



Grounded synergy: addressing the challenge to co-construct meaningfully collaborative, quality assured, transnational education (TNE) provision

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Presentation abstract

The number of students studying through transnational educational (TNE) arrangements at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) has grown considerably over the last decade. Universities UK (2022), drawing on 2020/21 data, reported that 162 HEIs engaged in TNE arrangements with 228 countries. TNE provision encompasses diverse delivery methods, including dual awards, joint awards, double degrees, and franchised or validated arrangements. HEIs grapple with enormous operational complexities in delivering partnership course arrangements. One fundamental challenge is delivering partnership courses that reflect meaningful collaborative work between host and partnership institutions (producing more engaging, creative, and inclusive learning experiences), while also ensuring parity of high-quality educational provision between the institutions. This session was intended to facilitate discussion around how partnerships can navigate these complexities, build a climate of respectful and open dialogue, and successfully deliver high quality, innovative environments for all learners. In doing so, it centred around three core questions:

1. How can HEIs involve partners in more meaningful, sustainable ways in educational provision?
2. How might TNE work help HEIs understand their own internal partnerships more clearly?
3. Where could or should TNE provision in higher education go from here?

Keywords: transnational education; professional development; partnerships; learning development.

Community response

The Learning Development sector grew out of the widening participation agenda and increasing internationalisation of contemporary higher education (HE) in the UK at the turn of the millennium. These agendas can appear to be inwards facing. Indeed, when thinking about international students, we might focus our attention on students coming to study in the UK. In the 2021/22 academic year, there were nearly 700,000 international students studying towards a degree in the UK (Universities UK, 2024). Throughout 2024, the British press has reported on how international students studying in the UK subsidise the financial viability of the sector through the significantly higher fees they pay compared to home domiciled students.

Yet international students in the UK are only one part of the internationalisation of UK HE. During the last decade, there has been a significant rise in transnational education (TNE). Over 500,000 students studied UK degrees abroad through TNE partnerships in 2020/21 (Universities UK, 2022). These arrangements can involve diverse delivery methods, including dual awards, joint awards, double degrees, and franchised or validated arrangements. Steve Smith—the UK government’s International Education Champion—has emphasised that these arrangements can be seen as more inclusive because they provide a way of supporting more students to access UK HE; by continuing to study in their own country, students’ costs (including tuition fees) are significantly reduced. Furthermore, TNE partnerships are seen as beneficial by governments because they keep students within a country rather than exporting their skills to the UK (Smith, 2023, 23:30). But, at the same time, Conroy and Vasant (2024) have emphasised the challenges posed by TNE, including geographical, cultural, and institutional differences that can reduce the effectiveness of partnerships and inhibit the quality of the student experience. It is important these challenges are tackled to avoid the TNE route becoming—or being perceived as—a second-class UK HE experience compared to studying in the UK itself.

Within this broader picture, it was striking that delegates emphasised they were unfamiliar with TNE partnerships in their direct educational working activities. One participant emphasised that Conroy’s talk had illuminated an area of HE that felt ‘abstract’ to them, as they did not have ‘the opportunity to collaborate internationally’ in their current role. Other participants, however, noted they had been indirectly linked to TNE work in some way

such as through requests from partnership teams based at their institution to provide Learning Development support to collaborative partners.

It could be argued that engagement with TNE should be encouraged across the Learning Development sector, as its focus on partnership working and widening access to higher education directly relates to ALDinHE's core values (see Briggs, 2018; ALDinHE, 2024). Indeed, a delegate acknowledged that, while they might not have had the opportunity to be involved in TNE themselves, Conroy's talk and his 'focus on meaningful collaboration struck a chord with me'. This participant reflected that their university does have partnerships with programmes in Hong Kong. They were keen to consider how the Learning Development team in their university might be able to establish connections with TNE partners to collaborate and share practice.

The community emphasised that a potential barrier to greater engagement with TNE provision was the diverse ways in which partnership operations dovetail with—or are isolated from—campus provision across contemporary HE. Some attendees reported that TNE provision was closely aligned to the on-campus experience through the sharing of Learning Development resources and approaches, yet others reported that campus and partnership provision was distinctive—involving different teams and separate pathways. This patchwork approach to Learning Development for TNE partnerships raises a question about what an 'ideal' approach would look like for Learning Development involvement.

Overall, Conroy's talk provided a useful opportunity to raise awareness of how UK HE operates outside the UK and the ways Learning Developers can start to explore how they might engage in these growing areas and contribute to the strategic priorities of their own universities. TNE partnerships provide an opportunity for Learning Developers to take a proactive role in shaping how students learn. In doing this, participants may find it helpful to read Conroy's companion piece in this special issue that focuses on developing a Professional Development Series for partnership educators (Conroy, 2024).

Next steps and additional questions

Conroy's session was framed by three prompt questions. These questions focus on HE institutions more broadly, but they could also be adjusted to consider specifically how Learning Development teams might be involved with their institution's approach to TNE. For example:

1. How can Learning Development teams engage with partners in more meaningful, sustainable ways to support TNE provision?
2. How might TNE work help Learning Development teams understand their own internal partnerships more clearly?
3. Where could or should the involvement of Learning Development teams with TNE provision in higher education go from here?

Author's reflection

The mini keynote format presented, I think, a successful way of giving choice to delegates and the possibility of exposure to wide-ranging topic areas at ALDinHE's 2024 conference. Around five different groups attended my mini keynote in batches of around four to six delegates. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of educators about transnational education and partnership work during this occasion.

I agree with the community response that there is a clear and, in fact, vital role for Learning Developers to take in partnership work. One recurring theme within partnership work and TNE in general is the boundaries around the extent to which the resources and learning opportunities available to campus learners are also available to partnership learners. Our partnership students are very much our own students at London Met—not a group apart, not another institution's responsibility, but our own students taking institutional courses in the same way as students who attend our main campus on Holloway Road in London, albeit by a different arrangement and clearly in a different physical learning space.

Clearer and more consistent involvement of Learning Developers in partnership provision would be an important practical way of gaining insights into the learning experiences of partnership learners and ensuring that the skills and expertise of our Learning

Development educators are made available to learners irrespective of their study mode and location.

Clearly, many obstacles present themselves here. Partnership arrangements involve clear contractual boundaries between what does and does not ‘travel’ within partnership educational arrangements. As I hoped to relay during my mini keynote sessions, this is part of what makes partnership work so compelling—the possibility of developing deeper, more meaningful professional connections between two institutions in a way that puts the partnership learner’s educational experience front and centre.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to share my passion for TNE work with different delegates and to understand their experiences of partnership work in their institutional settings. I am looking forward to taking these conversations further with Learning Developers at London Met—and with colleagues across the sector—to generate closer understanding of TNE work to help cultivate the highest possible standards of educational experience for our partnership learners.

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