

Outcomes and Impacts of Transnational Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review Focusing on Host Countries

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Abstract: The growth of transnational higher education (TNHE) in recent decades has attracted increasing scholarly attention. This paper systematically reviews existing research on TNHE's outcomes and impacts on host countries by analysing the research performance landscape, identifying common methodologies and theories, and thematising key findings. A total of 35 publications from the Web of Science database for the period of 2003–2023 were selected for performance and qualitative review. The findings reveal a rising research field dominated by authors from TNHE-exporting Western countries, supported by educational organizations, along with a notable presence of scholars from TNHE-importing countries. Researchers primarily examined the perspectives of graduates, students, and administrators, and employed qualitative methods, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks derived from management, social sciences, and philosophy. TNHE's academic, human resource, economic, social, and research outcomes and impacts on host countries were identified through thematic analysis. While this model of higher education provision has proven successful for some countries, uncertain global events pose ongoing challenges to TNHE's future sustainability.

Keywords: Higher Education, International Branch Campus, Outcomes and Impacts, Systematic Literature Review, Transnational Education

1. Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) has developed significantly over the past two decades. Historically focused on the mobility of people, it has evolved to include the cross-border movement of academic programs, the establishment of university branches, and the development of education hubs (Knight, 2024). Globalization and free trade have driven this expansion, facilitating the flow of programs and institutions from developed to developing countries experiencing increased demand for higher education due to industrialization.

However, the global proliferation of TNHE has faced challenges. For example, while 333 international branch campuses (IBCs) operate worldwide, 58 have closed (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2023). Moreover, concerns about the future sustainability of these institutions have been raised due to operational issues (Altbach, 2010; Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Healey, 2020). As a result, the benefits to key stakeholders and the outcomes for host countries have been highlighted as vital for the sustainability of TNHE (British Council & DAAD, 2014; Hill & Lim, 2021; Wilkins, 2021).

Although a few authors have explored the rationales and outcomes of TNHE from host country perspectives, research in these areas remains limited (Knight & Liu, 2019). Recent reviews have

examined various aspects of TNHE such as quality assurance, challenges and success factors, and graduate employability (Carvalho, Rosa, & Amaral, 2022; Schueller, 2023; Tran, Amado, & Santos, 2023). However, these studies do not delve into the broader implications of TNHE at the national level. For example, a recent review on TNHE graduate outcomes and employability lacks studies on graduates' perspectives and their contributions to their communities (Schueller, 2023). To sum up, while existing reviews cover a wide range of TNHE topics, no study critically evaluates and synthesizes research on its outcomes and impacts from host country perspectives.

This study intends to address these gaps by analysing existing research on TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries using descriptive and qualitative systematic review methods. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- i) What is the research performance landscape regarding TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries?
- ii) What methodologies and theories are commonly applied in studying TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries?
- iii) What are the identified outcomes and impacts of TNHE on host countries?

The remaining of the paper is structured as follows: the definition and background of TNHE are presented first, followed by the research design, procedure, and review process detailed in the methodology section. Furthermore, the findings section presents the results according to the research questions, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, implications, and conclusion.

2. TNHE Definition and Background

TNHE is often used synonymously with terms such as cross-border, offshore, and borderless education (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). Some authors have also proposed alternative concepts, such as “international program and provider mobility” (IPPM), to describe this phenomenon (Knight & Liu, 2019). This study adopts the definition of transnational education as “programs that are offered to learners in a country different than the one where the awarding institution is located” (UNESCO & Council of Europe, 2001). The focus of this study is on physical TNHE, including franchised programs, IBCs, and partnership institutions awarding foreign degrees, while online and distance programs are excluded from the scope.

Countries and universities engage in TNHE business for various reasons. Sending countries and institutions primarily pursue economic, soft-power, and reputational goals, while host countries aim to enhance their higher education systems, increase access and capacity, and develop a skilled workforce (Knight, 2016). Although TNHE is privately operated, governments leverage it to address local challenges and achieve public objectives (Lane & Kinser, 2011). Moreover, some destinations have integrated TNHE into broader economic and national strategies, positioning themselves as education hubs. For instance, Malaysia, Mauritius, Qatar, Singapore, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been recognized as student, skilled work force, and knowledge/innovation hubs (Aminudin, Abd Aziz, & Jamal, 2023; Ghasemy, Derahvasht, & Castillo Apraiz, 2022; Knight, 2024; Mustapha et al., 2021).

While comprehensive statistics are limited, available data highlight the importance of TNHE exports for some countries. For example, 558,085 students are estimated to be enrolled in the programs provided abroad by 162 universities of the United Kingdom (UK), the largest such figure globally (HESA, 2024). In contrast, the United States (US) leads in physical campuses, sending 84 of the 333 IBCs worldwide (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2023). Furthermore, in Australia, education ranks as the fourth-largest export and plays a vital role in the national economy (Australian Government, 2021). Emerging economies such as Russia, India, and China have also become active players, collectively sending 57 IBCs (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2023).

China, the UAE, Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar, and Hong Kong are major TNHE importers and have been widely studied. Additionally, more recent entrants, including Mauritius, Armenia, India, Egypt, South Korea, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, have also gained attention (Muratov & Wilkins, 2024; Pham, 2021; Wilkins, 2021). As global interest in importing TNHE grows, policymakers and researchers are increasingly focused on evaluating the implications of these projects.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and analytic procedure

This study employs a systematic review approach to examine publications on TNHE outcomes and impacts. A systematic review is a rigorous process for synthesizing research in a transparent and reproducible manner (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Rather than summarizing all available studies, it addresses specific questions or tests hypotheses (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Systematic reviews not only help researchers map existing knowledge and identify research gaps but also inform policy and practice by integrating findings from multiple studies (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Yan, Singh, Junjie, Lun, & Daoyuan, 2024).

This study follows the four-phase systematic review process developed by Snyder (2019): designing the review, conducting the review, analysing, and writing up. The research questions, search terms, and criteria were first established, followed by database searches to identify relevant publications. Furthermore, the selected studies were read and analysed in relation to the research questions, and the findings section was formed accordingly. The following section presents this process in detail.

3.2 Systematic Literature Review Process

Given that TNHE growth has primarily occurred over the past 20 years, this study evaluates English-language sources published between 2003 and 2023. The Web of Science database served as the main source due to its selectivity for academic journals (Singh, Singh, Karmakar, Leta, & Mayr, 2021). Additionally, relevant literature cited in the retrieved publications but not listed in the Web of Science was included. Table 1 outlines the systematic review process.

Table 1

Systematic review process

Steps	Actions	No. of articles
Step 1	(“transnational education” OR “transnational university” OR “international branch campus” OR “foreign branch campus” OR “international program and provider mobility” OR “joint university”) AND (“impact*” OR “outcome*” OR “host countr*” OR “result*” OR “effect*” OR “benefit*” OR “government” OR “skill*” OR “capacity” OR “sustainability” OR “graduate*” OR “employ*”)	808
Step 2	Title review	428
Step 3	Abstract and content review	23
Step 4	Reference review	12
Step 5	Publications selected for the study	35

First, a two-part Boolean search string combining TNHE-related keywords with outcome- and impact-related terms was developed to identify relevant publications (Vakulchuk, Daloz, Overland, Sagbakken, & Standal, 2023). The search retrieved 808 publications, of which 428 were retained after a title review. Afterwards, the assessment of abstracts and main content identified 23 articles focused on TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries. An additional 12 publications, including four organizational studies retrieved from references, were incorporated into the analysis. Overall, 35 publications were selected for the final review.

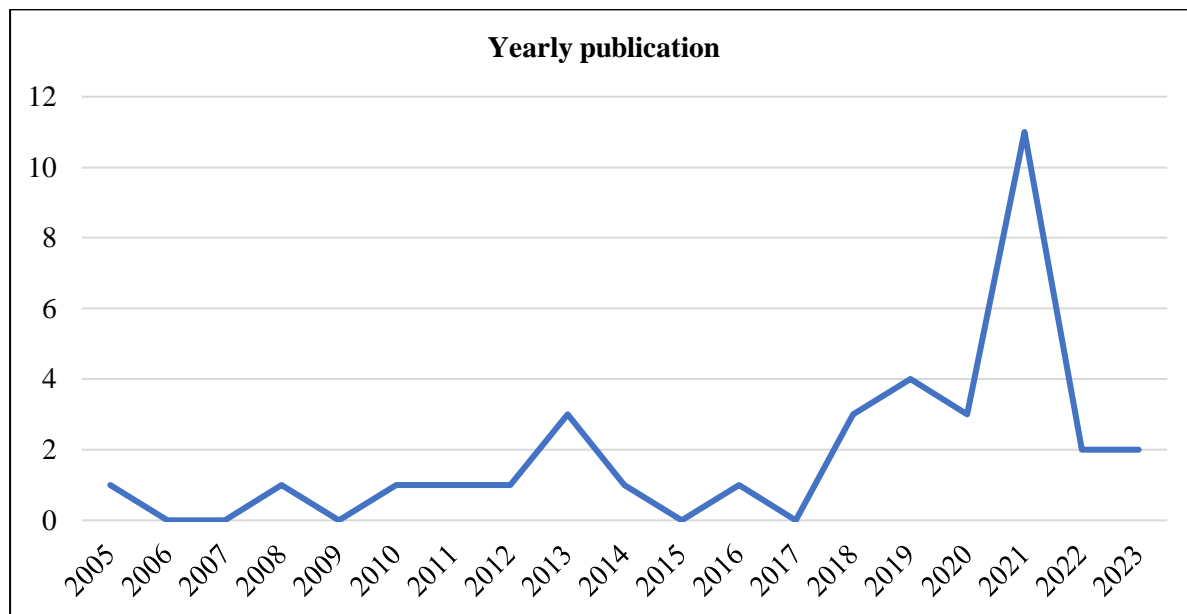
4. Findings

4.1 The research performance landscape regarding outcomes and impacts of TNHE on host countries

The research performance analysis focuses on the geographic distribution of authors and TNHE institutions, annual publication patterns, and respondent types. Most research has been published in the last five years (Figure 1), with 25 publications appearing between 2018 and 2023, compared to 10 during 2003-2017. The peak publication year was 2021, led by eight of 11 articles originating from a book on TNHE and host country perspectives (Tsiligiris, Lawton, & Hill, 2021). Furthermore, seven publications are linked to the British Council, including four commissioned reports (British Council, 2013, 2014; British Council & DAAD, 2014; Ilieva, Tsiligiris, Killingley, & Brandenburg, 2021) and three peer-reviewed articles supported by this organization (Ilieva, Postrado, & Peak, 2021; Leung & Waters, 2013; Sin, Leung, & Waters, 2019).

Figure 1

Number of yearly publications (2003-2023)



TNHE home country authors produced 11 publications, compared to eight by host country authors. Moreover, researchers from multiple countries collaborated on 14 publications. Among the 12 researchers who contributed to at least two studies (Table 2), Jane Knight stands out as the most prolific author, with four publications.

Table 2

List of researchers with at least two publications

Researchers	No. of publications
Knight, J.	4
Chen, C.	3
McNamara, J.	3
Vanclay, F.	3
Ilieva, J.	2
Leung, MWH.	2
Lien, D.	2
Liu, CJ.	2
Tsiligiris, V.	2
Waters, JL.	2
Wilkins, S.	2
Wu, QH.	2

Ten TNHE home countries were identified in the studies (Table 3). UK programs were the most frequently researched, with 13 studies, followed by the US with seven and Australia with six. Interestingly, TNHE-host countries such as India and Malaysia were each mentioned once as TNHE-home countries.

Table 3

TNHE home countries referred in publications

Countries	Frequency
UK	13
US	7
Australia	6
Netherlands	3
Germany	2
Canada	1
France	1
India	1
Ireland	1
Malaysia	1

On the receiving side, 35 countries were analysed. China, Malaysia, and the UAE were the most researched host countries, with ten, nine, and seven studies, respectively (Table 4), followed by Vietnam, Qatar, and Hong Kong. Moreover, seven countries appeared in two studies each, while 22 were the focus of single studies.

Table 4

TNHE host countries referred at least two times in publications

Countries	Frequency
China	10
Malaysia	9
UAE	7
Vietnam	5
Hong Kong	4
Qatar	4
Botswana	2
France	2
Greece	2
Mauritius	2
Mexico	2
Philippines	2
Singapore	2

The perspectives of 11 TNHE stakeholder groups were explored in 27 studies (Table 5). Graduates, students, and administrators were the most frequently studied, although graduates were often grouped with students and had lower representation. Only four studies focused exclusively on graduates' perspectives. Faculty, staff, and government officials received moderate attention, while employers and the public were studied less frequently. Furthermore, non-TNHE faculty, students, and experts also contributed to the research in a few instances.

Table 5

Stakeholder groups and the frequency of their views explored

Stakeholders	Frequency
Graduates	13
Stakeholders	Frequency
Students	12
Administrators	12
Faculty	5
Staff	4
Government	4
Experts	3
Employers	2
Public	2
Non-TNHE faculty	1
Non-TNHE students	1

4.2 The methodologies and theories commonly applied in studying TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries

The studies can be categorized into four research methodologies (Table 6). Qualitative research is the most widely used, applied in 24 studies. On the other hand, mixed methods and quantitative approaches were employed in five and four studies, respectively. Two studies used mathematical modelling to assess potential local impacts of TNHE.

Interviews were the most common data collection method, followed by surveys and document reviews. Additionally, bibliometric analysis, focus groups, observations, and personal reflection were also used, but less frequently.

Table 6

Methods employed in studies

Methods	Frequency
Qualitative methods	24
Mixed methods	5
Quantitative methods	4
Mathematical modelling	2

Approximately one-third of the studies employed theoretical lenses or conceptual frameworks, whereas the remaining studies focused on literature reviews without explicitly referencing such frameworks (Table 7). These theories primarily originate from management, social science, and philosophy.

Table 7

Theories and concepts employed in studies

Theories and concepts
Bourdieu: Theory of Capital
Constructivism
Cultural dimensions
Dual identity
English as a Business Lingua Franca
Forms of capital
IPPM classification framework
Positional theory
Pragmatism
Social license to operate
Stakeholder theory
Strategic coupling
Theories and concepts
University missions
Work integrated learning stakeholder model
World-systems

4.3 The identified outcomes and impacts of TNHE on host countries

TNHE has diverse outcomes and impacts on host countries. Through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013), these effects are categorized into five areas: academic, human resource, economic, social, and research.

The academic outcomes and impacts of TNHE are the most widely discussed. TNHE has increased access to higher education without substantial investments, particularly in developing countries with limited resources (Knight & Motala-Timol, 2021). As a result, some youth no longer need to study abroad, as they can access diverse programs locally, including those unavailable in public education (Baghdady, 2021). TNHE also provides high-quality education with rigorous academic standards, fostering subject-specific knowledge, soft skills, and foreign language proficiency, which are

often lacking in local education systems (Hodges & Seawright, 2023). Additionally, TNHE enhances university capacity through the transfer of knowledge and expertise from home countries. Moreover, graduates of TNHE programs can contribute to the development of crucial social sectors, such as public health (Leggat, Liu, & Wu, 2018; Liu et al., 2022). However, the academic effects of TNHE vary. In some cases, students view TNHE as a last resort due to challenges accessing public education (Leung & Waters, 2013; Papageorgiou, Makellaraki, & Tsiligiris, 2021), while in others, TNHE is criticized for its limited impact on the local higher education system, often due to government policies (Ding, 2019).

A key benefit of TNHE is its contribution to human resource development. Host countries engage TNHE to provide access to unique, in-demand courses, often unavailable locally. These programs typically incorporate work-integrated learning, emphasizing employability skills and internships (Bilsland, Carter, & Wood, 2020; Bilsland, Carter, & Wood, 2019). While TNHE may increase the risk of brain drain (Lien, 2008; Lien & Wang, 2012), its graduates are generally better equipped with relevant skills than public education graduates, making them valuable to local employers too (Cheong, Hill, Fernandez-Chung, & Leong, 2016). Their soft skills and language proficiency enable companies to operate and communicate internationally. On an individual level, students and graduates believe their studies have provided the skills and knowledge needed for employment (Manning, 2021).

The economic impacts of TNHE, another widely researched area, are evident at both national and individual levels. In some countries, TNHE attracts international students, while in others, it helps develop a skilled workforce for the national economy (Subramaniam, Majid, & Rashad, 2020; Sughnani, 2021). TNHE has significantly contributed to the economic development of nations positioning themselves as education and knowledge hubs (Schulze & Kleibert, 2021). At the regional level, its positive effects include increased economic activity and patent generation (Schmid, Kolesnikov, & Youtie, 2018). At the individual level, TNHE benefits graduates and their families by improving economic conditions, particularly for those unable to afford studying abroad (Bloisi & Hargy, 2021). Although TNHE tuition fees are higher than those for local education, students often view it as a worthwhile investment, believing it enhances their career prospects (British Council & DAAD, 2014).

The social outcomes and impacts of TNHE represent a moderately researched theme. Several studies have examined the effects of existing and under-construction IBCs on local residents (Chen & Vanclay, 2021, 2023; Chen, Vanclay, & Zhang, 2019). Generally, residents view foreign universities positively, though the cancellation of under-construction IBCs left some confused and disappointed due to unmet expectations. Moreover, TNHE fosters intercultural awareness in students by exposing them to foreign cultures. Graduates often develop broader worldviews and are favoured by multinational companies (Cheong et al., 2016). However, the extent of social and cultural capital gains depends on the specific TNHE context and type (Sin et al., 2019). Other studies suggest that social and cultural impacts are less significant for host countries compared to academic, economic, and skills-related impacts (British Council, 2014).

Research contributions of TNHE are the least studied area. As TNHE primarily focuses on teaching and remains a relatively recent development, its research output is still limited. However, 40% of IBCs engage in research, which is often more international and collaborative than that of other universities (Pohl & Lane, 2018). Some TNHE institutions have also achieved competitive research excellence at the national level (Mirkasimov, Malvicini, Kattaev, & Rikhsiboev, 2021). Additionally, graduates employed by these institutions significantly enhance research capacities (Grimmer et al., 2005). While TNHE research contributes to addressing public issues, operating in dual environments poses challenges and limits its potential (Zhan & Marginson, 2023).

5. Discussion

This systematic literature review investigated the outcomes and impacts of TNHE on host countries. Thirty-five relevant publications were analysed to map the research performance landscape, identify commonly applied methodologies and theories, and categorize key outcome and impact areas.

To begin with, the findings indicate steady growth in research on TNHE outcomes and impacts, reflecting the global expansion of TNHE institutions (Escriva-Beltran, Muñoz-de-Prat, & Villó, 2019). However, this field remains dominated by Western and TNHE home-country scholars (Knight & Liu, 2019). Educational organizations, such as the British Council, also play a significant role in TNHE studies. These factors contribute to the focus on TNHE programs imported from countries like the UK,

US, and Australia to host destinations such as China, Malaysia, and the UAE. Nevertheless, some studies have explored lesser-researched TNHE home and host countries across regions like Continental Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Secondly, the findings reveal that the perspectives of graduates, students, and administrators have received significantly more scholarly attention than other stakeholder groups. Although recent studies suggest increased research on graduates' views (Schueller, 2023), their perspectives are often examined alongside those of students. Notably, there is a lack of studies focusing exclusively on graduates' life and career trajectories. Furthermore, the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as governments, employers, and the public who could provide alternative insights into the broader impacts of TNHE remain underexplored.

Moreover, the review highlights the predominance of qualitative methodologies, likely due to the context-specific nature of TNHE issues. Thematic analysis reveals that TNHE impacts host countries across five key areas: academic, human resource, economic, social, and research. While TNHE generally contributes positively to academic and human resource development, not all countries have realized these benefits due to ineffective government policies (Ding, 2019; Leung & Waters, 2013). Additionally, the social and research impacts of TNHE are increasing and are expected to gain greater attention as the sector matures.

6. Implications

The review highlights key implications for policymakers, institutions, and researchers. First, TNHE can help developing countries enhance access, capacity, and quality in higher education while fostering human capital development in critical economic sectors. Additionally, TNHE contributes to local economies through university-related activities and can attract international students or address societal issues through research.

To achieve these benefits, host governments must integrate TNHE into local higher education systems and economies, support students, and fund research initiatives. Meanwhile, countries with established TNHE systems should focus on the future sustainability of these institutions. For instance, allocating research grants to local scholars to study TNHE contributions and graduates' career trajectories can inform strategic decisions.

This review highlights successful and challenging cases of TNHE institutions worldwide, offering insights for improvement. To remain competitive, TNHE institutions should prioritize education quality, address market demands, integrate into local societies, embrace research missions, and track graduates' career trajectories.

The review identifies several opportunities for researchers. Scholars from host countries, particularly in lesser-studied TNHE regions such as Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America, should take the lead in future studies. In addition to quantitative research, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term outcomes of TNHE. Furthermore, greater attention should be given to the perspectives of graduates, public officials, employers, and the public.

7. Conclusion

Research on TNHE outcomes and impacts is increasingly gaining attention. Governments, organizations, and scholars recognize its importance for understanding the future sustainability of TNHE. This study contributes to the field by reviewing publications from the last two decades and identifying key researchers, study contexts, participants, methodologies, theories, and concepts. Additionally, it highlights five themes of TNHE outcomes and impacts on host countries: academic, human resource, economic, social, and research.

This research has certain limitations. First, the results are based on studies retrieved from a specific database and search query, along with relevant publications cited within those studies. Using alternative databases or search terms might produce slightly different results. Additionally, advanced bibliometric analyses, such as thematic mapping and keyword evolution, were not conducted due to the limited number of publications in this field.

To conclude, TNHE has expanded rapidly in recent decades, becoming a significant component of the economy and higher education in some countries. As the sector matures, its outcomes and impacts

on host countries, and sustainability have become subjects of debate. While some remain optimistic about TNHE's future (Wilkins, 2021), unpredictable and politicized global events create volatility. For instance, the announced closure of two decades old Texas A&M University's Qatar campus, potentially influenced by the Israel-Hamas conflict, shocked stakeholders (Knox, 2024). Similarly, Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has polarized the world and may significantly affect TNHE. Finally, the implications of UK visa restrictions for international students (The Economic Times, 2024) and China's demographic challenges (Jing, 2024) remain to be seen.

8. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 planned and wrote the article. Author 2 supervised, reviewed, and edited the article.

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