of location or the type of provision. Every programme (or programme cluster) has a course representative for each cohort, known as a Student Voice Leader. Students are surveyed annually through the Middlesex Student Survey. On branch campuses, survey questions are identical to the *National Student Survey* in the UK, although the question about the student union is not used, reflecting local arrangements. In Dubai, supplementary questions gather feedback on campus-specific student support services. For partnership provision, questions may be adapted to fit different academic contexts.

This allows Middlesex to compare the student experience across the world. Surveys, however, give only part of the picture. Senior academics use findings from surveys (including the free text comments) to identify themes, which they test through engagement with Student Voice Leaders and others. The issues raised on one campus may inform improvement to the student experience elsewhere. For example, Digital Media students in Dubai asked for more technical content in the early stages of the programme. The result was an improved Digital Media programme in the UK as well as offshore. Similarly, TNE students were influential in the scheduling of assessment as the University moved from year-long to semester-long modules.

TNE postgraduates, equally, complete surveys based on the *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)*. Middlesex works hard to engage all its students in surveys, recently attracting an over 80 per cent response rate both in London and Dubai.

4. What do providers know?

In preparing this report, I wanted to get a better understanding of how providers gather information about the TNE student experience, and how they use this information to enhance academic provision. I did this through a short survey and a series of follow-up interviews.

There were 22 responses to the survey from 18 UK-based providers. Where there was more than one response from a single provider, they addressed different aspects of academic provision. This reflected individual responsibility for one programme or another, or different academic or professional roles within the institution. The job titles of respondents to the survey indicate that five are in academic roles (typically as director of a TNE programme), nine have institutional responsibility for the development of international partnerships and eight are in senior quality assurance roles.

Of the 18 providers represented in the survey, 14 are English universities, and four are universities in Scotland or Wales. Taken together, they are responsible for just over 117,500 TNE students, a fifth of the total number in the 2022/23 aggregate offshore record. There were two providers with fewer than 1,000 TNE students, six with more than 1,000 but fewer than 5,000 and 10 with more than 5,000. All four of the types of provision used in the aggregate offshore record were represented in the survey, although most respondents commented on collaborative provision.

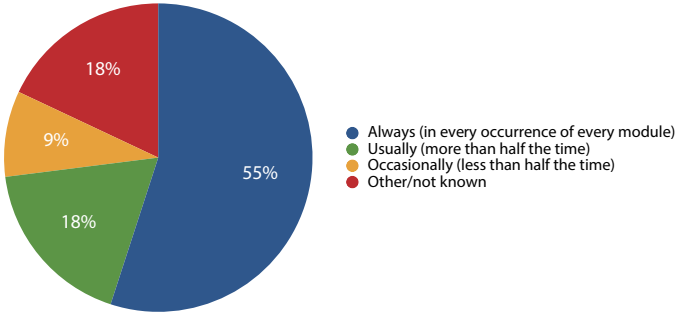
The survey therefore covered a variety of TNE provision in different shapes and sizes, and a variety of academic and professional perspectives. Taken together, these perspectives give us a range of views about the TNE student experience and how it is evaluated, rather than a systematic account. The survey outcomes, therefore, should be taken as indicative rather than a definitive account of what goes on in the sector.

Greater depth of insight came from six follow-up interviews. The interviewees were from a range of providers, including one with fewer than 1,000 TNE students and three with more than 5,000. The interviewees were from providers in England, Scotland and Wales.

Student evaluation of academic provision

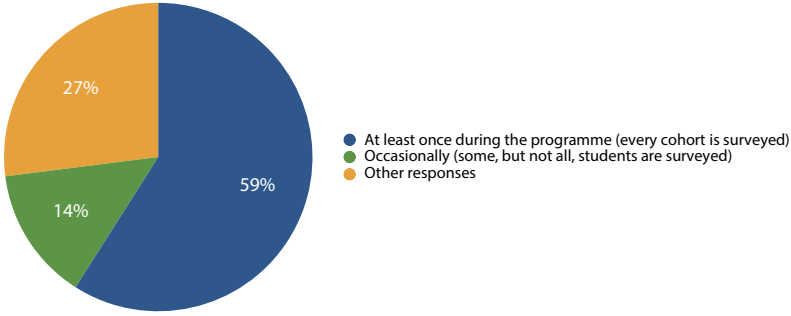
Respondents were asked three questions on aspects of TNE provision (typically a single programme or partnership) that are familiar to them. This revealed widespread – although not universal – use of student surveys at module and programme level.

1. How often are students asked to give feedback through module evaluation surveys?



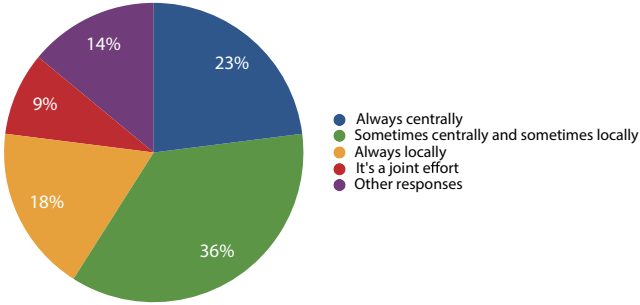
Among the 'Other' category, one said that they always have module surveys, but 'we also have a mid-module evaluation … in a more informal way … it may be a focus group for example. It's to enable us to be responsive'. Two others said that they leave arrangements for module evaluation for their in-country partners to arrange.

2. How often are students asked to give feedback through programme evaluation surveys?



Among the 'Other' responses, one said that they survey students annually but partners often run their own programme evaluation as well. Another – from an institution that has validated provision – said they do not survey students themselves; instead, they ask about student engagement when approving new partnerships, but 'we leave this to the partner to decide how best to engage their students'.

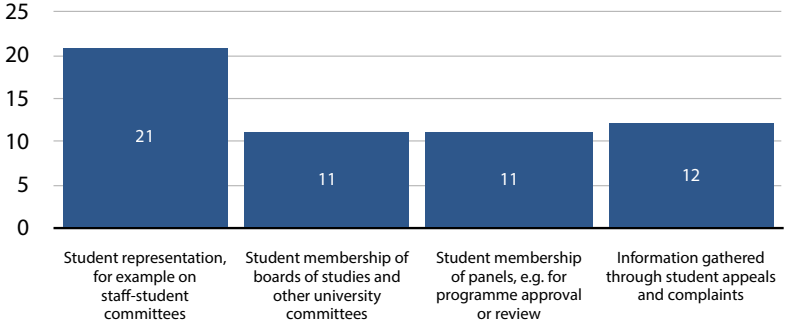
3. To what extent are student surveys organised centrally (by you as the awarding institution), as opposed to locally (for example, at a branch campus or through a delivery partner)?



A frequent pattern emerged in collaborative provision: the partner university is responsible for module evaluation, while the UK provider conducts its own annual survey of TNE students at programme level.

A fourth question asked about other means of capturing the student voice. Respondents could select as many answers as applied to their case.

4. By what other means is the student voice captured?



Despite the widespread use of student surveys, many saw greater value in capturing the student voice through face-to-face interaction. As one interviewee put it, 'we always find something new by speaking to students directly'. The favourite means of doing this, shared among all but one respondent, is student representation, for example on staff-student committees. These committees can be influential, as evidenced by the case studies included in this report. Some providers, in addition, send their external examiners to visit local partners and meet with students.[43]

How to survey TNE students

Very often, the starting point for TNE student surveys is the question set used for UK-based undergraduates in the *National Student Survey (NSS)*. Some providers use exactly the same questions, allowing them to make comparisons between the onshore and offshore student experience (see, for example, the case study from Middlesex University). Others prefer to vary NSS questions to suit the local context. One interviewee said that they 'explain in the materials that go out [to students] that they mirror the NSS and its importance'. Another said that their TNE survey questions are based on NSS questions, but altered to take account of variation in the provision of student services and the division of responsibilities between the UK provider and their partner. A third interviewee said that they base their TNE survey on the *National Student Survey*, but take advice from their partner institutions on what questions to include.

Overall, providers appear to be balancing two competing imperatives when they survey TNE students:

- One view, held by some of the larger TNE providers, says that we can ask the same questions of students, regardless of location. This allows the provider to take a comparative overview of the student experience in different parts of the world.
- Others are sceptical about this approach. One interviewee, from an institution with a range of collaborative provision, questioned the wisdom of making comparisons. They said that students in different places come with different expectations; so the year-on-year comparison of survey outcomes within a partnership might be more instructive than comparisons between partners.

The second view, therefore, says that a TNE student survey must be appropriate to the local context. This is frequently true of partnership provision, where the UK provider is not responsible for every aspect of the student experience. One interviewee said that they aim for 'consistency not uniformity'. The use of identical survey questions across onshore and offshore students is perhaps easier to do when a provider has their own branch campus.

Among other comments, there was some engagement with publicly available survey tools:

- Three providers have used the International Student Barometer, conducted by Etio, to survey TNE students.
- Six have used the *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey*, and three have used the *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey*, conducted by Advance HE.
- Two providers refer to the *Graduate Outcomes* survey, conducted by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This survey can be mined at institutional level for employment outcomes specific to TNE partnerships and campuses.

A few providers conduct alumni surveys, sometimes informally and at programme level. Three respondents were aware of alumni surveys conducted by partner universities.

The student voice in quality assurance

The follow-up interviews revealed a good deal of common ground in the approach to programme evaluation and review. The usual model is in two parts:

- an annual review at programme level; and
- periodic review, typically once every five years, of partners in collaborative provision. This routinely includes meetings with students.

There was some variation in the approach to annual programme review, determined by institutional teaching and learning policy: some institutions

take a data-led approach, including data from module and programme surveys; others take an enhancement-led approach, requiring continuous improvement through academic development projects. These two approaches are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

All six interviewees said that there is a role for sector regulators in the quality assurance of transnational education. This view was held – in one form or another – regardless of the provider's location in England, Scotland or Wales. Three cited the need to maintain the reputation of UK higher education. Of these three, two said that students need to be confident that their programme is good value for money. There was a general view that the sector could benefit from better information about the TNE student experience, although this is not without its difficulties. This includes the difficulty of comparing the student experience across different locations and types of provision. Methods for capturing the TNE student voice should be sensitive to local context.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

In this report, I have found (through a review of existing student surveys) that UK transnational education students are likely to be satisfied with their courses. I have also found (through my own survey) that UK providers are likely to take a keen interest in their TNE students. They use various means to gather student data for the monitoring and enhancement of provision.

Therefore, if we are seeking to improve the public availability of information about TNE students, it could reasonably be asked what problem we are trying to solve. In my view, the drivers for improving the availability of information relate to the three stakeholder groups previously mentioned in Chapter 2, namely:

- for sector regulators, to gain assurances on the quality of TNE provision. This matters, given the complexity of international partnerships and the academic risks;
- for providers, to share practice and feed this into the continuous improvement of transnational education; and
- in respect of wider society, including overseas stakeholders, to maintain the reputation of UK higher education.

Behind all three sits a single stakeholder group, the students themselves. Students, who may be paying considerably more to study through transnational education than they otherwise would, need to be confident about the quality of an academic programme and where it is leading.

Against this, there are constraints on our enthusiasm for better data. In the first place, we have to be mindful of the cost both in cash terms and in terms of people's time. Any addition to the regulatory burden needs to be in proportion to the intended gain. One interviewee pointed out that replacing the aggregate offshore record with individual student records will already be challenging for English and Welsh providers, who must provide the data. Secondly, we should consider what exactly we hope to achieve. In particular, a sector-wide *National Student Survey*-style survey of TNE students sounds good in principle but may yield limited insights, given the variety of provision and local contexts. Thirdly, the sector – and sector

regulators – may have their attention elsewhere. Changes to the quality assurance of transnational education must take their place alongside other pressing concerns, not least the financial position of higher education institutions.

Having said all that, transnational education remains strategically important to the sector, and accounts for 16 per cent of its students. Better information about these students is in everyone's interest. The following recommendations are designed to achieve the greatest effect within existing structures.

1. **The Office for Students should consult on the best way to provide public information and reassurance about the quality of English transnational education.** One possibility is an exercise like the Teaching Excellence Framework, but on a smaller scale and a different cycle. Providers could be asked to submit statements, in which they (i) comment on the available data; and (ii) set out their approach to teaching excellence in transnational education.

2. **There should be wider engagement with the QE-TNE scheme.** As an ideal, the scheme should be expanded to include all UK TNE providers, and its reports should be free to access. The alternative is a more fragmented approach, where different sector regulators have responsibility for TNE country reviews. Either way, it will be useful to commission student and graduate surveys in each country reviewed.

3. **TNE providers should consider making greater use of external student surveys for transnational education.** This will improve the ability of survey providers to draw insights across countries and regions of the world. This might include the Advance HE *Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys* and Etio's International Student Barometer.

These measures would increase the availability of survey data in a targeted and useful way, as well as unlocking a good deal of the learning that lies within the sector. Taken together, they will considerably improve public understanding of UK transnational education. There are potential gains for accountability, improvement and reputation.

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The UK's higher education sector has over half a million students in transnational education (TNE). These are students who study outside the UK for degrees and other awards made by UK providers.

In this HEPI Report, David Carter considers what we know about the student experience of transnational education and calls for greater public availability of data.

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