



Future Approaches to the External Quality Enhancement of UK Higher Education Transnational Education

Consultation Report

Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) is an important component of UK higher education provision. In 2018-19, 142 universities reported they had TNE students in 226 locations (countries, territories and administrations), with over 660,000 students studying for UK awards outside of the UK. TNE is also one of the pillars of the cross-government [International Education Strategy](#), and it is supported by the [Global Wales](#) and [Connected Scotland](#) initiatives.

The success of UK higher education transnational education (UK TNE) is underpinned by its reputation for quality - a reputation recognised by students and their families, and by overseas regulators and agencies; and which makes UK universities partners of choice internationally.

UK providers are ultimately responsible for the academic standards of their awards and for the quality of provision irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them. External regulation and quality assurance provide a framework for ensuring that baseline quality requirements are met. UK TNE reputation is further strengthened by robust quality enhancement mechanisms - both internal and external -

Key findings

The consultation received a total of 105 responses - 74 UK higher education institutions providing institutional responses

A UK-wide approach would allow for the development of areas such as quality and provision of data, sharing of best practice, and TNE community building. A common concern centred on *how* a UK-wide approach would function in relation to respective regulatory frameworks across the four nations. This question was particularly significant for English providers given the regulator's progressive implementation of a risk-based monitoring and intervention approach to transnational education.

The 11 guiding principles

91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that any quality enhancement system should be underpinned by the 11 principles outlined in the consultation. Just 6% of respondents disagreed and 3% neither agreed nor disagreed.

The 11 guiding principles proposed in the consultation (Annex A) were considered to reflect the values of UK higher education. Principles 7 and 8, regarding students and their experience, were highlighted as particularly important. There was uncertainty about how any UK-wide approach could ensure equivalence of student experience and student outcomes, given contextual differences in-country and the current data landscape not fully capturing the information needed to understand and develop this area of UK TNE.

There was some concern expressed about principle 11 ('be informed by robust metrics where available and align with UK data-informed approaches where possible') as to the availability of data to inform the system. It was suggested that developments of any quality assurance and enhancement for UK TNE was designed in collaboration with in-country regulators and authorities to promote collaboration, accountability and align with in-country priorities of regulators and authorities. The respondents recognised it as an important challenge for UK TNE to determine an appropriate balance between adherence to the principles and values of UK TNE while respectfully acknowledging cultural differences.

Model One

In the consultation, Model One was defined as accepting that existing national mechanisms applied in the UK are broadly sufficient to enhance the quality of TNE provision, with additional measures taken on an ad hoc basis where improvements could be made.

There were concerns expressed about the different approaches to quality assurance and enhancement in each nation and about how to maintain a UK-wide approach to transnational education. 38% strongly agreed/agreed with Model One but the comments for this group predominantly sought further development of the TNE activities and resources mentioned above. 43% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with Model One. The remaining 19% neither agreed nor disagreed. Disagreement with in-country reviews in Model One does not mean that respondents do not support further development and assurance of quality within UK TNE. The overseas respondents sought a clear UK-wide approach to UK TNE that would ensure consistency across TNE arrangements and standardise requirements, so that expectations were clear and accountable.

Model Two

In the consultation, Model Two was defined as adding a regular programme of in-country quality enhancement reviews to existing national quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. A majority of 60% agreed or strongly agreed, while 25% strongly disagreed or disagreed.

The comments acknowledged that in-country reviews provided an overview of context and regulatory environment through a trusted peer-review process. A few responses disagreed

with Model Two solely because Model One was seen to provide robust assurance. These respondents also questioned which aspects of the existing mechanisms were seen to not provide assurance. Respondents who strongly disagreed/disagreed with Model Two were predominantly those who strongly agreed/agreed with Model One. Criticism of Model Two predominantly centred on aspects of the in-

The comments included a wide variety of potential parameters seen as requiring consideration in order to determine the differential fee. Value in relation to fees centred on the relevance of the TNE activities decided, especially if in-country reviews are chosen. Although cost was important to respondents, greater significance was placed on providers' ability to choose which TNE activities and in-country reviews to participate in and pay for as appropriate to their TNE provision and internal priorities.

Voluntary participation

A considerable minority (43%) agreed or strongly agreed that regular in-country quality enhancement of UK TNE should be a voluntary QAA Membership service. 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 25% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. Voluntary participation in quality assurance and enhancement was seen to conflict with the UK-wide approach with which the vast majority strongly agreed/agreed. Participation was seen to benefit the wider UK higher education (HE) sector and it was therefore suggested, by a number of respondents, that the sector commits collectively to the development of UK TNE and UK HE. Voluntary participation, at least for UK TNE providers, was seen by some respondents as exposing UK HE and UK TNE to reputational risk. It was suggested that in-country reviews and other TNE activities were clearly articulated with the existing QAA service - 'International Insights'.

TNE quality assurance and Enhancement Mark or Statement

A majority of respondents (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that buying into TNE quality enhancement activities should be associated with a Mark or Statement. 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 23% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Respondents were concerned that a Mark which was solely awarded to providers would be a barrier to entry for smaller providers. It was suggested that a Mark or Statement should be associated with a minimum level of quality assurance and enhancement activities. It was also suggested that a Mark or Statement should be associated with a minimum level of quality assurance and enhancement activities. It was also suggested that a Mark or Statement should be associated with a minimum level of quality assurance and enhancement activities.

Annex A

The joint UUK/GuildHE/QAA working group agreed with the merits of adopting a UK-wide approach to quality enhancement of TNE and identified 11 UK-wide principles that should underpin any approach to quality enhancement of UK HE TNE.

Any effective system should:

- 1 be UK-wide
- 2 apply to all degree-awarding bodies who engage in TNE
- 3 be valid for all types of TNE
- 4 be cost-efficient
- 5 be flexible and responsive
- 6 minimise the burden to institutions, avoiding duplication of course or institutional review and aligning with the review processes of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), where relevant and appropriate
- 7 have the student experience at its heart
- 8 ensure equivalence of student experience and student outcomes between TNE and UK-based students
- 9 retain international trust and maintain the reputation of the UK's quality assurance approach
- 10 be enhancement-led
- 11 be informed by robust metrics where available and align with UK data-informed approaches where possible.