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Reimagining Transnational Education

Transnational Education as Ecosystem: Rethinking Sustainability and Equity

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ABSTRACT

Transnational education (TNE) continues to expand globally, yet many partnerships remain fragile, short-lived or insufficiently connected to local contexts. This study argues that TNE must be reimagined not as a transactional delivery model but as a dynamic ecosystem grounded in equity, sustainability and mutual capacity-building. Drawing on 245 survey responses, 20 stakeholder interviews and more than 1000 regulatory audit findings, the analysis identifies systemic barriers including weak institutional integration, rigid curriculum transfer and fragmented support for students and staff. In response, the paper proposes an ecosystem-based framework that emphasises collaborative governance, contextual adaptation and long-term relational investment. The findings suggest that meaningful TNE partnerships prioritise people, trust and strategic alignment. When approached as ecosystems rather than exports, TNE can support not only academic outcomes but also wider social, economic and institutional development. Sustainable impact requires moving beyond education-to-education transactions towards partnerships designed to endure, evolve and become locally embedded.

1 | Introduction: From Projects to Ecosystems

Recent high-profile international campus closures highlight the continuing volatility of transnational higher education and the need for more resilient partnership models. In February 2024, the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents voted to close its Qatar campus by 2028, marking a significant retreat from one of the longest-standing American university presences in the Middle East (Knox 2024). University College London also closed its Qatar campus in 2020, describing the decision as part of a wider strategic shift away from bricks-and-mortar campuses towards more collaborative ‘partnerships of equivalence’ (UCL 2020). These developments signal deeper structural pressures and evolving institutional strategies that stress the importance of rethinking how transnational education (TNE) is conceptualised, governed and sustained.

TNE, whether branded as offshore delivery, cross-border collaboration or international joint programmes, has become a defining feature of global higher education. With more than 384 international campuses currently operating in 85 host countries (Cross-Border Education Research Team 2025), and 653,570 students enrolled in UK TNE programmes alone during the 2023–24 academic year (Universities UK 2025), the scale and financial significance of TNE are undeniable. Economically, the UK's TNE activities generated £3 billion in revenue in 2022 (Department for Education 2025).

However, behind these headline figures lies a more complicated picture. A notable number of ventures have either failed or have been withdrawn quietly. Issues such as fragmented governance, overreliance on fly-in faculty, asymmetrical quality assurance, inadequate student support and limited capacity-building for

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staff are all too common (Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Tran et al. 2023). The people tasked with delivering TNE, whether academic coordinators, local lecturers or administrative teams, are often underprepared, under-resourced and under-supported. When closures do happen, prompted by financial strain, policy shifts or regulatory impasses, they are often seen as one-off cases. However, a closer look suggests these outcomes stem from deeper structural shortcomings (Hickey and Davies 2024; Lewis 2024; Tran et al. 2023): a lack of joined-up thinking, weak integration into local systems and insufficient investment in the human infrastructure that sustains teaching and learning.

While many TNE initiatives centre on teaching delivery, sustainable ecosystems demand a more holistic approach, one that meaningfully integrates research, the broader student experience and academic instruction. Embedding research collaboration and investing in the full academic life of both students and staff, not just in delivery, are essential for institutional integration and long-term value creation. Crucially, sustainable TNE ecosystems also engage with the local economy, industry and government, positioning partnerships as contributors to regional development, not just providers of imported curricula.

This paper argues for a new paradigm. It reconceptualises TNE not as a series of projects, but as an ecosystem that includes living, adaptive and interdependent arrangements of people, institutions and processes. Such a lens encourages universities to move beyond compliance-driven delivery and towards shared responsibility, co-creation and intercultural mutuality, recognising that TNE is also a form of educational soft power (Gauttam et al. 2024), shaping perceptions, relationships and influence through the exchange of knowledge, culture and values.

2 | Literature Review: Rethinking TNE Through an Ecosystem Lens

2.1 | Defining TNE

TNE broadly refers to the provision of higher education across national borders, enabling students to access foreign degrees while remaining in their home countries. Despite divergent regulatory interpretations, common elements include cross-border academic delivery, collaborative institutional arrangements and shared responsibility for quality assurance (Knight 2016; Knight and McNamara 2017). Definitions provided by global organisations and national bodies consistently emphasise the mobility of programmes rather than students, the cross-jurisdictional nature of provision and the need for robust governance frameworks. For instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Council of Europe define TNE as education delivered by an institution in a different country from the student's location (OECD 2012), while national definitions (e.g., in China, India and Australia) vary in specificity regarding partnership structures and modes of delivery (Wang 2025).

2.2 | Typologies and Models of TNE

TNE encompasses a wide spectrum of delivery formats, from branch campuses and joint degrees to franchised and validated

programmes. In a franchise arrangement, an existing programme that is fully designed and owned by the awarding institution is delivered overseas by the partner. Validated programmes operate differently: the local partner designs the programme, but the overseas institution approves it and awards the final degree. These sit alongside other forms of provision. Some models retain substantial central control by the home institution, as in distance education and wholly owned branch campuses. Others, such as joint institutes and dual degrees, are built on shared governance and joint curriculum development. Knight's (2016) distinction between independent and collaborative models remains influential, although recent scholarship highlights the growing hybridity of provision.

A continuum approach, articulated by scholars such as Tran et al. (2023), captures the way TNE partnerships frequently evolve over time, shifting between modes as strategic, political or regulatory conditions change. A franchise, for example, may develop into a joint degree as collaboration deepens and mutual trust is built. This fluidity challenges binary classifications and points to the need for analytical frameworks capable of accommodating complexity and change.

It is also important to recognise that the extent of curriculum transfer is not always an institutional choice. In some jurisdictions, regulatory frameworks explicitly require a close replication of the home curriculum. Egypt's 2018 law for international branch campuses, for instance, stipulated that programmes must conform to those taught at the home university, with any deviation requiring ministerial approval (Egypt 2018). Such regulatory constraints help explain why certain TNE models remain tightly controlled, even when institutions might prefer greater contextual adaptation.

Tsiligiris (2025) similarly observed a shift towards more complex and mature forms of TNE that require deeper integration, more sophisticated management structures and greater intercultural responsiveness. Consequently, models once regarded as cost-effective export mechanisms must now be reimagined as globally embedded educational ecosystems that are responsive to local contexts (Lim et al. 2025) and capable of contributing to both institutional and societal development.

2.3 | Intercultural and Governance Challenges

A core but undertheorised dimension of TNE relates to the intercultural interface. Students, faculty and administrators must navigate not only national cultural differences but also professional, linguistic and institutional norms. Cultural identity in TNE is neither fixed nor reducible to nationality; rather, it involves a dynamic interplay of roles, expectations and power (Wang 2025).

Building on realist and critical approaches to interculturality (Dervin 2016; Spencer-Oatey and Wang 2025; Wang 2018, 2023), this study avoids essentialist assumptions by examining how individuals navigate intercultural complexity in situated, institutional contexts. Rather than treating cultural experience as fixed or uniform, the analysis focuses on the specific tensions that participants described in their own

TNE settings. For example, many TNE learners in this study reported feeling a disjuncture between their local environment and the pedagogical assumptions embedded in imported curricula. Unlike international students who relocate, these learners engage with a foreign academic model without the benefit of immersive cultural exposure, which creates a distinct and underexplored pattern of challenges. The emerging trend of TNE students moving to a third country to complete their studies (Lane et al. 2025) adds another layer of complexity, reshaping the intercultural and institutional dynamics in which TNE operates.

Faculty and administrators must similarly reconcile misaligned academic standards, regulatory requirements and governance logics. Prior studies have documented tensions around academic recognition, quality assurance, financial responsibilities and power asymmetries (Hill et al. 2014; Montgomery 2014; Shams 2016). Even seemingly minor differences, such as expectations about classroom interaction or definitions of academic integrity, can generate friction and erode trust between partners (Cranwell et al. 2021).

Shams (2016) proposed a dual strategy of standardisation and adaptation to balance global consistency with local relevance, while Ziguras (2008) warned against the cultural flattening that can result from over-standardisation. Similarly, Eldridge and Cranston (2009) and McBurnie and Ziguras (2006) stressed the need for local contextualisation not only in pedagogy but also in operational systems, assessment practices and student engagement.

2.4 | Ecosystem Thinking and Success Factors

Recent literature has increasingly framed TNE as a co-evolving ecosystem rather than a linear export model. This paradigm shift repositions TNE as a dynamic network of universities, regulators, faculty, students and societal actors shaped by the interplay of institutional priorities, geopolitical contexts and cultural expectations (Habib and Hastings 2025; Hickey and Davies 2024; Hill and Thabet 2018; Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Tran et al. 2023; Tsiligiris 2025). In contrast to earlier transactional models focused on standardisation and revenue generation, ecosystem thinking emphasises mutual adaptation, relational commitment and contextual embeddedness as foundations for sustainable partnership.

Across diverse empirical and conceptual sources, six interconnected domains have emerged as critical to the success, or failure, of TNE ecosystems: strategic integration, leadership and governance, academic delivery, financial philosophy, operational sustainability and relational/reputational capital. Table 1 presents a synthesis of these success factors, contrasting hallmarks of effective practice with common pitfalls that undermine long-term viability.

This synthesis reinforces that sustainable TNE is not simply a matter of curriculum export or meeting enrolment targets. It relies on long-term strategic coherence, effective governance, cultural reciprocity and mutual capacity-building. Ecosystem

resilience also depends on cross-border trust, regulatory legitimacy and adaptive pedagogy, all of which are often overlooked in rigid delivery models.

The literature further shows that sustainability is shaped by how well partners achieve strategic alignment, operational coherence and meaningful relational engagement across locations. Many cases of partnership instability arise from misaligned priorities, fragile operational systems or limited attention to the relational and intercultural foundations of collaboration. By contrast, partnerships that invest in shared structures, inclusive governance and locally relevant academic practices tend to demonstrate greater continuity, stronger student outcomes and more stable reputational profiles (Healey 2023; Hickey and Davies 2024; Hill and Thabet 2018; Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Li et al. 2025; Lim et al. 2025; Tran et al. 2023).

Although this study adopts the ecosystem model as its primary theoretical frame, the following section introduces the Triple-A framework as a complementary perspective. The Triple-A model highlights agility, adaptability and alignment as key institutional capabilities that support responsive governance, context-sensitive academic design and effective coordination across borders. Several challenges identified in this study, such as leadership asymmetry, curriculum rigidity and uneven stakeholder engagement, point to the continued relevance of these capabilities within wider TNE ecosystem dynamics.

2.5 | The Triple-A Framework

While this article adopts an ecosystem perspective as its primary theoretical lens, it also builds on earlier work that introduced the Triple-A TNE Partnerships Framework, which identifies agility, adaptability and alignment as key institutional capabilities (Wang 2025). Figure 1 presents the framework. Although it is not the central model in this article, the Triple-A approach offers a useful conceptual backdrop. It highlights the importance of responsive governance, context-sensitive academic design and coordinated cross-border operations within sustainable partnerships.

Several ecosystem-level challenges identified in this study, including leadership asymmetry, curriculum rigidity and uneven stakeholder engagement, reflect the ongoing relevance of agility, adaptability and alignment. These capabilities support institutions in responding to complexity, negotiating cultural and regulatory variation and maintaining coherence across different sites of delivery. They therefore sit comfortably within the wider dynamics of the TNE ecosystem examined in this article.

The Triple-A model shows how agility, adaptability and alignment function as interdependent institutional capabilities. Agility refers to responsiveness in governance and decision making, adaptability relates to contextual alignment in curriculum and practice, and alignment concerns strategic coherence between partners. Together, these capabilities contribute

TABLE 1 | Synthesis of ecosystem success factors influencing sustainable TNE partnerships (adapted from Healey 2023; Hickey and Davies 2024; Hill and Thabet 2018; Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Li et al. 2025; Lim et al. 2025; Tran et al. 2023; Zhang and Dai 2025).

Factor	Hallmarks of success (do this)	Common pitfalls (avoid this)
Strategic Integration	- Embedded in long-term university strategy and monitored via a global balanced scorecard - Market entry based on host-country political-regulatory scan and formal go/no-go criteria - Adaptively aligned with evolving national policy priorities and global HE trends	- Treating TNE as a side project; absence in core university plans - No pre-entry risk mapping or overreliance on unsolicited invitations - Pursuit of short-term metrics over ecosystem-building
Leadership and Governance	- Co-led model with empowered local and home leaders; shared decision rights - Governance includes local stakeholders; joint board/senate with bilingual reporting - Cross-functional coordination supported by cultural mediation and policy alignment	- Overreliance on home campus control - Governance bypasses host representation; opaque decision-making - Disconnect between academic and operational leadership
Academic Scope and Pedagogy	- Curriculum co-designed with host-country workforce needs and pedagogical norms - Local adaptation in delivery, assessments and academic support - Emphasis on student experience, language preparation and work-integrated learning	- Fly-in/fly-out teaching; lack of pedagogical localisation - Identical syllabus regardless of cultural/regulatory environment - Limited student support and faculty understanding of local norms
Financial Philosophy	- Transparent revenue-sharing model tailored to partnership structure - Multiple income streams (e.g., CPD, research, government support, in addition to tuition fee income) - Contingency funds (e.g., 15% surplus earmarked) to support strategic re-investment	- Revenue expectations based only on tuition - Poor forecasting - Hidden subsidies from home campus or host government - Absence of funding safeguards or underinvestment in R&D
Operational Sustainability	- Three-year transition plan from home-led to locally sustainable delivery ('shadow pairing') - Hybrid service models with localised operations and admissions - Digital dashboards enable real-time cross-campus monitoring and risk management	- Reliance on visiting or short-term staff with minimal local integration - Fragmented operations; excessive outsourcing - Manual reporting; poor oversight of student experience and risks
Relational and Reputational Capital	- Regular bilingual engagement with local students, families, employers and regulators - Two-way mobility of staff and leadership (e.g., partner-in-residence posts) - Strategic communications prioritise host-language visibility and cultural legitimacy	- Transactional agreements without relational commitment - Partner viewed as vendor rather than co-creator - English-only communications limit engagement and trust

to the conditions under which TNE ecosystems can operate sustainably.

2.6 | Summary of the Literature Review

The literature reviewed above shows that TNE has moved beyond the early phases of curriculum export and offshore delivery. While franchised and validated programmes remain part of the landscape, sometimes by institutional choice and sometimes because regulatory frameworks require close conformity to the home curriculum, the contemporary TNE environment is characterised by greater hybridity, deeper interdependence and more complex governance demands. This aligns with recent analyses that call for shared academic ownership, contextual

responsiveness and long-term relationship-building rather than simple transplantation of programmes across borders.

Across the scholarship, several themes recur. First, sustainable TNE depends on strategic integration and alignment between partners rather than reliance on transactional modes of provision. Second, governance structures must be adaptive, co-ordinated and culturally attuned if partnerships are to navigate fluctuating regulatory, political and organisational contexts. Third, curriculum and pedagogy increasingly require co-development and local relevance, particularly in jurisdictions where rigid replication may undermine student engagement or institutional credibility. Finally, scholars highlight the importance of investing in people, relationships and intercultural capability as core elements of partnership resilience.

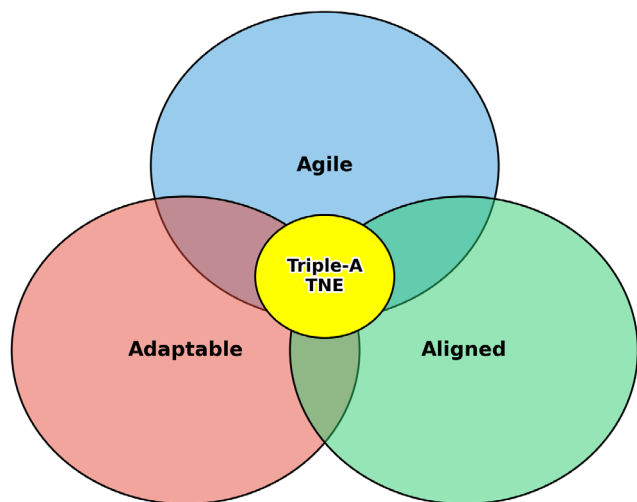


FIGURE 1 | Triple-A TNE framework.

Taken together, these strands point to the need for a systemic perspective. Ecosystem thinking reframes TNE as a co-constructed, interdependent arrangement of actors, institutions and contextual forces in which long-term success depends on strategic coherence, cultural and regulatory alignment and mutual capacity-building. This study builds on that trajectory by examining how these ecosystem conditions are fostered or hindered in practice and by drawing together insights from surveys, interviews and regulatory reports to illuminate the institutional dynamics that support or erode sustainable, equitable transnational partnerships.

3 | Methodology

This study forms part of a broader project examining what enables and undermines the success of TNE. The wider project explores how institutional, regulatory and intercultural dynamics shape the formation and evolution of TNE across varied models and geographies. To analyse the specific barriers and enablers that influence the development of sustainable TNE ecosystems, this study adopted a qualitative-dominant, multimethod design. Three complementary datasets were analysed: an international stakeholder survey, in-depth interviews with institutional actors and regulator-published audit and review reports. Triangulation supported inductive theme development and cross-validation of emerging insights.

3.1 | Survey Data

The first strand comprised a multichannel survey that captured the perspectives of students, institutional stakeholders and parents involved in TNE. Three role-specific questionnaires were developed to ensure clarity and relevance for each group while retaining a shared core of constructs on academic support, intercultural experience, communication and programme evaluation. The student survey focused on learning, cultural adjustment and engagement (Appendix 1). The staff and manager survey examined governance, collaboration and operational support (Appendix 2). The parent survey explored communication, information access and perceptions of support (Appendix 3).

Each instrument was piloted with a small group of volunteers to test wording and sequence and minor refinements were made to improve flow and accessibility. The survey was distributed through both online and face-to-face channels. Invitations were shared through the author's personal and professional networks, social media platforms (LinkedIn, WhatsApp, WeChat, Line and professional mailing lists), institutional partners and alumni associations. Printed QR codes and short paper forms were also circulated during partnership meetings, academic workshops and local briefing sessions at collaborating campuses. Academic and student assistants introduced the study, after which the participants completed the questionnaire either online or on paper; paper responses were subsequently transcribed into the dataset. This mixed approach enabled participation from regions with limited internet connectivity and accommodated preferences for in-person engagement.

A total of 245 valid responses were obtained: 123 students, 67 institutional stakeholders and 55 parents. Respondents were based in 23 countries and territories across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Oceania and North America. Using the minimum invitation denominator, the overall response rate was approximately 25%. Table 2 summarises the distribution by role and region. Respondents were drawn from both host and sending countries. While most student and parent responses came from Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the United Kingdom, North America and Australia were represented mainly by institutional stakeholders, reflecting their roles as principal home countries for TNE provision. The figures in Table 2 indicate the respondents' geographic locations rather than the headquarters of their home institutions. Several participants from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australian universities were based in host-country partnerships, providing first-hand perspectives from those working on the ground within receiving contexts.

Closed-ended questions were analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages; each statistic reported in the *Findings* section specifies the base (n/N) and respondent group. Open-ended responses were coded inductively in NVivo. To enhance reliability, a second researcher independently reviewed a random subset of responses, compared coding decisions and resolved discrepancies before the final codebook was applied to the full dataset. The resulting themes informed triangulation with the interviews and audit strands.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Cambridge. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. In reporting, only the participant's country or region, the nature of the institution, and broad role type are mentioned when relevant to ensure protection of identity and compliance with ethical guidance.

3.2 | Interview Data

To complement the survey and capture richer, context-sensitive insights, the second strand comprised unstructured interviews with stakeholders directly engaged in the design, delivery or oversight of TNE partnerships. The aim was to deepen the

TABLE 2 | Survey respondents by stakeholder role and geographic region.

Region/territory	Students (<i>n</i> = 123)	Institutional stakeholders (<i>n</i> = 67)	Parents (<i>n</i> = 55)	Total (<i>n</i> = 245)	% of Total
East Asia (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan and South Korea)	38	18	14	70	28.6
Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia)	31	16	12	59	24.1
South Asia (Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan)	20	10	9	39	15.9
Middle East and North Africa (UAE, Qatar, Egypt and Oman)	14	9	8	31	12.7
Europe (excluding UK) (Germany, Cyprus, France, Greece and Poland)	10	8	5	23	9.4
Sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria)	6	5	7	18	7.3
United Kingdom	2	6	0	8	3.3
North America (United States and Canada)	1	5	0	6	2.4
Australia and New Zealand	1	5	0	6	2.4
Total	123	67	55	245	100.0

Note: Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Cells with fewer than five respondents per stakeholder group are aggregated at the regional level to preserve anonymity. Recruitment was through professional and social media networks rather than institutional sampling frames; figures describe composition rather than representativeness. Respondent locations reflect where the participants were based, not necessarily the headquarters of their home institutions. Several staff from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australian universities were working within host-country partnerships at the time of data collection.

understanding of how individuals experience and interpret TNE in practice.

Twenty interviews were conducted either face-to-face or on-line, depending on participant availability and location. Conversations ranged from 20 to 60min and were held in English or in the participant's preferred language, with interpretation support when required. Each discussion began with a broad, open prompt such as 'Can you tell me about your experience of transnational education?' and then developed in directions shaped by the participant. This open format allowed interviewees to lead the conversation and foreground the issues most significant to them.

Interviewees included senior management, programme leaders, link tutors, quality-assurance personnel and national regulators from diverse national and institutional contexts. Table 3 presents the distribution of interviewees by role, country and institutional type.

The participants reflected on successful elements of collaboration as well as challenges, failed initiatives and perceived imbalances of power or responsibility. All participants provided informed consent. Identifying details were removed during transcription, and only anonymised descriptors, such as country or region, institutional type and broad role category, are used when presenting quotations.

Transcripts were coded inductively in NVivo, following Clarke and Braun's (2014) thematic approach. Coding was iterative and comparative across cases and stakeholder groups. This approach captured nuance and variability in

intercultural encounters while maintaining ethical integrity and confidentiality.

3.3 | Documentary Analysis: Quality Assurance and Regulatory Reviews

The third strand comprised 108 publicly available reviews and audit reports produced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (the United Kingdom) evaluating UK-led TNE provision across 12 host-country contexts. These reports covered 85 institutional partnerships, spanning international branch campuses, joint institutes, dual awards and franchised degrees, and provided an external perspective on how intercultural, operational and governance challenges are identified within regulatory review processes. A full list of reports is provided in Appendix 4.

Although designed for compliance and quality assurance, the reports provided valuable secondary insights into partnership governance, institutional processes and intercultural dynamics. They were included because QAA reports follow a consistent structure and employ comparable terminology across cases, which supports the systematic analysis of recurring themes. The QAA's public reporting framework is among the most comprehensive and longitudinally consistent national-level mechanisms in transnational higher education.

Comparable documentation from other jurisdictions was explored but not retained in the final dataset. Reports from the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Australia) were initially reviewed, but most were more than a decade old

TABLE 3 | Interviewee list by role, country and institutional context.

Role	Country	Institution type	Nature of institution	Nature of TNE partnership
Chief executive	UK	Branch campus	Public university	Joint venture
Senior dean	Malaysia	Branch campus	Public university	Wholly owned subsidiary
TNE manager	Australia	Home	Public university	Various
Director of international partnerships	US	Home	Private university	Various
Joint institute associate director	China	Home	Public university	Joint institute
Fly-in faculty	France	Home	Public university	Joint degree
Senior administrator	Singapore	Host	Public university	Joint college
Teaching staff (expatriate)	Qatar	Home	Public university	Joint venture
Teaching staff	Vietnam	Host	Private university	Validation
Student	China	Host	Public university	Dual degree
Parent	Sri Lanka	Host	Private university	Franchise
President	Greece	Host	Private college	Franchise
Director of academic partnerships	UK	Home	Public university	Various
President	Singapore	Host	Private college	Franchise
Manager and Director	China	Host	Public university	Joint programme
Director	China	Host	Ministry of Education	Various
Parent	China	Host	Joint University	Joint University
Dean	Saudi Arabia	Branch campus	Public university	Joint venture
Student	Germany	Branch campus	Public university	Joint venture
Seconded professor from the US home university	Qatar	Branch campus	Private university	Joint venture

and no longer reflected the current regulatory environment following Australia's shift in 2014 to a risk-based oversight model. The United States lacks a central authority for the external quality assurance of cross-border provisions, and regional accreditation reports are not released in a consistent comparable form. While approval and monitoring frameworks exist in several host countries, detailed national-level audit or review reports are not publicly available in ways that permit systematic comparison. The QAA corpus therefore represents a UK regulatory lens, but it provides a coherent and accessible evidence base for cross-institutional analysis.

3.3.1 | Data Extraction and Coding Procedure

Each report was converted to plain text and imported into NVivo. A targeted keyword search identified evaluative or diagnostic markers such as *however*, *recommend*, *require*, *should improve* and *noted*, which typically signalled areas of concern or commendation. Each passage containing one of these indicators was extracted as a discrete concern unit. Where multiple issues appeared within a single paragraph, they were coded separately but linked to the report identifier so that

both unit-level and institutional-level frequencies could be calculated.

An initial codebook was developed inductively from a random sample of 10 reports and refined through iterative reading. Two researchers independently coded a 15% random subset and then compared and reconciled decisions. Inter-coder agreement reached 0.87 (Cohen's $\kappa=0.79$). One coder applied the final framework to the full corpus.

A total of 1069 QAA-identified concerns were extracted. In line with the study's focus on ecosystem-level enablers and barriers, concerns were filtered to include only those relating to structural, strategic or intercultural challenges. Narrow operational matters, such as late feedback, were excluded when they did not indicate systemic weaknesses.

From the full set, the final analytical subset retained:

- 193 concerns addressing lack of curriculum contextualisation and pedagogical adaptation.
- 117 concerns related to staff capacity, training and support structures.

- 86 concerns highlighting administrative fragmentation and communication breakdowns.

3.3.2 | Analysis and Interpretation

Documentary findings were triangulated with the survey and interview datasets to validate and enrich emergent themes. The reports often mirrored stakeholder accounts of strategic misalignment, marginalised host faculty and rigid delivery formats. In some cases, they offered counterpoints or revealed institutional blind spots that were not directly reported by the participants. This strand added a regulatory dimension that substantiated many of the system-level barriers and provided external third-party credibility to the analysis.

The interactions among the three strands are summarised in Table 4. For each theme, the table presents the relevant measure, its primary source and an illustrative example drawn from coded data. Presenting each strand in its native metric, whether percentages, counts or interview frequency, preserves methodological clarity.

Taken together, the three strands capture lived experience and institutional practice. Examining them side by side revealed a coherent pattern: the structural and cultural tensions described by participants were also evident in formal audit discourse. The next section presents the main findings, organised around the barriers and enablers that shape whether TNE partnerships evolve into sustainable and equitable ecosystems.

4 | Findings: Barriers and Enablers to the TNE Ecosystem

This study examined the foundations and fault lines of TNE partnerships, with a particular focus on what enables or impedes their evolution into equitable, sustainable ecosystems. Drawing on over 1560 coded references from surveys, interviews and audit reports, the analysis revealed two overarching patterns: systemic barriers that hinder inclusive collaboration and institutional resilience and enabling practices that support long-term integrated partnership development.

Five principal barriers emerged:

1. Insufficient institutional support across stakeholder groups: cited by 64% of survey respondents and 19 of 20 interviewees and reflected in 117 QAA-identified concerns: encompassing weak onboarding, limited intercultural support and lack of practical guidance for navigating cross-border complexity.
2. Lack of cultural and pedagogical contextualisation: cited by 52% of respondents, raised in 15 interviews and reflected in 193 QAA findings: exposing the dangers of rigid curricular transfer and lack of local responsiveness.
3. Communication breakdowns and administrative fragmentation: cited by 49% of respondents and supported by 86 QAA-identified concerns and multiple interviewees,

particularly in relation to uncoordinated systems, opaque decision-making and inconsistent timelines.

4. Strategic misalignment and vision gaps between partners: observed in 41% of survey responses and 13 interviews, highlighting misaligned visions, expectations and governance priorities.
5. Overreliance on delivery-only models: identified in 32% of survey responses and 10 interviews, reflecting concerns about one-way curriculum transfer, limited collaboration and passive host roles. This was also reflected indirectly in QAA observations of curriculum contextualisation and governance.

These challenges often intersected, reinforcing power asymmetries and eroding trust and transparency. The following sections examine each barrier in depth, drawing on illustrative examples from the three datasets.

4.1 | Barriers to Developing Sustainable TNE Ecosystems

While the barriers were presented analytically as distinct, the participants often described experiences that cut across multiple categories. Issues such as weak governance, insufficient support and fragmented communication frequently co-occurred and reinforced one another. The thematic distinctions therefore serve as organising lenses rather than mutually exclusive constructs, with several examples illuminating more than one aspect of partnership fragility.

4.1.1 | Insufficient Institutional Support Across Stakeholder Groups

Insufficient institutional support was the most pervasive barrier across all data sources. The respondents pointed to fragmented or absent systems for supporting staff, students and parents involved in TNE. Whether it was the absence of local mentorship for new faculty, unclear communication for parents or a lack of cultural orientation for students, many described feeling unsupported or unsupported.

We were asked to run before learning how to walk, in a landscape we didn't even understand.

The students reported not knowing who to approach for help with academic or emotional issues, while the parents described confusion over who to contact regarding tuition, pastoral support or complaints. Meanwhile, the staff indicated they were often expected to navigate intercultural classroom dynamics, dual reporting lines or cross-jurisdictional human resource (HR) and visa requirements without structured guidance.

Beyond pedagogy, institutional gaps were particularly problematic in cross-border operational areas such as taxation, visas, legal employment arrangements and income repatriation. These technical complexities were often overlooked by the home

TABLE 4 | Evidence map of data triangulation.

Thematic focus	Source and measure	Converging evidence	Illustrative example
Institutional alignment (governance, roles, priorities)	41% of coded survey comments; 19 of 20 interviewees; multiple audit cases	Strong convergence across strands	‘We’re implementers, not partners.’ (academic coordinator, Dubai). ‘Responsibilities for decision-making between the University and the partner were not always clearly defined, creating uncertainty over academic oversight.’ (QAA 2014c, University of Strathclyde—Singapore Institute of Management)
Staff capacity and development	52% of staff respondents; 117 audit concerns; 14 of 20 interviewees	Convergent survey and audit evidence; interview nuance	‘We often rely on visiting staff for guidance.’ (link tutor, Malaysia) ‘Although the College provides mentoring and personal support for its tutors through the Chief Executive, there was no evidence of formal staff development taking place or procedures for identifying staff development needs.’ (QAA 2011, Heriot-Watt University–Trent Global College, Singapore)
Communication and information flow	49% of respondents; 86 audit concerns; 13 of 20 interviewees	Full convergence	‘The review team found duplication of reporting lines and parallel data systems between the University and its partner, hindering effective oversight and communication.’ (QAA 2014a, City University London – Cass Business School, Dubai)
Curriculum contextualisation	32% of respondents; 193 audit concerns; 11 of 20 interviewees	Strong convergence	‘Our syllabus is identical to the UK’s but feels detached from local cases.’ (student, China) ‘The team encouraged the University to develop further the use of local examples and contextual materials to enhance student understanding.’ (QAA 2020, University of Exeter in Malaysia)
Intercultural support structures	41% of students and 72% of staff reported no formal support; not addressed in audits	Divergent: strong perception data, weak documentary trace	Reveals absence of regulatory focus on staff intercultural preparation. ‘No formal arrangements for cross-cultural training were evident.’ (QAA 2018b, University of Warwick – Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology)
Strategic misalignment and risk	18% of respondents; multiple audit cases referencing strategic divergence; 10 of 20 interviewees	Partial convergence	‘Conflicting goals between academic mission and financial imperatives.’ (manager, Dubai) ‘The team noted that the partnership was undergoing a transition as KDU was acquired by a new corporate owner, which introduced uncertainty about the future direction of the collaboration.’ (QAA 2019b, University of Lincoln–KDU, Malaysia) ‘The review team noted that the business school and its partner had different views of strategic priorities, requiring renewed alignment of objectives.’ (QAA 2014b, University of Manchester Business School in the UAE)
Student engagement and voice	38% of students cited limited influence; 128 audit concerns; 9 of 20 interviewees	Convergence across survey and audits	‘Our input feels like an afterthought.’ (student, Cyprus) ‘The UoG and SEGi are recommended to establish and implement a properly supported student representation structure that will allow matters to be raised by and discussed with students.’ (QAA 2019a, University of Greenwich–SEGi, Malaysia)
Agility during disruption	Qualitative survey subset (15%) and interviews (8 cases); audit mentions in 2020 reports	Convergent perception and documentary evidence	‘It took us only a week to shift online and keep students engaged.’ (CEO, Sri Lanka)

institution, with staff and administrators left to navigate unfamiliar systems alone.

They'd never seconded anyone before. There was no HR process, no legal support. We were on our own.

When I started teaching on the programme, I wasn't even clear who my line manager was, my UK contact or the local dean. It took months to figure out basic procedures.

The seconded staff also described difficulties adapting to the host culture, securing appropriate health insurance and navigating dual tax obligations, particularly in contexts where the home institution lacked prior international operational experience. These challenges had direct implications for staff morale and retention.

Across QAA audit reports, 193 concerns were identified relating to staff and student support mechanisms, ranging from fragmented onboarding processes to underdeveloped welfare services. These shortcomings not only compromised educational delivery but perpetuated unequal power dynamics within partnerships, especially when home institutions assumed compliance without investing in infrastructure to support transnational complexity.

4.1.2 | Lack of Cultural and Pedagogical Contextualisation

Many respondents described the rigid transplantation of curricula, teaching methods and assessment strategies from the home institution, with limited or no adjustment for local realities. This lack of contextualisation was widely seen as undermining both academic effectiveness and student engagement.

We teach EU law in a country where it's not relevant. Students don't see the point.

My students were used to structured, exam-driven learning. I was told to use reflective journals and peer assessment without support or explanation. It created frustration for all of us.

This problem extended to the delivery language, cultural references in materials and learning outcomes that assumed a Western frame of reference. Interviewees noted that academic content often ignored the economic, legal and political frameworks of host countries, which made teaching feel abstract or disconnected from students' realities. A QAA audit of a UK–Hong Kong partnership illustrates how these issues can appear even in well-established arrangements. The review commended the effectiveness of bilingual delivery and the broad equivalence of resources, but it also noted that several programme specifications remained largely UK-centric and would benefit from more globally relevant processes. This finding reinforces the view expressed by interviewees that

curriculum contextualisation is not simply a matter of translation or resource provision but requires sustained attention to local academic and cultural contexts.

A distinctive feature of all programmes is that they are taught in both English and Chinese (Cantonese). The University's arrangements for this bilingual provision are sound, based on a combination of processes to ensure equivalence... In general, learning resources for English and Chinese programmes are equivalent, though with some areas where Chinese provision can be enhanced... Issues were identified regarding UK-centric programme specifications, for which more global processes are recommended.

(QAA TNE Review – Glyndŵr University and Hong Kong Management Association 2018a)

The participants further highlighted difficulties in reconciling local accreditation and compliance norms with UK standards. For example, some programmes were hindered by discrepancies between host-country professional requirements and imported qualifications that lacked local recognition.

Systemic constraints were also noted in cross-national academic regulations. In several cases, local institutions struggled to align faculty appointment processes or staff evaluation criteria with those of the UK partner, causing delays in programme delivery.

We couldn't start the course until the UK partner approved all our lecturers. But their requirements didn't match our hiring rules or timelines. It caused huge bottlenecks.

These mismatches were reflected in 117 QAA-identified concerns, many of which cited insufficient adaptation of module content and assessment to local expectations. The findings suggest that without pedagogical co-design and flexibility, even well-intentioned partnerships risk becoming misaligned, irrelevant or non-compliant.

The lack of globalised processes and overreliance on UK-centric templates meant that contextual learning was often sacrificed for regulatory conformity. TNE ecosystems that do not evolve culturally or structurally cannot thrive in diverse global environments. This was evident in the direct transfer of curricula, pedagogy and assessment models from the home institution, with minimal adaptation to the host context. Such cultural disconnects led to disengagement, confusion and at times, conflict between learners and educators.

Beyond content, mismatches in learning styles and classroom expectations were cited repeatedly. The respondents also highlighted system-level disconnects in areas such as professional recognition, contract law and academic regulations, which complicated staffing and quality assurance.

4.1.3 | Communication Breakdowns and Administrative Fragmentation

Communication challenges appeared in more than half of all survey responses and were a recurring theme across interviews and audit reports. Local partners described fragmented, unclear or inconsistent communication channels with their home counterparts. Critical updates were sometimes delivered informally, duplicated across departments or missed altogether.

Every time we needed an answer, it came from a different person. No one seemed in charge.

In one case, a joint programme leader explained how late changes to assessment regulations were communicated only after students had completed their coursework, creating confusion and additional work. In another, an academic administrator described emailing five different departments in a UK university to resolve a simple grading query, with each unit redirecting responsibility to another.

This fragmentation extended into core academic operations such as assessment moderation, faculty approval and results processing. Misaligned academic calendars often meant that exam boards and quality reviews were out of sync, delaying student progression or graduation.

The UK partner operates on a different semester schedule. By the time they mark and moderate, our students have already started their next term. The delay affects their ability to apply for jobs or further study.

Although differences in academic calendars may appear administratively routine, the participants stressed that the consequences were far from trivial. Misaligned teaching periods affected the timing of moderation, delayed local exam boards, disrupted progression points and created repeated difficulties in coordinating staff availability and teaching loads across institutions. The concern, therefore, was not that calendars differed but that the partnership lacked coordinated planning to manage the operational impact of these differences.

Technology-related barriers reinforced this fragmentation. Several respondents noted that home institutions required the use of digital platforms that were incompatible with local systems, from virtual learning environments to gradebook software. This added to the administrative workload and hindered real-time tracking of student progress. These challenges reflected structural rather than superficial misalignment. Institutions reported that differences in software licencing, procurement policies, firewall restrictions and national data-protection rules restricted seamless access to shared platforms, assessment systems and secure drives. Such constraints disrupted assessment workflows, complicated moderation and undermined the consistency of the student experience. The participants emphasised that these issues were not simple oversights but signs of a deeper disconnect that required joint planning and investment to resolve.

QAA reports echoed these experiences, flagging 86 cases in which administrative misalignment disrupted programme

delivery. Audit teams noted breakdowns in data management, uncertainty over document ownership and inconsistent approaches to quality assurance between home and host institutions. Together, these weaknesses made it difficult to maintain continuity, transparency and trust, all of which are essential for effective TNE governance.

4.1.4 | Strategic Misalignment and Vision Gaps

Strategic misalignment emerged as a recurring and layered challenge, defined not by partners having different strategic goals but by a failure to integrate those complementary goals into a unified partnership vision. While many partnerships began with ambitious memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and strategic press releases, stakeholders often described a disconnect between the rhetoric of collaboration and the reality of execution.

Home institutions typically viewed TNE as a tool for enhancing international reputation, diversifying revenue or demonstrating global impact. Host institutions, however, were more likely to frame partnerships as vehicles for institutional upgrading, staff capacity-building and access to new pedagogies or regulatory standing.

The problem arose when these distinct and often complementary motivations were not effectively prioritised and reconciled within a joint governance structure. This integration failure led to diverging expectations around resource allocation and specific outcomes. For example, a home institution prioritising rapid expansion for revenue might clash with a host institution requiring slower and sustained investment in joint faculty training to achieve capacity building.

As one interviewee stated, 'It looked good on paper. But we were speaking different languages when it came to purpose, not because our goals were opposite, but because we never agreed on the *one plan* to meet both of them.' [My emphasis].

The interviewees cited cases in which programme portfolios were expanded rapidly without host consultation or where new leadership at one end deprioritised TNE altogether. In one partnership, a change in the vice-chancellor resulted in the withdrawal of funding and faculty support, leaving the host institution without resources to continue delivery.

They changed their Dean halfway through our planning. Everything we'd agreed was paused or reversed. There was no continuity.

Others highlighted that joint strategic planning committees either did not exist or devolved into operational forums, failing to revisit or realign a long-term vision. In some cases, reporting lines and accountability structures were so centralised in the home university that host partners were excluded from key decisions.

QAA reports frequently referenced this issue, with 52 concerns related to weak governance structures, reactive strategy and role ambiguity. One audit noted that the absence of a joint academic

board contributed to decision-making bottlenecks and inconsistent implementation.

This disconnect also extended to external engagement. While host partners often cultivated relationships with local employers, alumni and regulators, home institutions were slow to acknowledge or integrate these networks into broader strategic planning, creating missed opportunities and tension. The cumulative result was that partnerships struggled to mature beyond transactional delivery, with strategic misalignment eroding both trust and long-term sustainability.

4.1.5 | Overreliance on Delivery-Only Models

Delivery-only models, in which host partners are tasked with reproducing curriculum and delivery from the home institution, were identified as a structural barrier to developing mature TNE ecosystems. These rigid arrangements often resulted from either inflexible home-institution policy or stringent external regulatory requirements but invariably neglected collaboration, localisation or shared ownership.

The pressure to deliver the exact same programme, sometimes mandated by an inexperienced host government seeking fidelity to a specific foreign credential and sometimes enforced by the home institution's internal quality assurance, reduced the host partner's role.

We were told to deliver the exact programme, word for word. There was no room for adaptation, even when our local industry advisory board questioned its direct relevance.

In several cases, host faculty reported feeling like service providers rather than partners. There was little opportunity to co-develop modules, adapt assessment strategies or contribute to strategic planning. This led to disengagement, particularly when local needs, such as employability trends or linguistic diversity, were ignored.

One interviewee noted the disconnect in assessment: 'The final assessment was designed entirely around the UK legal and resource environment. It created a massive, unnecessary barrier for our students because they were forced to write about companies and case law that didn't exist in their local economy.'

These delivery-heavy models also constrained institutional innovation. The interviewees described missed opportunities for joint research, interdisciplinary experimentation or regional thought leadership. Several cited partner institutions that had the capacity to contribute more but were not invited to do so.

We had strong industry links and could have set up internships. But they weren't interested. The focus was purely on course delivery.

Audit data supported these claims. Seventy-nine QAA concerns mentioned limited local involvement in academic governance,

inflexible delivery formats and minimal contextualisation. Some reports flagged partnerships where the same content was delivered in multiple countries with little consideration of local culture, regulation or student background.

By treating host institutions as passive delivery agents, home universities risked losing both local credibility and academic quality. These models hindered the emergence of collaborative, responsive and sustainable ecosystems, ultimately reducing TNE to a compliance exercise rather than a transformative venture.

4.2 | Enabling Features of TNE Ecosystems

In contrast to the barriers described above, several enabling practices were consistently observed in more resilient and equitable TNE partnerships. These partnerships were not defined by one-way delivery but by dynamic co-construction, shared decision-making and mutual trust. Institutions that developed sustainable ecosystems did so by recognising the cultural, structural and operational realities of their partner contexts.

4.2.1 | Collaborative Governance and Integrated Structures

Successful TNE ecosystems were often underpinned by strong collaborative governance. Rather than deferring all decision-making to the home campus, these partnerships created academic boards, management committees and programme review panels with balanced representation. This commitment to integrated structures fostered trust and enabled more responsive decision-making. One interviewee shared: 'We had monthly joint management meetings, decisions were never imposed. That helped us deal with issues early and avoid misunderstandings.'

In a Vietnam-based partnership, the joint management board alternated meeting locations and hosted bilingual agenda papers, enhancing mutual understanding. In another case, a Sino-British institute invited employer representatives to sit on academic advisory panels, ensuring external relevance alongside internal coherence.

This structure was particularly effective when roles were clearly defined, documentation was bilingual and reporting lines respected both institutional hierarchies and cultural norms. Collaborative governance helped transform hierarchical transactions into inclusive deliberations, where both partners shaped direction and strategy, significantly investing in the partnership's relational capital.

4.2.2 | Contextualised Curriculum and Pedagogical Adaptation

Partnerships that allowed room for local contextualisation, without compromising core standards, had higher student satisfaction, better learning outcomes and greater faculty buy-in. These adaptations ranged from local case studies and bilingual instruction to curriculum co-design, reflecting regional labour markets.

We integrated local finance law and case studies into our modules. Students were more engaged, and our employer feedback improved.

In the United Arab Emirates, a health sciences programme included regional case simulations in Arabic, which both met professional licencing standards and enhanced student confidence. In Malaysia, a UK partner collaborated with host faculty to adapt entrepreneurship modules to halal business practices.

The QAA audit reports highlighted the benefits of this approach in reducing attrition and supporting regulatory alignment. Where pedagogical adaptation was actively encouraged, partnerships were able to build academic relevance alongside compliance. Rather than being a threat to standards, contextualisation emerged as a pathway to excellence.

4.2.3 | Investment in People and Relationships

People, not processes, were the lifeblood of successful TNE ventures. Institutions that invested in secondments, co-teaching arrangements, staff development workshops and reciprocal visits fostered long-term professional bonds that helped weather political and leadership changes.

I spent six months on their campus. It changed how I understood their priorities. We now have informal ways to resolve most things.

For instance, a joint MSc in computing included annual staff mobility weeks in which faculty from both institutions co-delivered lectures and shared research. In another initiative, both institutions co-funded a transnational teaching fellow scheme, allowing junior faculty to spend one semester abroad observing, learning and contributing.

This relational infrastructure often proved more durable than contractual terms, especially in volatile or evolving policy environments. As one interviewee put it, 'The MOU gave us the framework, but the friendships built the bridge.'

4.2.4 | Integrated Academic and Student Support Systems

Strong TNE ecosystems made a deliberate effort to ensure that students across locations received a coherent and well-supported academic experience. This did not require identical provision in every setting; rather, it depended on building integrated systems that aligned key processes such as assessment policies, feedback timelines and access to academic, pastoral and digital services.

Students at the partner site had access to comparable academic and pastoral support, and the mechanisms for referral were consistent across both locations.

One branch campus in Dubai developed a unified academic portal modelled on its UK equivalent, providing real-time access to

timetables, plagiarism-checking tools and exam feedback. In a dual award in Sri Lanka, both campuses trained their support teams through a shared virtual academy, which enabled students to be referred smoothly between services and ensured that guidance remained consistent.

Where this level of integration was achieved, students reported a stronger sense of belonging and clearer pathways to support. The evidence suggests that coordinated, context-sensitive provision is central to creating a coherent institutional identity within a distributed TNE ecosystem.

4.2.5 | Flexibility, Agility and Responsiveness

Finally, the most effective partnerships exhibited agility. They responded swiftly to regulatory shifts, market changes or local feedback. In one case, a partner adjusted its curriculum within 6 weeks to meet new ministry requirements, avoiding programme suspension. This responsiveness was made possible through empowered local teams, decentralised approvals and mutual trust.

When the Ministry of Education rules changed, we created an emergency task force with both institutions. We solved it within days because we already had channels open.

Flexibility also extended to contract renegotiation, evolving governance models and new forms of collaboration, including research, community engagement and employer partnerships. Crucially, resilient ecosystems did not focus solely on teaching delivery; they sought to integrate teaching, research and student experience in a more holistic, mission-aligned model. In doing so, they moved away from narrow academic exports and towards locally embedded knowledge exchange hubs.

One example included the co-establishment of joint research centres, where faculty from both home and host institutions collaborated on regionally relevant projects, enhancing not only academic credibility but also institutional integration.

Our sustainability lab involved researchers from both sides and secured external funding. It created a sense of ownership beyond the classroom.

Importantly, these robust ecosystems did not operate as isolated education-to-education relationships. Rather, they fostered broader cross-sector engagement, collaborating with local governments, employers, non-governmental organisations and policy bodies to generate impact beyond the university. These wider networks positioned the partnership not just as a programme provider but as a trusted regional actor contributing to social, economic, and environmental development.

We worked with the Ministry of Industry on a skills audit for the region. That opened doors to internships, new courses, and recognition as a partner with purpose.

These adaptive behaviours ensured that the partnership remained viable and valuable over time, demonstrating that flexibility is not a compromise but a core enabler of sustainable TNE ecosystems.

Moreover, a truly functional TNE ecosystem is not defined solely by financial performance. While financial viability matters, long-term success requires attention to academic depth, reputational integrity and relational resilience. Ecosystems that thrive over time do so because they invest in quality teaching, robust research collaborations, community relevance and long-lasting human relationships, not merely contractual or commercial gains. These dimensions, financial, academic, reputational and relational, are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. These adaptive behaviours ensure that the partnership remained viable and valuable over time.

In sum, enabling features were not about ticking boxes but about cultivating the conditions for partnership as a relationship, not a transaction. Ecosystems flourished when institutions invested in co-ownership, context and capacity, not just compliance. The success of TNE lies not in replication but in resonance: where global ambitions meet local realities through shared purpose and mutual respect.

5 | Discussion: Towards Sustainable and Equitable TNE Ecosystems

The findings of this study indicate that the foundations of sustainable TNE extend well beyond contractual arrangements or quality assurance procedures. What shapes outcomes most strongly are the relationships among institutions, the effectiveness of governance processes and the quality of support provided to staff and students. Viewed collectively, the evidence suggests that TNE operates less as a linear delivery system and more as an ecosystem in which multiple domains must work together if partnerships are to remain resilient and equitable.

The analysis identified six domains that consistently influenced partnership effectiveness: strategic integration, leadership and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, financial sustainability, operational sustainability and relational and reputational capital. These domains, drawn from the literature, offer a structural perspective on the ecosystem. The empirical findings show how each domain can be reinforced or weakened through routine practices. Barriers such as insufficient institutional support, limited contextualisation, communication breakdowns, strategic misalignment and delivery-only models often undermined several domains simultaneously. In contrast, enablers such as collaborative governance, contextualised curriculum design, investment in people, integrated support systems and flexible, responsive decision-making strengthened them.

Figure 2 brings these elements together into an integrative model. It positions agility, adaptability and alignment as cross-cutting capabilities that influence how institutions operate across the six ecosystem domains. These capabilities help explain why some partnerships respond constructively to complexity while others remain constrained by inherited structures. The model offers a way of understanding how contextual conditions, institutional behaviours and partnership outcomes interact over time and provides a basis for thinking about TNE as a sustainable and mutually beneficial ecosystem.

5.1 | Challenging the Delivery Paradigm

A dominant theme across data sources was the overreliance on delivery-only models, where host institutions are treated as implementation arms for pre-designed curricula. These models, often justified as scalable and quality-assured, instead create structural rigidity and cultural dissonance. As Sidhu and Christie (2015) warned, such arrangements risk replicating forms of pedagogic colonialism, where epistemological authority remains concentrated in the Global North.

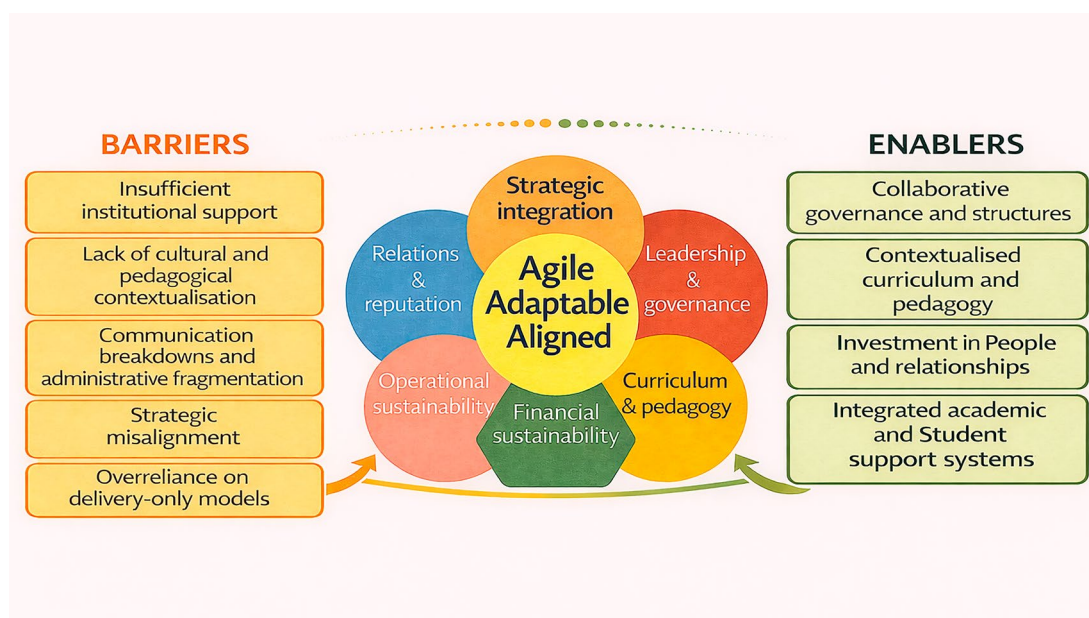


FIGURE 2 | Integrative TNE ecosystem model.

The findings reinforce Wilkins and Huisman's (2012) argument that legitimacy must be co-produced. Ecosystems that prioritised co-design, collaborative governance and local adaptation exhibited greater resilience and credibility, particularly in complex regulatory or socio-cultural environments. TNE robustness, in this sense, comes not from control, but from collaboration.

5.2 | Support as Ecosystem Infrastructure

Insufficient stakeholder support emerged as the most pervasive barrier. As Shams (2016), Eldridge and Cranston (2009) and Wang (2025) argued, intercultural engagement requires institutional infrastructure, not just goodwill. Whether through onboarding for faculty, pastoral care for students or communication protocols for parents, support mechanisms must be designed into the partnership model.

Survey and interview data repeatedly revealed the absence of such infrastructure, especially in areas such as visa navigation, legal secondment, academic advising and cross-border HR. Importantly, these gaps were not merely operational oversights; they reflected a lack of strategic investment in the human systems that sustain academic delivery.

5.3 | Strategic Misalignment and the Illusion of Consensus

TNE partnerships often begin with rhetorical alignment, shared press releases and aspirational language around global impact or capacity building. However, this study revealed frequent strategic divergences between partners. What one institution views as a prestige venture, the other may view as an access or upgrading mechanism. This mismatch often leads to miscommunication, inertia or breakdown.

Echoing Knight and McNamara's (2017) emphasis on 'strategic fit', the findings underscore the need for ongoing negotiation of purpose, not just agreement at the outset. Mature TNE ecosystems actively revisit their goals, involve both academic and non-academic actors in planning and treat strategic friction as an opportunity for recalibration rather than rupture.

5.4 | Governance as Relational Ecology

Effective governance in TNE is not a static organogram but a living negotiated ecology. Our data suggest that the most functional partnerships had multi-level governance structures: joint academic boards with shared voting rights, bilingual documentation, cross-campus policy alignment and even cultural mediation roles.

This supports Chen et al.'s (2025) characterisation of governance as context-sensitive and adaptive. Crucially, resilience did not mean the absence of conflict; it meant the presence of mechanisms to address it. When decision-making authority was shared and local expertise was respected, governance enabled, not inhibited, ecosystem growth.

5.5 | Investing in People and Relationships

Perhaps most significantly, this study highlights that successful TNE ecosystems are built on long-term relational capital. Time spent on secondments, joint teaching and informal professional exchanges created reservoirs of trust that outlasted leadership changes or policy shifts. In contrast, partnerships with high staff turnover, limited mobility or transactional engagement struggled to adapt under pressure.

This finding amplifies recent calls to re-centre people, rather than procedures, in the TNE strategy (Tran et al. 2023). Investment in human infrastructure, through joint fellowships, inter-campus placements and cross-cultural training, is not an optional enhancement; it is the core of sustainable collaboration. Furthermore, support from the home government can play a catalytic role in enabling these efforts. When funding agencies, ministries or national quality bodies create frameworks for academic mobility, co-research or institutional twinning, they actively shape the relational landscape in which ecosystems thrive. These relational investments resonate with the Triple-A framework (Wang 2025), agility, adaptability and alignment, which remain essential operational capacities within broader ecosystemic dynamics. While this study adopts a wider systemic lens, the Triple-A model remains a useful way of thinking about how institutions strengthen intercultural responsiveness, governance flexibility and strategic coherence in transnational partnerships.

5.6 | Beyond Education-To-Education: Building out the Ecosystem

Finally, the study shows that robust TNE ecosystems transcend the university-to-university model. They involve employers, accreditation bodies, local governments and civil society actors. In several successful cases, curriculum design incorporated employer feedback, while research partnerships aligned with national innovation goals (often reflecting host-government priorities in sectors such as technology, health or creative industries). These networks created institutional embeddedness and positioned the TNE partnership as a long-term stakeholder in regional development.

This aligns with Hickey and Davies (2024) argument that ecosystem health depends on both internal integration and external connectivity. By reaching into local economies and governance systems, TNE becomes more than a degree vehicle; it becomes an instrument of social, economic and educational transformation. Ultimately, the path forward lies in fostering TNE that is not only globally ambitious but also equitable and sustainable, grounded in shared purpose, responsive to local realities and built to endure.

6 | Conclusion: Reimagining TNE for a Complex World

6.1 | Synthesis of Contribution

This study has argued that a sustained and equitable approach to TNE demands a fundamental shift in perspective, moving decisively from a transactional delivery model to a dynamic

and collaborative ecosystem. We advanced the TNE literature by conceptualising the partnership as an ecosystem, defining its operational resilience through six critical domains and by validating the Triple-A framework (alignment, adaptability and agility) as the essential set of capabilities required for long-term health. Our analysis demonstrated that the longevity of TNE is not secured by contractual terms or resource input but by the continuous intentional cultivation of relational capital across the partnership. Ultimately, the findings establish that TNE robustness is cultivated through trust, shared ownership and long-term relational investment, confirming that when partnerships are designed as reciprocal ecologies, they contribute meaningfully to both institutional and social capacity-building.

6.2 | Practical Implications and Recommendations

The evidence carries significant implications for institutions and policymakers committed to the responsible growth of TNE:

- For institutions: Higher education institutions need to shift from hierarchical oversight towards collaborative governance that empowers local leadership and embeds strategic alignment across borders. Investment should prioritise human and relational capital through measures such as reciprocal staff mobility and professional development programmes, ensuring that the core partnership infrastructure is robust and genuinely shared.
- For policymakers: Regulatory frameworks need to evolve to incentivise collaborative partnership models rather than purely commercial arrangements. Policy should move beyond compliance auditing and begin assessing the integrated, equitable and sustainable outcomes of the partnership, recognising and validating localised curricular adaptations that demonstrate responsiveness to local development needs.

6.3 | Limitations and Future Research

While this cross-sectional study established critical relationships between ecosystem domains and sustainability, it did not track their temporal evolution. We propose three key avenues for future scholarship to build upon this foundation: further longitudinal studies to track the development of the Triple-A capabilities over a partnership's life cycle, a comparative analysis of equity to investigate the differential impact of the ecosystem model on marginalised groups, and an examination of how digitalisation is either hindering or facilitating the necessary alignment and agility within the TNE ecosystem.

6.4 | A Call for a New TNE Mandate

The challenges facing TNE today are not mere administrative hurdles; they are systemic indicators in which the dominant model is unsustainable. Our research offers a clear mandate: to move beyond TNE as an export strategy and embrace it as a shared ecology. True sustainability is achieved

when partnerships value co-creation over control and relational outcomes over transactional efficiency. This transformation requires not only policy changes and new governance models but also a fundamental shift in institutional culture, one that sees the international campus not as a satellite but as an integral self-sustaining world within a global network. Only then can TNE fully realise its potential as a powerful, equitable force for global higher education development.

Author Contributions

Jiayi Wang: conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – review and editing, project administration, formal analysis, software, data curation, supervision, resources.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix 1

TNE Student Experience Survey

Thank you for sharing your thoughts. This survey aims to understand the challenges and experiences of Transnational Education (TNE) students. Your feedback is invaluable and will help us enhance support and resources for our students. It will take approximately 5–10 min to complete.

Section 1: General Information

1. What is your current year of study?
 - Year 1
 - Year 2
 - Year 3
 - Final year
 - Other (please specify)
2. Which programme are you enrolled in?
(Open-ended)
3. Where are you currently located?
(Open-ended)
4. What is the general subject area of your course?
 - Arts, Humanities or Social Sciences
 - Business, Economics or Marketing
 - Engineering
 - IT or Computer Sciences
 - Health care or Medical Sciences
 - Science
 - Other

Section 2: Academic Challenges

5. What are the biggest challenges you face in your academic journey as a TNE student?
(Open-ended)
6. How would you rate the following aspects of academic support?
(1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent)
 - Availability of academic resources (e.g., online library, course materials)
 - Accessibility of faculty and staff
 - Quality of feedback on assignments and assessments.
 - Clarity of course objectives and expectations
7. What additional academic support do you feel would help improve your experience?
(Open-ended)

Section 3: Cultural Challenges

8. What are the biggest intercultural challenges you have encountered while studying in this TNE programme?

(e.g., understanding academic requirements, managing communication with staff and peers, balancing academic workload, adapting to cultural differences between global curricula and local contexts, financial challenges or feeling a sense of belonging)
(Open-ended)

9. Have you received support or guidance to navigate intercultural challenges?
 - Yes, and it has been helpful
 - Yes, but it could be improved
 - No, I have not received support
 - Not applicable
10. If yes, what type of support was most helpful? If no, what support do you think would help?
(Open-ended)

Section 4: Communication and Engagement

11. How would you rate the effectiveness of communication between you and the institution?
(1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent)
12. What communication methods do you find most effective?
 - Email
 - Online platforms (e.g., Moodle, Teams)
 - Live webinars or virtual sessions
 - In-person meetings (if applicable)
 - Other (please specify)
13. Do you feel engaged and connected with the TNE community?
 - Yes, very engaged
 - Somewhat engaged
 - Not engaged
14. What could be done to help you feel more connected to the TNE community?
(Open-ended)

Section 5: Final Feedback

15. What do you think is working well in this TNE programme?
(Open-ended)
16. What improvements would you suggest for this TNE programme?
(Open-ended)
17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a TNE student?
(Open-ended)

Thank you for your feedback! Your input is invaluable in helping us enhance the TNE experience for all students.

Appendix 2

TNE Stakeholder Experience Survey

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights. This survey is designed to gather feedback from Transnational Education (TNE) stakeholders: staff, administrators, managers and regulators. Your responses will help us identify challenges and opportunities across TNE programmes and enhance their effectiveness. The survey will take approximately 5–10 min to complete.

Section 1: General Information

1. What is your role in the TNE programme(s) you are involved with?
(Select all that apply)
 - Academic Staff
 - Administrator
 - Manager
 - Regulator
 - Other (please specify)

2. Which TNE programme(s) are you involved with?
(e.g., *undergraduate, postgraduate, professional development, dual awards, branch campus*)
(Open-ended)
3. What is the general subject area of your course(s)?
 - Arts, Humanities or Social Sciences
 - Business, Economics or Marketing
 - Engineering
 - IT or Computer Sciences
 - Health care or Medical Sciences
 - Science
 - Other
4. How long have you been involved with the TNE programme(s)?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1–3 years
 - 3–5 years
 - More than 5 years

Section 2: Challenges in TNE

5. What are the biggest challenges you face in your role within the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)
6. How would you rate the following aspects of the TNE programme(s) from your perspective?
(1 = *Very Poor*, 5 = *Excellent*)
 - Clarity of policies and procedures
 - Support from the institution
 - Communication between stakeholders
 - Availability of resources
7. What additional support or resources would help you perform your role more effectively?
(Open-ended)

Section 3: Cultural Challenges

8. What are the biggest intercultural challenges you have encountered in your role within the TNE programme(s)?
(e.g., *communication styles, cultural expectations, teaching and learning practices, adapting to diverse academic standards*)
(Open-ended)
9. Have you received guidance or support to navigate intercultural challenges?
 - Yes, and it has been helpful
 - Yes, but it could be improved
 - No, I have not received support
 - Not applicable
10. What type of support, training or resources would help you address cultural challenges in the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)

Section 4: Communication and Collaboration

11. How would you rate the effectiveness of communication between you and other TNE stakeholders?
(1 = *Very Poor*, 5 = *Excellent*)
12. What communication methods do you find most effective in your role?
 - Email
 - Online platforms (e.g., Moodle, Teams)
 - Meetings (virtual or in-person)
 - Reports or newsletters
 - Other (please specify)
13. What could be done to improve collaboration among TNE stakeholders?

(e.g., *more frequent meetings, shared platforms, streamlined processes*)
(Open-ended)

Section 5: Programme Evaluation

14. From your perspective, what is working well in the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)
15. What improvements would you suggest for the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)
16. How do you measure success in your role within the TNE programme(s)?
(e.g., *student outcomes, programme growth, stakeholder satisfaction, personal goals*) (Open-ended)
17. Are there any specific challenges or barriers to achieving success in your role?
(e.g., *institutional, operational, or external factors*)
(Open-ended)

Section 6: Final Feedback

18. What opportunities do you see for the future development of the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the TNE programme(s)?
(e.g., *additional challenges, opportunities, or suggestions for improvement*)
(Open-ended)

Thank you for your feedback! Your input is invaluable in helping us better understand and improve TNE provision for all stakeholders.

Appendix 3

TNE Parent Experience Survey

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights. This survey is designed to gather feedback from parents of students enrolled in Transnational Education (TNE) programmes. Your responses will help us better understand your experiences, identify challenges and improve the support provided to both you and your child. The survey will take approximately 5–10 min to complete.

Section 1: General Information

1. Which TNE programme(s) is your child enrolled in?
(e.g., *undergraduate, postgraduate, dual awards, branch campus, professional development*)
(Open-ended)
2. How long has your child been enrolled in the TNE programme(s)?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1–3 years
 - 3–5 years
 - More than 5 years
3. Where is your child currently studying (location/country)?
(Open-ended)
4. Are you located in the same country as your child's TNE programme?
 - Yes
 - No (please specify your location)
5. How would you describe your involvement in your child's TNE education?
(e.g., *financial support, academic guidance, emotional support*)
(Open-ended)

Section 2: Challenges in Supporting TNE Education

6. What are the biggest challenges you face as a parent in supporting your child's TNE education?
(e.g., *understanding academic requirements, communication with the institution, financial challenges*)
(Open-ended)
7. How would you rate the following aspects of your experience as a parent supporting a TNE student?
(1 = *Very Poor*, 5 = *Excellent*)
 - Communication from the TNE institution
 - Accessibility of information about the programme
 - Support for your child's well-being
 - Opportunities for parent engagement
8. What additional support or resources would help you better support your child in the TNE programme(s)?
(Open-ended)

Section 3: Cultural Challenges

9. Have you encountered any intercultural challenges in supporting your child's TNE education?
(e.g., *understanding cultural differences, academic expectations, or communication styles*)
(Open-ended)
10. Have you received any guidance or support to navigate intercultural challenges?
 - Yes, and it has been helpful
 - Yes, but it could be improved
 - No, I have not received support
 - Not applicable
11. What type of support or resources would help you better address cultural challenges?
(e.g., *workshops, cultural awareness guides, direct communication with staff*)
(Open-ended)

Section 4: Communication and Engagement

12. How effective is the communication between the TNE institution and parents?
(1 = *Very Poor*, 5 = *Excellent*)
13. What communication methods do you find most effective?
 - Email
 - Online portals (e.g., Moodle, Teams)
 - Newsletters or updates
 - Parent-teacher meetings (virtual or in-person)
 - Other (please specify)
14. What could be done to improve communication and engagement with parents?
(e.g., *more frequent updates, parent workshops, feedback opportunities*)
(Open-ended)

Section 5: Programme Evaluation

15. What aspects of the TNE programme(s) do you think benefit your child the most?
(e.g., *academic quality, cultural exposure, career opportunities*)
(Open-ended)
16. What improvements would you suggest for the TNE programme(s) to better support parents?
(Open-ended)

17. How do you evaluate your child's success in the TNE programme(s)?
(e.g., *academic performance, personal growth, readiness for the future*) (Open-ended)
18. Are there any barriers or challenges you face in supporting your child's success in the TNE programme(s)?
(e.g., *lack of information, financial constraints, cultural differences*) (Open-ended)

Section 6: Final Feedback

19. What opportunities do you see for improving the relationship between TNE institutions and parents?
(Open-ended)
20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a parent of a TNE student?
(e.g., *additional challenges, opportunities, or suggestions for improvement*)
(Open-ended)

Thank you!

Thank you for your feedback! Your insights are invaluable in helping us enhance the TNE experience for students and their families.

Appendix 4

QAA TNE Review and Audit Report List

Sending nation	Sending university	Host country/region	Branch campus	Year of publication
Wales	Aberystwyth University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	Anglia Ruskin University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	Coventry University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	Lancaster University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	Liverpool John Moores University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	University of Lincoln	Malaysia	No	2020
England	University of Greenwich	Malaysia	No	2020
Wales	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	Malaysia	No	2020
England	Newcastle University	Malaysia	No	2020
England	University of Nottingham	Malaysia	Yes	2020
England	University of Reading	Malaysia	Yes	2020
England	University of Southampton	Malaysia	Yes	2020
England	University of Southampton	Malaysia	Yes	2020
England	City, University of London	UAE	No	2014
England	Coventry University	UAE	No	2014
Scotland	Heriot-Watt University	UAE	Yes	2014
England	London Business School	UAE	No	2014
England	Middlesex University	UAE	Yes	2014
England	University of Bolton	UAE	No	2014
England	University of Bradford	UAE	No	2014
England	University of Exeter	Malaysia	No	2020
England	University of Manchester	UAE	No	2014
Scotland	University of Strathclyde	Singapore	No	2014
England	Birmingham City University	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	De Montfort University	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	Edinburgh Napier University	Hong Kong	No	2018
Wales	Glyndwr University	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	Leeds Beckett University	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	University College Birmingham	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	University of Northumbria	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	University of Warwick	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	University of Sunderland	Hong Kong	No	2018
England	University of Bradford	India	No	2009
England	Cranfield University	India	No	2009
England	De Montfort University	India	No	2009
Scotland	Edinburgh Napier University	India	No	2009
England	University of Huddersfield	India	No	2009
England	London South Bank University	India	No	2009
England	Oxford Brookes University	India	No	2009
England	University of Plymouth	India	No	2009

Sending nation	Sending university	Host country/region	Branch campus	Year of publication
Scotland	Queen Margaret University	India	No	2009
England	Staffordshire University	India	No	2009
England	University of Chester	Ireland	No	2017
Scotland	University of Dundee	Ireland	No	2017
England	London Metropolitan University	Ireland	No	2017
England	Middlesex University	Ireland	No	2017
Wales	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	Ireland	No	2017
Northern Ireland	Ulster University	Ireland	No	2017
Wales	Cardiff Metropolitan University	Greece	No	2016
Scotland	University of Strathclyde	Greece	No	2016
Scotland	Queen Margaret University	Greece	No	2016
England	St George's, University of London	Cyprus	No	2015
England	University of Portsmouth	Greece	No	2016
England	University of Derby	Greece	No	2016
England	University of Sheffield	Greece	No	2016
England	University of Central Lancashire	Cyprus	Yes	2015
England	University of St Mark & St John	Cyprus	No	2016
England	Anglia Ruskin University	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	London Metropolitan University	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	University of Hertfordshire	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	University of Greenwich	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	University of Leicester	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	University of Sunderland	Trinidad and Tobago	No	2015
England	University of Hertfordshire	Jamaica	No	2015
England	University of Bedfordshire	Jamaica	No	2015
England	University of Central Lancashire	China	No	2013
England	University of Durham	China	No	2013
England	University of Greenwich	China	No	2013
England	Harper Adams University	China	No	2013
England	University of Nottingham	China	Yes	2013
England	University of Liverpool	China	Yes	2013
England	London Metropolitan University	China	No	2013
England	Queen Mary, University of London	China	No	2013
England	The University of Reading	China	No	2013
England	The University of Surrey	China	No	2013
England	Coventry University	Singapore	No	2011
Scotland	Heriot-Watt University	Singapore	No	2011
England	London South Bank University	Singapore	No	2011
England	The Open University	Singapore	No	2011
England	University of Manchester	Singapore	No	2011
England	University of London International Programs	Singapore	No	2011

Sending nation	Sending university	Host country/region	Branch campus	Year of publication
Wales	University of Wales	Singapore	No	2011
England	University of Warwick	Singapore	No	2011
England	University of Wolverhampton	Singapore	No	2011
England	University of Greenwich	Sri Lanka	No	2020
England	University of Wolverhampton	Sri Lanka	No	2020
Wales	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	Sri Lanka	No	2020
Scotland	The University of Abertay	Malaysia	No	2010
England	Anglia Ruskin University	Malaysia	No	2010
England	University of Bolton	Malaysia	No	2010
England	University College Plymouth St Mark and St John	Malaysia	No	2010
Scotland	Heriot-Watt University	Malaysia	Yes	2010
England	University of Reading	Malaysia	Yes	2010
England	Sheffield Hallam University	Malaysia	No	2010
England	University of Sunderland	Malaysia	No	2010
Wales	University of Wales	Malaysia	No	2010
England	University of the West of England Bristol	Malaysia	No	2010
England	City University London	UAE	No	2014
England	Coventry University	UAE	Yes	2014
Scotland	Heriot-Watt University	UAE	Yes	2014
England	London Business School	UAE	Yes	2014
England	Middlesex University (1)	UAE	Yes	2014
England	Middlesex University (2)	UAE	No	2014
England	University of Bolton	UAE	Yes	2014
England	University of Bradford	UAE	Yes	2014
England	University of Exeter	UAE	No	2014
Scotland	University of Strathclyde	UAE	Yes	2014
England	University of Manchester	UAE	Yes	2014