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Recognising the Ignored and Misunderstood Providers in International Higher Education: A New Typology for Transnational Higher Education Institutions

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Although several authors and organisations have offered definitions and conceptualisations of 'transnational education' (TNE), we argue that several types of institution have been ignored or misunderstood. The aim of this paper is to offer a new typology for transnational higher education institutions. In effect, the study's research question is 'what types of institution should be regarded as TNE providers?' In order to include a greater number of institution types in the new typology, it is necessary to first redefine the term 'transnational education'. Based on a scholarly review and analysis of literature and empirical evidence, we offer a new typology for TNE institutions. Our approach to defining TNE and classifying TNE institutions is original and different to all the existing approaches. The proposed typology may benefit institutions, researchers and governments, and particularly students if in future they are able to better understand the nuances between different types of TNE provider.

Full paper

Introduction

Although several authors and organisations have offered definitions and conceptualisations of 'transnational education' (TNE) (e.g., Healey and Michael 2015; Knight 2015, 2016; Knight and Liu 2019; Universities UK 2022; Wilkins 2018), many researchers, educators and students remain unclear about the meaning of the term. Generally speaking, students turn to TNE when they want a foreign or international education without having to leave their home country, but most students and parents are unaware of the differences between alternative types of provider (Cai et al. 2024; Dai et al. 2023; Li 2020; Wilkins 2013). Also, among researchers, there is considerable conceptual ambiguity. Thus, the paper's research question is: 'what types of institution should be regarded as TNE providers?'.

Method

The research primarily involved a scholarly review and analysis of literature, as well as an examination of empirical evidence. It was part of a larger project on TNE, which involved 35 practitioners (senior institution managers, academics, researchers) and 112 students in twelve countries globally. Our

process of data collection and analysis followed Elliot and Timulak's (2021) Descriptive-Interpretative Qualitative Research Method. The primary data, which was obtained through a mix of face-to-face semi-structured interviews and written questionnaires, enabled a process of triangulation that ensured the validity of our analysis and interpretation.

Findings

The existing definitions of TNE share one common theme, namely the movement of programmes or providers across national borders. TNE has traditionally been recognised as education that is delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based (Universities UK 2022). The main areas of confusion appeared in connection with country-branded universities and international branch campuses. We argue that institutions which provide a foreign or international education should also be considered as TNE operators. Theoretically, we are referring here to the concept of iconic authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004), as some TNE providers may be recognised as not being the real, genuine or original thing but nevertheless sufficiently close or similar to the original to be an acceptable alternative.

For example, Wilkins and Huisman (2024) claim that country-branded universities, such as the American University in Cairo and Vietnamese-German University, 'borrow' or 'transfer' elements of the higher education system of the affiliated country (accreditation, pedagogical style, national values, etc.). Previously, country-branded universities were referred to as 'foreign-backed' institutions (Lanzendorf 2008a, 2008b), but many evolve into independent institutions that later have no identifiable foreign backers or partners, hence the term 'country-affiliated universities'.

An international branch campus is a 'bricks-and-mortar' entity established by a higher education institution in a foreign country, which operates under the parent institution's name and awards its degrees, corresponding to Knight's (2015) satellite model. However, some authors have observed that these 'branch' campuses may actually be owned by individuals, companies and governments. Ubaydullaeva (2020) refers to these institutions as 'franchise branch campuses'. Thus, we argue it is important to distinguish institution-owned and operated campuses from those owned and operated by franchisees. Further, the term 'international study centre' may be applied to small TNE operations, where the use of the term 'campus' may appear inappropriate.

Given that China is the largest market for TNE globally, it is worth considering the Chinese context. Chinese legislation requires most forms of TNE to involve a Chinese partner, so should Chinese TNE campuses be classified as satellites or joint ventures? (Knight 2015). To recognise the collaborative nature of China's TNE campuses, many authors use the term 'Sino-Foreign Institution' or 'Sino-Foreign Institute' (Cockayne et al. 2020). However, it is important to distinguish between Sino-Foreign universities, which have independent legal entity status, and Sino-Foreign institutes which do not, and which are located within a Chinese university (cf. Hu and Willis 2017; Zhu and Feng 2021).

Finally, we observed a set of institutions that each have multiple campuses, spread across different countries. Multiple governments cooperate to establish a new institution that serves students in a particular region, to respond to regional needs (Knight and Zhang 2022).

The main types of TNE provider identified in this research are listed in Table 1.

Conclusion

This research was intended to provide new insights into the provision of foreign or international higher education. We argue that consistent classification of TNE providers will help researchers and analysts worldwide with data collection and analysis. Of course, given the very complex higher education landscape globally, we accept that no typology will be a perfect fit for every country and context, although this research may be a step in the right direction.

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