

## **The emergence and significance of transnational education in internationalised higher education**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the significance of transnational higher education to institutional and structural change in higher education. Transnational higher education (TNHE), where students study on a 'foreign' degree programme whilst remaining in their home country, is a rapidly developing phenomenon. Universities across the UK, for example, are now operating 1,395 TNE programmes and 73 overseas campuses have been established with 454,473 students involved in TNE (British Council 2013). Transnational higher education in the global context, is being played out in an environment where supra-national, regional, national and institutional levels of structure and agency interact and as a result it is likely to have wide-ranging implications for policy, quality assurance systems and structures, governance models, regulatory frameworks and student and staff experiences of learning and teaching. The presentation draws on a qualitative synthesis of a comprehensive literature review of published research on transnational higher education appearing between 2007 and 2014.

### **Introduction**

The recent unprecedented growth of TNHE has taken place within multiple socio-cultural and economic contexts and has been negotiated within a complex, layered environment of power structures, identities and subjectivities (Montgomery, 2014; Djerasimovic, 2014). TNHE is being played out in an environment where supra-national, regional, national and institutional levels of structure and agency interact and is thus likely to have wide-ranging implications for policy, quality assurance systems and structures, governance models, regulatory frameworks and student and staff experiences of learning and teaching. The focus of this paper is to explore the emergence and the significance of the recent exponential developments in TNE through the exploration of trends in the research addressing these issues.

A review of the UK literature on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in 2007 (Caruana and Spurling, 2007) posed the question 'The future shape of institutional internationalisation – Transnational Higher Education?' Statistics published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggest that since that time TNHE may well have become a predominant feature of the internationalisation agenda. This review of the literature differs from the 2007 review in that it extends beyond the UK. This reflects the nature of TNHE itself with the crossing of regional, national and cultural borders in a myriad of contexts being the central principle. In this brief paper only two issues drawn from the extended literature review are highlighted: the emergence of policy responses to the development of TNHE and the change in HE that has occurred alongside the rise in TNHE.

### **The emergence of TNHE and policy responses**

In the literature the responses of higher education and government policy to the new global realities is high on the agenda. Moutsios (2009) argues that international organisations such as the World Bank,

IMF, OECD and World Trade organisation play an enhanced role in producing educational policies and that decisions affecting higher education are taken within a framework of economic competition (Moutsios, 2009). Furthermore, policy makers in transnational networks face dilemmas in responding to the sometimes conflicting globalising governance models. In this context, differences in network power raise issues of levels of autonomy and structural constraints on universities. Although policy is also influenced by localism there are divergences in policy as a result of global influences that may contradict and conflict with local issues (King, 2010). These conflicting forces have resulted in policy being in transition; the terms divergence, convergence and emergence were coined by Frankowicz et al, (2008) and applied to the context of the Polish HE arena to exemplify the way that national policy is converging and emerging transformed. An interesting example of this is the Bologna process where transnational communication of this process can induce change even in countries not participating in harmonisation processes either in study structures or quality assurance measures related to benchmarking activities (Vogtle et al, 2011).

International consortia of universities are arising from global co-operation and competition and these have the potential to develop as deliberate spaces where internationalisation agendas can be re-framed (Tadaki and Tremewan, 2013). Ironically, even though quality assurance has been an area of conflict it can also provide a platform for mutual trust and co-operation which could instil confidence in mutual decision making processes; the International Network for QA Agencies in HE plays important part in developing this collective effort (Cheung, 2006). Thus quality assurance can be a basis for true collaboration as opposed to representing erosion of national educational sovereignty. A good example of this is the 'tropED Network for International Health in HE' which has developed its own transnational QA framework. The participatory learning process engendered during its development was positive for relations between transnational partners (Zwanniken et al, 2013).

### **Transnational education and change in higher education**

Unlike other more traditional internationalisation activities TNHE represents the direct impact of trade liberalisation and a more commercial approach in which higher education systems have become sites for competition and contestation of various kinds in various societies. The dilemma posed by the dichotomy of responding to the contemporary needs of the globalised labour market, industry and the global system of higher education whilst seeking to improve access to higher education for historically excluded social, ethnic and racial groups is common the world over, but it is perhaps particularly stark in the developing world (Lee, 2012, Spinivaso, 2007 and Yang, 2006). While organisations like the British Council are actively working to assess the impact of UK provided transnational education on host countries in terms of academic, economic, human resource development, socio-cultural and status outcomes, attempts to develop an analytical framework to establish which countries have the most favourable environment for transnational education suggest an abiding preoccupation with neo-liberal market responses to globalisation (British Council, 2013).

Despite the influence of the neo-liberal discourse there is a prominent theme in the literature around capacity building. The strongest players in this field, China, Singapore and Malaysia, have in the past imported TNHE in order to increase enrolments and quicken the pace of massification of higher education but there is also a motivation for promoting wider access and inclusion despite the tension with enhancing competitiveness and quality of higher education (Huang, 2006a). In China the drivers to engage with TNHE have related to domestic socio-economic development and they have expanded the system to satisfy increasing demand. However, in the process institutions are also gradually learning about new missions, curriculum and faculty development and becoming interested in new teaching ideas which they believe may improve academic standards and social prestige. Again there

are complexities and tensions in this with both teaching and standards being highly regulated and the emphasis being on maintaining sovereignty (Huang, 2006b).

The conflict in TNHE is to maintain national character and identity while importing foreign educational resources, exercising quality assurance monitoring on incoming foreign education activities. Transformationalists argue that national governments are not losing power or sovereignty, instead power and sovereignty are being shared among many other public and private agencies in a multi-layered system of governance (Tsuruta, 2006). Lee (2006) suggests that the path of TNHE development may be initially challenging but in the longer term will create opportunities.

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