

Intercultural dialogue: Experiences of developing and piloting a UK-based ‘community of practice’ doctoral supervisor development programme in Transnational Higher Education.

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The United Nations SDGs can help to address address major social and environmental challenges or ‘wicked problems’ including poverty and education for all, using Transnational Education (TNE). TNE is funded by grants which encourage international higher education (HE) partnerships, but TNE is under-researched and surrounded by debates and challenges including neo-colonialism, cultural differences, and power

UK universities involved in TNE projects include those focusing on professional or teacher development, with studies suggesting the move away from transmissive models of CPD programmes, through de-labelling facilitators as the experts, and encouraging agency and openness through communities of practice.

This paper shares experiences of developing and piloting a UK-based community of practice doctoral supervisor development programme across six institutions in a TNE partnership. The paper uses Wang’s (2016) intercultural dialogue (ICD) framework for transnational teaching and learning to explore the main findings from the programme evaluation and the lived experiences of partners involved.

Full paper

Introduction

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an opportunity to address major social and environmental challenges or ‘wicked problems’ including poverty and education for all (Alexander et al. 2020). Transnational Education (TNE) contributes towards the SDGs; through grants which encourage international higher education (HE) partnerships to deliver UK HE courses and postgraduate provision (British Council, 2020; 2023). After 20 years of growth amidst shifting landscapes TNE remains a high priority, perhaps for the value to the UK economy (Illeva et al. 2022). However, TNE is an under-researched area and one prevalent with debates surrounding the neo-colonial aspects of TNE program

development and challenges including communication, cultural differences, and power (Wilkins and Juusola, 2018; Compton and Aylesford, 2022; Keay 2014).

These debates and challenges raise concerns about UK universities being involved in projects including those focusing on professional or teacher development. This paper aims to add to this under-researched area and provide insights for those involved in doctoral supervisor professional development in TNE contexts. This article will use Wang's (2016) intercultural dialogue (ICD) framework for transnational teaching and learning to explore the main findings from an evaluation of a pilot programme and the lived experiences of partners involved in a TNE project across six institutions.

Universities can move away from transmissive models in CPD programmes, through de-labelling facilitators as the experts, and encouraging agency and openness (Compton and Aylesford, 2022; Kennedy, 2005). This is important when attempting to combine cultures and practices to avoid the dominance of one country's perspectives within TNE (Kendall et al. 2020). Studies have used previously used communities of practice (CoP) in TNE programmes (Compton and Aylesford, 2022, Tran et al. 2021). CoPs are groups of individuals that share an interest and want to learn how to improve, as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1988; Keay 2014). CoPs are transformative as they increase capacity for autonomy (Kennedy 2005) which raises questions around the roles that those involved in TNE might take when working on these projects.

Whilst there are global differences in the professional development of doctoral supervisors between HEIs, ranging from the non-existent to one-off workshops; there are also mandatory programmes including multiple sessions for senior academics (Wichmann-Hansen et al., 2020). Programme content can range from the discussion of regulations to pedagogical support, with the latter drawing on concepts and case studies through communities of practice to aid doctoral supervisor dialogue and reflection (Hill and Vaughan, 2018; Jara, 2020; Everitt, 2024). What is not known is how a UK doctoral supervisor development programme, might be developed and piloted using communities of practice in a TNE context.

Research Methods and Aims

This study reports on a three year British Council funded 'Digi-Doc' project which developed and piloted a digital EdD-I (Professional Doctorate in Education) and an international version of a UK CoP supervisor development programme (BCU, 2023; Hill and Vaughan, 2018). The six collaborating institutions from Vietnam, China, Indonesia and the UK worked together through international knowledge exchange (KE) workshops, monthly meetings, programme development, piloting and evaluation. The pilot CoP supervisor development programme was delivered over four online sessions, using UK facilitators who encourage the CoP members to take part in conversations and reflect on pre-readings literature and session notes (Hill and Vaughan, 2018).

The supervisors were recruited from across the five HEIs and 13 participants took part. Full ethical approval for the evaluation activities which included a focus group and survey was granted by Birmingham City University's ethics committee. The focus group took place during the fourth and final CoP session led by a member of the UK team who was not a module tutor. The CoP members completed an on-line evaluation survey of the CoP pilot programme. This paper also draws on the lived experiences and reflections of the programme partners from five of the six institutions who collaborated in developing and piloting the UK CoP supervisor development programme in the TNE contexts.

Findings

The findings highlight the issues of co-ordinating provision across time zones and delivering using UK facilitators. It was apparent that the involvement of the local project partners aided the intercultural dialogue. The guided conversations from the UK CoP programme encouraged rich discussion, which resulted in some similar challenges seen in the UK, but also the opportunity for reflection. There was value to the pre-session literature as conversation provokers and the subsequent session notes. There was influence on the supervisory practice of those involved and it was important to recognise participation with formal certificates.

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