

Transnational Education: Lifelong Learning Beyond Traditional Borders

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Abstract: Transnational education (TNE) has become a transformative force in higher education, accounting for a significant share of global student mobility and provision. While TNE offers immense opportunities for expanding access and fostering collaboration, it faces critical challenges. These include inconsistent terminology, fragmented quality assurance (QA) frameworks, and limited data collection and monitoring practices. This paper examines the complexities surrounding the recognition of TNE qualifications, drawing on insights from international legal instruments such as the Lisbon and Global Recognition Conventions and findings from recent monitoring reports. It advocates for harmonised QA systems, clearer definitions, and strengthened international collaboration to address these challenges and enhance the integrity and accessibility of TNE. By doing so, TNE can better contribute to global educational equity and mobility while ensuring trust in qualifications awarded across borders.

Keywords: Cross-Border Education, Recognition, Transnational Education, Quality assurance

1. Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has emerged as a pivotal aspect of the internationalisation of higher education, reflecting its profound transformation over recent decades. As a significant driver of internationalisation, TNE represents 10% to 40% of total higher education provision in several countries, while accounting for 30% to 50% of international students in the main sending nations, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States (Knight & McNamara, 2017). This rapid expansion, propelled by increased global mobility and unmet demand for higher education in developing nations, has reshaped the landscape of academic provision, enabling institutions to deliver qualifications across borders without requiring students to travel abroad.

Despite its promise of widening access and enhancing global academic cooperation, TNE faces numerous challenges. Chief among these are undefined and inconsistent terminology, regulatory disparities in quality assurance, and significant difficulties in data collection and monitoring. These issues create a fragmented environment, undermining trust in TNE qualifications and hindering their recognition across jurisdictions. Such barriers not only limit the potential benefits of TNE but also threaten its sustainability in addressing global education inequities.

This paper seeks to address these challenges by analysing the obstacles to the recognition of qualifications awarded through TNE and proposing harmonised approaches to improve regulatory frameworks. Drawing upon insights from key international legal instruments, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and the Global Recognition Convention (GRC), alongside findings from the 2022 Monitoring Report on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, it will evaluate existing policies and identify best practices and open questions to be further addressed.

2. Terminology

2.1 The Need for Clear Definitions and Classifications in Transnational Education

The evolving landscape of transnational education (TNE) has introduced complexities that the original frameworks for qualification recognition, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), were not initially designed to explicitly address in all its forms. Adopted in 1997 by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, the LRC sought to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across national borders in the European region and beyond.

When the LRC was drafted, the primary focus was on the recognition of traditional qualifications awarded by institutions operating within their national jurisdictions. Articles IV.9 and VI.5 of the Convention allow signatories to set additional criteria for the recognition of qualifications issued by foreign providers operating within their borders, leaving discretion to national authorities to define what these "specific requirements" for their recognition should be (Council of Europe&UNESCO, 1997). The LRC does not define transnational education or classify the modes through which it occurs. The Explanatory Report accompanying the LRC acknowledges that differences in the quality and status of TNE institutions, as well as varying degrees of institutional oversight, contribute to the complexity of recognition procedures (Council of Europe&UNESCO, 1997).

The 2022 LRC Monitoring Report underscores the different interpretation caused by this lack of standardized terminology. Responses from member states reveal discrepancies in the understanding of TNE, with some identifying it solely with joint degree programmes while others encompass branch campuses, franchise arrangements, and virtual learning platforms. These diversities reflect not only different national experiences with TNE but also the absence of a common conceptual framework. As noted by Knight (2016), over 40 distinct terms are used globally to describe international programmes and provider mobility, with inconsistent application even within individual countries. The resulting *terminology chaos* complicates efforts to ensure quality assurance, qualification recognition, and data comparability across borders. As the Monitoring Report suggests, the harmonization of terminology is essential to enhance transparency, facilitate cross-border recognition, and ensure equitable access to quality education. By developing shared understandings of terms such as branch campuses, franchise programmes, and joint universities, policymakers can create a more coherent regulatory environment that reflects the diverse realities of transnational education provision (Knight, 2016).

2.2 Definitions

The development of international education has evolved over generations. Initially, during the Cold War, the focus was on the movement of students and scholars across borders. Over time, educational programmes and institutions also began to expand internationally. By the 1990s, governments and institutions started establishing transnational joint degree programmes and branch campuses. This eventually led to the creation of education hubs—government-driven initiatives aimed at concentrating educational institutions in specific locations to enhance their influence in global education markets (Knight, 2011, 2012). Addressing critical issues such as licensing, quality assurance, access, funding, and recognition of qualifications is essential, yet difficult without clear definitions of terms like cross-border, transnational, offshore, and borderless education. The absence of consistent terminology hampers policy development, regulatory frameworks, and comparative analysis across regions.

As McNamara and Knight (2015) highlight, the diversity of terms used to describe similar or overlapping concepts has resulted in a *terminology chaos* that impedes effective policy development and data collection. There are over 40 terms used to describe international programme and provider

mobility. Often, the same terms are applied to different modes of TNE, while different terms describe identical activities.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, four key terms shaped the discourse on programme and provider mobility: *borderless*, *offshore*, *transnational*, and *cross-border* education. While all these terms revolve around geographical borders, each highlights a different aspect—*borderless* emphasizes the erosion of boundaries, *transnational* and *offshore* focus on the separation between the learner and awarding institution locations, and *cross-border* underscores the crossing of jurisdictional borders. Despite their distinct meanings, these terms were frequently used interchangeably (Knight, 2005, Muratov, B., & Ghasemy, M., 2025.) and have evolved over time.

The term *borderless education* was introduced in an Australian report by Cunningham et al. (2000) and later adopted in the UK to describe the erosion of traditional academic boundaries—conceptual, disciplinary, and geographic—within higher education (CVCP, 2000). Championed by the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) since 2003, the term initially captured the expanding reach of distance and online education, emphasizing the diminishing relevance of physical borders. However, while the term is useful for illustrating the fluidity of modern education, it remains largely conceptual and abstract, limiting its practical application in policy and regulation (Knight, 2006). *Borderless education* acknowledges the disappearance of barriers, unlike *cross-border* education, which underscores the persistence of jurisdictional boundaries and the regulatory responsibilities tied to quality assurance, accreditation, and intellectual property. Despite its broad scope, the term's lack of operational clarity has hindered its adoption in formal frameworks. As higher education evolves, the need for concrete definitions around jurisdiction and institutional accountability has grown, underscoring the limitations of the label *borderless education* in addressing practical governance and oversight issues.

Another term often found is *offshore education*. It is primarily used by anglophone countries like Australia, the US, and the UK to describe education provided by domestic institutions to students overseas, contrasting with *onshore education*, where international students attend programmes within the provider's home country. In Australia, offshore education refers to institutions operating outside national borders, often regulated by frameworks such as the Code of Ethical Practice in the Offshore Provision of Education (Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee). Interestingly, Australia was an early adopter also of the term *transnational education* in the 1990s to distinguish between international students studying onshore and those pursuing Australian degrees offshore through twinning, franchise, distance learning, or branch campuses. Over time, *international education* in Australia came to signify onshore provision, while *transnational education* denoted offshore enrollment. In the UK, *offshore education*, also called *transnational education*, is tracked by HESA which collects data on students studying entirely outside the UK but enrolled with UK providers or being awarded a UK qualification. Despite being used by major education exporters, usually alongside the term *transnational education*, the expression *offshore education* remains less relevant to many territories, especially to landlocked countries and those with limited overseas educational operations. While useful for distinguishing modes of delivery, the term's geographic specificity and limited applicability have led to its diminishing relevance in broader *transnational education* discourse.

Since the mid-2000s, *transnational education* and *cross-border education* have become the dominant terms in literature, legislative frameworks, and international conventions, including regional and global initiatives by UNESCO, the Council of Europe and OECD for describing educational provisions that span national jurisdictions. However, national and regional studies reveal varying preferences for terminology across countries. Australia, Europe and Latin America predominantly use *transnational education*, though interpretations differ. In contrast, North America and the United Kingdom favor the term *cross-border education* while also using *transnational education* as an alternative term. In Africa, the two terms are often used interchangeably without clear distinctions, as exemplified by South Africa's code of practice. The defining feature of both terms lies in the geographical or jurisdictional divide between the location of the learner and the awarding institution (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018), yet each term holds distinct value—*cross-border education* highlights the significance of borders and their role in shaping national education policies and regulations, while *transnational education* has gained widespread recognition through practical use rather than conceptual rigor (Knight, 2016).

The term *transnational education* first emerged in the 1990s and was formally defined by the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) in 1997, one of the first organisations to address the issue of quality assurance of education being delivered abroad, as “any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be crossed by information about education, and by staff and/or education materials. (GATE, 1997). This definition emphasised the location of the student, but also introduced a new element which is the location of the institution providing the education. The notion of crossing borders is also made explicit.

In 2001 Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education by UNESCO and the Council of Europe and its revision in 2007, the definition of TNE was expanded as “all types of higher education study programmes, sets of study courses, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the education system of a State different from the State in which it operates or may operate independently of any national education system.” (UNESCO&Council of Europe, 2001, revised 2007). This reinforced the focus on the distinction between the location of the learner and the awarding institution, thus pointing out the notion of who awards the qualification as preeminent. Moreover, this definition emphasised the comprehensive nature of TNE, encompassing all delivery modes, and introduced the concept of *stateless* programmes that operate outside any national education system and by inference institutions.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) echoed this definition in 2013, aligning closely with UNESCO and the Council of Europe use of terminology (APEC, 2013). On the contrary, by 2013, the British Council adopted a narrower view, defining TNE as situations where “students study towards a foreign qualification without leaving their home country” (British Council, 2013). The British Council acknowledged that its conceptualization of transnational education was inspired by definitions provided by leading multilateral agencies such as Council of Europe, UNESCO, OECD and The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). It is worth noting that the definition of the British Council focused exclusively on the mode of delivery aspect of such concept rather than the broader institutional and systemic aspects (E. Jean Francois et al., 2016)

In the 2023, the EAR Manual includes the following definition “Transnational education (also known as “cross-border education”) refers to all types and modes of delivery of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country other than the one where the awarding institution is based.”. Again, the focus is on the different location of learners and awarding institutions but the manual pointed out how the identification of the “home country” may sometimes be hard and involve serious challenges in the recognition of relevant qualifications. (Nuffic, 2023)

Despite slight differences in scope, all current definitions of TNE, seem to be grounded in the principle of transnationality, that is involving a higher education institution in country A providing – across a national border – a qualification to students in country B (Bordogna & Healey 2014), primarily addressing scenarios where educational programmes cross borders virtually or through partnerships. This definition, however, presents strong limitations as it overlooks various transnational education modes where foreign institutions independently establish a physical presence in the host country and obtain permission to offer qualifications or contribute to awarding local qualifications.

Examples include independent institutions offering foreign curricula and awarding foreign qualifications, thereby acting as both foreign awarding and teaching institutions without being located in a different country from their students. A notable case is John Cabot University in Rome. Alternatively, institutions like Peking University’s School of Transnational Law (STL) in China collaborate with international faculty to deliver a blended Chinese-American curriculum, yet degrees are awarded by Peking University under local accreditation. Similarly, some Country-Branded Universities, such as the German-Jordanian University operate independently within host countries, awarding degrees through local national education systems while following German curricula. Although these models embody international elements, they fall outside the conventional TNE definition, challenging its comprehensiveness. Over time, such arrangements may evolve into multinational models, with local partners – either governments, private individuals or organisations - having the ownership and assuming greater academic responsibilities. These new modes end up blurring

the lines between transnational and domestic education (Bordogna & Healey 2014; Wilkins and Huisman, 2024).

Additionally, another mode included in certain frameworks, such as the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, but not fully aligned with the current definition of TNE, is represented by international universities. Examples include the European Public Law Organization in Italy, the University of the United Nations in Japan, and the World Maritime University in Sweden. These higher education institutions operate outside any national education system and are typically established by supranational or international bodies through bilateral or multilateral treaties, of which the host country is often a member or signatory.

The programmes delivered by these institutions generally lead to the awarding of single, non-country-specific qualifications. Recognition of these qualifications in the host country is typically regulated by national legislation or international agreements. Although these institutions and their programmes differ from the national education system, aligning with the notion of 'foreignness' in awards and curricula central to cross-border or transnational education, their inclusion under the TNE umbrella remains a topic of debate. The inability of these institutions to fall under the jurisdiction of a specific national education system challenges the traditional concept of crossing borders, as there is no clearly identifiable *home country*. Nevertheless, there remains no distinction between the location of the learner and the awarding institution, despite the fact that the qualification and curriculum do not reflect the local system.

In all such cases, the provider, while foreign, operates within the same jurisdiction as the students, diverging from the conventional TNE model which assumes that the awarding institution and the students are situated in different locations. The inability of existing definitions to encompass these modes and institutions may stem from a narrow conceptualisation of the movement, which traditionally focuses on students and/or providers but overlooks the transfer of knowledge alone to a country where both the awarding institution and the learner are located. This suggests that a broader approach may be advisable to conceptualise transnational education, allowing for the inclusion of emerging modes and elements of education that cross borders.

A recent definition by Wilkins and Huisman (2024) reflects this shift in TNE provision: "Transnational education is a form of education that borrows or transfers elements of one country's higher education system, as well as that country's culture and values, to another country." The practical applicability of this definition remains to be tested.

Finally, by further comparing the definitions of transnational and cross-border education and their relevant scopes and modes, transnational education might be positioned as a subset of cross-border education.

The term *cross-border education* emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a response to the introduction of GATS regulations governing the international exchange of services, including education. Under GATS, cross-border education was initially framed through the lens of service supply, focusing on education crossing national borders without requiring the physical movement of students. (Knight, 2008).

During the 2000s, cross-border education evolved into a broader concept, encompassing the movement of students, programmes, and providers across jurisdictional or geographic borders (Knight, 2003). UNESCO's 2004 position paper, "Higher Education in a More Globalised World", highlighted cross-border education as a crucial aspect of internationalization, emphasizing its relevance to quality assurance, research, and language of instruction (UNESCO, 2004). Around the same time, OECD's Centre for Education, Research and Innovation (CERI) convened regional meetings and published reports addressing consumer protection and quality assurance in cross-border education. Finally, the 2005 UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education further expanded the definition, describing "cross-border higher education includes higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. Cross-border higher education may include higher education by public/private and not-for-profit/for-profit providers. It encompasses a wide range of modalities, in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms such as students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to distance learning (using a range of technologies and including e-learning)." (OECD & UNESCO, 2005). In 2007's OECD/The World Bank publication "Cross-border Tertiary Education", it is defined as referring to "movement of people, programmes, providers, curricula, projects, research

and services in tertiary (or higher) education across national jurisdictional borders. Cross-border education is a subset of educational internationalisation and can be part of development cooperation projects, academic exchange programmes and commercial initiatives.” (OECD & The World Bank, 2007).

These definitions underscores the distinction between cross-border and transnational education, with the former emphasizing national boundaries and jurisdictional crossing, while the latter focuses on the location of the learner relative to the awarding institution. Although their outcomes may align, the conceptual framing differs. Moreover, upon closer examination, cross-border education encompasses a wider array of academic mobility, including the movement of scholars, faculty, and intellectual resources alongside students and programmes. This refined perspective aligns with the broader definition offered by the Global Recognition Convention (UNESCO, 2019) and reflects the increasing importance of jurisdictional boundaries in higher education regulation.

The Global Recognition Convention, adopted at UNESCO's 40th General Conference in 2019, marks the first UN treaty addressing higher education on a global scale. The Convention aims to facilitate access and mobility in higher education by establishing principles for recognizing qualifications across borders. This milestone builds on the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the other regional conventions, responding to the rapid growth in student mobility reaching 6 million in 2023 (UNESCO, 2023). Recognizing the complex landscape of cross-border qualifications, the Convention defines cross-border education as “all modes of educational delivery which involve the movement of people, knowledge, programmes, providers and curriculum across States Parties’ borders, including, but not limited to, quality-assured international joint degree programmes, cross-border higher education, transnational education, offshore education and borderless education.”

Within this framework, transnational education (TNE) is identified as one mode of cross-border education, coexisting with international joint degrees, offshore education, and borderless education. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon and its definition are far broader than those included in the Lisbon Recognition Convention at the end of the 90s. In the Global recognition convention, cross-border education underlines three key elements:

- Movement of Educational Elements – It involves the dynamic flow of people, knowledge, programmes, providers, and curricula across national boundaries. This definition highlights various forms of mobility, including the relocation of entire institutions (physically or virtually) and the cross-border delivery of educational programmes.
- Modes of Delivery – The definition also addresses how education is delivered, distinguishing between transnational and borderless education. Delivery methods include face-to-face instruction, online platforms, and hybrid formats, often involving self-study or collaboration with local academic partners.
- Relationships between teaching and awarding institutions - the definition reflects the evolving relationships between teaching and awarding institutions, influencing the overlap and distinction between transnational and offshore education.

In conclusion, if the origin of the definitions of borderless, offshore and transnational education initially focused on the movement of students across borders, the evolution of the latter and most common term has shifted towards the movement of providers, most notably through branch campuses and franchised partnerships. These models typically envisage a clear and direct trajectory from country A to country B, with the former being the home country of the awarding institution and the latter being the location of the student, who is no longer the focal point of mobility.

Recent developments, however, have further altered the object and trajectory of this movement, making definitions based on the different location of awarding institution and learner inadequate to capture the full scope of TNE modes. While the crossing of jurisdictional borders remains central, identifying what crosses these borders and the origin of the movement has become more complex. In earlier models, the movement of providers stemmed from a clearly identifiable home country, resulting in the establishment of fully foreign institutions and/or awards implanted within the host country. Currently, emerging hybrid TNE modes—both collaborative and independent—are flourishing. These models increasingly pivot around the movement of knowledge that supplements and enriches local curricula without replacing them. Examples include joint universities, country-branded universities, and

4+0 partnership models. This hybridisation addresses concerns regarding the relevance of foreign curricula to local communities by fostering mutual enrichment and cultural integration, increasing accessibility and mitigating brain drain. These modes allow for greater localisation and hybridisation as the process often integrates local culture and language while selectively adopting foreign knowledge, often retaining the awarding institution's ownership and nationality. It seems therefore that a new definition of TNE focusing on the movement of educational and cultural elements across borders may be advisable.

Beside transnational education, also the term cross-border education appears relevant to the current scenario. It seems, however, broader in scope than transnational education, incorporating not only the movement of programmes, providers, and knowledge but also that of scholars and students. While efforts such as the Global Recognition Convention represent significant progress, inconsistencies persist across national and regional frameworks, contributing to regulatory fragmentation and policy ambiguities. Terminological differences, particularly between transnational and cross-border education, reflect deeper conceptual divides regarding jurisdiction, institutional mobility, and the role of national education systems.

By conceptualising transnational education as a subset of cross-border education—centred on the movement of educational elements across educational systems rather than purely geographical boundaries—policymakers can try to bridge existing gaps, creating a more cohesive and inclusive framework that accommodates the diverse realities of contemporary cross-border education. Further research is necessary to classify the various modes within this evolving conceptual framework and to determine how different models can be accommodated within this new definitions.

3. Quality Assurance and Recognition in Transnational and Cross-Border Education

The quality assurance (QA) of cross-border and transnational education presents a complex and multifaceted challenge, shaped by the diverse and evolving nature of higher education provision across national boundaries. As cross-border education continues to expand in scale and scope, issues surrounding the oversight, accreditation, and recognition of academic programmes delivered beyond national borders have come to the fore. These challenges not only affect the integrity of higher education systems but also influence the recognition of qualifications obtained through cross-border provision.

One of the primary issues in QA for cross-border education stems from the increasingly collaborative nature of cross-border provision models. While traditional models such as branch campuses or franchise programmes often imply a clear division of responsibilities between sending and host institutions, the reality is more nuanced. Branch campuses, for instance, may deliver entire programmes within the host country, and franchise programmes often involve significant delegation of delivery to local partners, even as the sending institution retains control over design and qualification awarding (Verbik & Jokivirta, 2005). This blurring of lines between host and sending institutions creates ambiguities in academic oversight, complicating efforts to ensure consistent quality standards across jurisdictions.

Moreover, the rise of partnership-based models, including joint, double, and multiple degree programmes, has further exacerbated QA challenges. While these arrangements can enhance academic collaboration and foster greater international engagement, they also introduce questions regarding the locus of responsibility for quality assurance. In such contexts, both host and sending institutions may be involved in programme design and delivery, necessitating dual or overlapping QA processes. However, this often results in bureaucratic duplication, with QA agencies in both countries conducting parallel reviews that may not always align in their assessments (Knight, 2007) or no oversight at all, when the accountability for cross-border provision seems to lay nowhere and QA of awarding institution do not covers provisions outside the national borders.

As a matter of fact, the variability in national QA frameworks addressing cross-border provisions represents a significant hurdle. While some countries have established comprehensive regulatory mechanisms to oversee cross-border provision, others lack the capacity or political will to regulate incoming providers. In many cases, foreign institutions operating in host countries are not subject to national QA processes unless explicitly registered or licensed.

The regulations concerning licensing or registration are usually very different from the accreditation procedures established for national institutions and very often do not include quality

assurance. This regulatory gap allows for the proliferation of unaccredited or substandard providers, undermining the credibility of transnational education as a whole. The absence of consistent registration requirements across jurisdictions poses a substantial risk to the recognition of qualifications, as degrees awarded by unaccredited institutions may not be recognized presenting substantial differences from the qualification awarded nationally.

Compounding these challenges is the emergence of fraudulent accreditors - *accreditation mills* - that provide illegitimate quality labels to cross-border providers, most notably *diploma mills*. Distinguishing between bona fide and rogue institutions and accreditors is a growing concern, particularly when neither the provider nor the accreditor is based in the host or sending country. This lack of oversight can erode trust in transnational qualifications and limit graduates' opportunities for further study or employment (Altbach & Knight, 2007; CIMEA 2018; Council of Europe 2022).

Finally, even when the QA authorities in the sending country verify the quality of national educational providers operating abroad, the application of the same standards to both domestic and transnational provision is questionable. On one hand, transnational education involves specific characteristics that must be addressed and may not align with the criteria applied to domestic providers operating in the national context. On the other hand, domestic standards may not be suitable for a variety of different host contexts.

To address these issues, several countries and regional organisations have begun developing frameworks and protocols to enhance the QA of transnational education. Australia, for example, has introduced the Transnational Education Quality Framework, which emphasizes equivalence in programme delivery and outcomes between domestic and overseas offerings. Similarly, the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Education Insight working with the British Council has recently developed a Global framework for TNE engagement including the signature of recognition conventions among the criteria (British Council, 2024). The United States, on the other hand, operates a decentralized accreditation system led by private, non-profit accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). This system allows American institutions to leverage their accreditation abroad (Long, 2023) but it is worth noticing that the membership to CHEA is a voluntary process and the oversight by the Department of Education is limited to the purpose of allocating funds.

Nonetheless, significant disparities remain in how different jurisdictions approach QA for transnational education. Some countries prioritize bilateral agreements and mutual recognition arrangements, while others focus on unilateral regulatory measures. This diversity underscores the need for greater international cooperation and the development of harmonized QA frameworks that can provide a consistent baseline for assessing cross-border provision.

In conclusion, the QA of transnational education is an evolving field marked by significant complexities and ongoing debates. Ensuring the quality of cross-border academic programmes and the subsequent recognition of degrees requires robust and coordinated efforts from national QA agencies, higher education institutions, and international organisations. As transnational education continues to grow, addressing these QA challenges will be critical to safeguarding the value and credibility of qualifications awarded through cross-border provision.

3.1 Quality assurance and recognition procedures within the framework of the Lisbon and Global recognition conventions

The quality assurance (QA) and recognition of qualifications awarded through cross-border education have evolved significantly over the past decades, driven by the increasing complexity of cross-border education. This evolution is anchored in the legislative frameworks established by the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and the Global Recognition Convention (GRC), as well as a series of recommendations and guidelines aimed at harmonizing recognition practises across jurisdictions. These legal instruments reflect ongoing efforts to align quality assurance with the growing internationalization of higher education but some risks and grey areas seem still to be addressed.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), adopted in 1997 by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, laid the foundation for the recognition of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area. Aimed at facilitating academic mobility, the LRC has been ratified by 57 countries, including non-European states such as Canada, Australia, United States and New Zealand (Council of

Europe&UNESCO, 1997). Though the LRC predates the proliferation of cross-border education modes, it includes provisions that indirectly address cross-border education with a special focus on quality aspects. Article IV.9 and Article VI.5 permit signatory countries to impose specific requirements on the recognition of qualifications issued by foreign institutions operating within their territories. This flexibility allows nations to safeguard educational standards while recognizing qualifications awarded through transnational and cross-border provisions. However, the LRC does not provide explicit definitions or comprehensive frameworks for transnational education, leaving member states to develop their own criteria and policies. The Explanatory Report accompanying the LRC highlights potential risks associated with TNE, such as the diversity in institutional quality and the absence of uniform QA mechanisms. It underscores the importance of ensuring that qualifications awarded by cross-border providers meet national standards and calls for cautious application of exclusionary measures to uphold the Convention's principles.

Two years later, The Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999) was adopted. This Recommendation expanded the scope of the LRC by addressing for the first time qualifications obtained through international programmes that may not fall within national education systems. It introduced the concept of International Access Qualifications emphasizing their legitimacy and comparability to national qualifications, provided they adhere to rigorous QA processes. This Recommendation touched upon institutions operating outside any national education systems, but did not address qualifications at the tertiary level which developed afterwards and seem now to be facing recognition issues related to quality assurance.

The 2001 Code of Good Practice, revised in 2007, directly addressed the accountability of institutions providing transnational education. It advocated for:

- **Comparable Standards:** Ensuring that TNE programmes met the same quality benchmarks as domestic programmes.
- **Transparency:** Promoting clear, accessible information regarding programme quality and accreditation status. Quality assurance procedures must be based on specific, transparent, and systematic criteria that are open to scrutiny.
- **Dual Accountability:** Holding both the awarding and teaching institutions responsible for maintaining academic quality (Council of Europe/UNESCO, 2001, 2007).

This Code represents a significant step in fostering mutual trust and establishing clear QA expectations for transnational education.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention itself and its subsidiary texts, in a legal sense, only covers qualifications belonging to the education systems of Parties. However, since the Convention's adoption, the importance of study paths involving multiple institutions and countries, resulting in qualifications that do not belong to any specific national or subnational education system, has grown substantially.

The Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees was adopted in 2004 and then revised in 2016 by the Committee of the LRC. This document specifically targeted the recognition of joint degrees, a mode of collaborative transnational education involving multiple institutions across different countries and implying a high level of integration in both the programme design and the issuance of a single qualification. Although the Recommendation explored programme specifics, it notably drew a crucial distinction between the delivery mode and its resultant qualifications. Specifically, it acknowledged that a joint degree, jointly issued by multiple institutions in a single document, represented one potential outcome of a joint programme. However, it also recognized that such joint programmes may lead to alternative outcomes, such as double or multiple degrees. It's important to note that while these alternative outcomes exist, they fall outside the scope of the Recommendation.

In the General Principles of the Annex to the Recommendation, it was clearly stated that joint degrees should be recognized in the same manner as any other qualification from the originating education system. However, joint degrees often face more challenges in obtaining recognition compared to national qualifications, which contradicts the goal of promoting mobility and international cooperation. While partner institutions automatically recognize all parts of the study programmes leading to a joint degree, such recognition is not necessarily granted outside the consortium. The Recommendation highlighted the critical nature of quality assurance in the recognition of joint degrees, specifying two main approaches for its implementation.

- **Single Cross-Border Quality Assurance Process:** Competent recognition authorities should recognize joint degrees that have undergone a single cross-border quality assurance process conducted by a quality assurance agency, provided the outcomes are officially recognized in the countries of the participating institutions.
- **National Quality Assurance Mechanisms:** In the absence of a single cross-border process, recognition authorities may require that all parts of the study programme and the institutions involved be subject to transparent quality assurance mechanisms in accordance with the rules and legislation of their respective countries, as well as European guiding principles.

According to the Explanatory Memorandum, the main advantage of the single cross-border quality assurance process is its ability to streamline evaluations by eliminating the administrative burdens of separate assessments in each country. However, where a single cross-border quality assurance process is not possible mainly due to the lack of legal provisions allowing cross-border quality assurance of national programmes, recognition authorities may require all components of the joint degree programme and the institutions involved to undergo transparent quality assurance mechanisms. In both cases, however, the Explanatory memorandum underscored that if any part of a joint degree programme lacks quality assurance mechanisms this may justify non-recognition or partial recognition of the joint degree.

Despite the above mentioned recommendations (UNESCO, 2004, revised 2016) strongly advocate for an improvement and harmonisation of quality assurance procedures in cross-border and transnational education, it seemed that many countries, national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation, and qualification recognition within and outside the EHEA had not yet fully adapted to the challenges of cross-border higher education. While some countries have established mechanisms to oversee transnational education, others lack comprehensive systems, leading to inconsistencies and gaps. This uneven landscape leaves certain cross-border programmes outside formal quality assurance structures, exposing students and stakeholders to low-quality providers.

To address this issue, the UNESCO and OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education were published in 2005 to try reinforce the importance of quality assurance in transnational and cross-border education, aiming to protect students and stakeholders from low-quality education and disreputable providers while fostering high-quality cross-border higher education. A key element of the Guidelines is their focus on strengthening national capacities to assure quality in higher education. This is to be achieved by reinforcing UNESCO's regional conventions and enhancing capacity-building efforts supported by multilateral organisations and national partners. The Guidelines also highlight the importance of non-governmental organisations, including student bodies, academic associations, quality assurance networks, and credential evaluation bodies, in fostering cooperation and improving quality standards (UNESCO & OECD, 2005). A monitoring report published 7 years later, however, found that compliance with the Guidelines varied, with OECD countries reporting a 72% implementation rate, while non-OECD nations averaged 58% , the main weaknesses in compliance being identified in the access to information and the level of learners protection. (UNESCO & OECD, 2012).

As an instrument to foster recognition across regions, the Global Recognition Convention (GRC) was adopted in 2019 and entered into force in 2023. Expanding on the LRC, the GRC applied a broader framework that addressed cross-border education directly. In the Global Recognition Convention, cross-border education is addressed at article V with regards to recognition of higher-education qualifications (article V, points 3 and 6), article VI with regards to partial studies and prior learning (article VI.3) and at article XI with regards to the assessment of qualifications for admission to higher education institutions (article XI.6).

Similarly to the LRC, also the GRC highlights at article V and VI the possibility for “each State Party to make the recognition of higher-education qualifications acquired through cross-border education or through foreign educational institutions operating in its jurisdiction contingent upon specific requirements of the legislation or regulations of the State Party, or of the constituent unit thereof, or upon specific agreements concluded with the State Party of origin of such institutions.” Moreover, at article XI it echoes article IV.9 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in its reference to specific requirements that may be applied by each state party in order to recognise qualification awarded

through cross-border education for access to higher education. Both articles allow recognition to be contingent upon "specific requirements of national legislation" (Lisbon) or "the legislation and regulations of the State Party or the constituent unit thereof" (Global). The Global Convention explicitly includes "regulations" and acknowledges the possibility of requirements set by constituent units (sub-national entities like states or provinces), adding a layer of detail to the regulatory basis for recognition. Additionally, the Lisbon Recognition Convention specifies "operating in its territory," which implies a geographical focus. In contrast, the Global Recognition Convention uses the term "operating in its jurisdiction," which encompasses both geographical and legal dimensions. This broader context includes various administrative divisions within a state, providing a more comprehensive framework for recognizing qualifications.

Both Conventions, along with relevant subsidiary and explanatory texts as well as guidelines, strongly advocate for quality assurance (QA) to serve as a cornerstone in the recognition of qualifications awarded through cross-border education. However, many areas surrounding QA still appear to require attention.

The Global Recognition Convention (GRC) entered into force on March 5, 2023, and currently has 35 signatory countries across regions. While a monitoring report on its implementation is not yet available, the 2022 Monitoring Report on the 57 countries that are signatories to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) provided valuable insights into the ongoing questions regarding transnational and cross-border education. It underscored the need for a harmonized and systematic approach to QA in transnational education (TNE) to ensure consistent recognition of cross-border qualifications and reduce disparities across jurisdictions.

A close analysis of the responses to questions on transnational education in the monitoring report reveals that most countries impose additional requirements aligned with relevant articles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, even if these requirements are not directly related to the qualification itself. Notably, a significant number of respondents indicated that, while the general assessment process remains consistent, the recognition of TNE qualifications involves heightened scrutiny of the quality of both the programmes, and the institutions delivering them.

As a result, the primary focus of additional requirements for recognizing TNE qualifications is often centered on the status of the institutions involved. Although there is broad consensus among countries that qualifications awarded through TNE should hold official recognition in the country of origin, ambiguity persists concerning the specific national provisions governing the institutions and programmes. This lack of clarity highlights the need for further alignment and consistency in the recognition process for TNE qualifications.

Member states exhibit varying approaches to the requirements to be fulfilled in this regard. Some countries require only official recognition of the qualification and institutions in the country of origin, essentially delegating quality assurance to the foreign nation's regulations. Others base recognition on:

- Specific agreements between the member party and the country of origin of the foreign educational institutions.
- National legislation regulating the recognition of qualification awarder through TNE provision alongside agreements with the country of origin.
- National legislation regarding the ability for an educational institution to operate, the right to award specific academic credentials, alongside agreements with the country of origin.
- Official recognition of the qualification by the competent authority of the country where the transnational education is provided.
- Official recognition of the foreign institution by the competent authority of the country where the transnational education is provided.

While many countries have established more or less comprehensive legal frameworks for TNE, the level of detail and coverage varies considerably. Confusion often exists regarding the distinction between the right of a foreign institution to operate within the member State sanctioned by a registration or licensure process and the right of that foreign institution to award degrees within the member State and to have those degrees recognized.

The legal frameworks governing transnational education within the member states therefore reveal a complex picture. While many countries have established legal structures to address TNE, these

frameworks vary considerably in their comprehensiveness, level of detail, and scope. This disparity leads to confusion regarding the rights and responsibilities of foreign institutions operating within member states. A key source of ambiguity lies in the distinction between:

- The right of a foreign institution to function within a member State, typically authorized through a registration or licensure process.
- The right of that same institution to award degrees within the member State's territory.
- The recognition of the awarded degrees by the member State's authorities.

On the basis of this fragmented scenario, the Monitoring report included a set of specific recommendations with regards to QA and recognition procedures of transnational and cross-border education that pointed to a clear identification of accountability, a shared responsibility between host and home countries, institutions, and national authorities. A crucial recommendation is updating the 2007 Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education to address emerging challenges. Quality assurance must remain central to evaluating TNE qualifications, considering both the awarding body and the institution conducting the studies. Transparency and clear communication about the quality assurance processes and distinctive elements of TNE qualifications are vital during all stages of education delivery. To combat fraudulent practices such as diploma mills, national authorities are urged to implement measures to safeguard the integrity of the TNE sector. National information centres should ensure transparent reporting on TNE institutions and their evaluation practices. Furthermore, assessment procedures must consider the status of both the awarding institution and the institution administering the studies. Higher education institutions are encouraged to disclose detailed information about the roles and statuses of the institutions involved in the TNE process, aligning with the Diploma Supplement framework to ensure clarity and trustworthiness in qualifications

The data of the Monitoring Report on the recognition procedures for qualification awarded through transnational education provisions underscores the urgent need for harmonized approaches to quality assurance. While most member States acknowledge the importance of quality beyond simply recognizing foreign qualifications and institutions, the current landscape is characterized by significant variation in national regulations. This inconsistency contributes to a challenging and, at times, unclear environment for both institutions seeking to offer TNE programmes and students pursuing qualifications across borders. Differences in what regulations cover are also reflected in the legislative frameworks addressing aspects of TNE in several countries outside the EHEA that host foreign providers on their territory. Examples include:

- India's UGC Regulations to Offer Twinning, Joint Degree and Dual Degree Programmes with Foreign Higher Education Institutions, 2022.
- Indonesia's Regulation for International Universities in Indonesia by the ministry for research, technology and higher education, 2018.
- Pakistan's Policy for Pakistani Higher Education Institutions Offering Degree Programs in Collaboration with Foreign Universities, 2020.
- Egypt's Law No. 162 of 2018 on the Establishment and Organization of International Branch Campuses, 2018.
- The Transnational Higher Education Act in the Philippines in 2019.

These countries account for over 20 per cent of the world's tertiary education population, with over 54 million learners (Tsiligkiris, V, Ilieva, J, Alexander.W and Pilsbury, .D, 2023) and none of them have signed the Global Recognition Convention yet.

In conclusion, several questions remain open and require further scrutiny and research to address the lingering uncertainties surrounding quality assurance (QA) in transnational education especially with regards to accountability of institutions and countries. Two main areas can be identified, the lack of clarity regarding the roles of host and home countries, as well as the responsibilities of awarding and teaching institutions and the confusion surrounding the rights and responsibilities of foreign institutions operating within host countries.

Concerning the first area of concern:

- Who holds primary responsibility for external quality assurance of TNE - the sending country, the host country, or should a shared responsibility model be adopted?
- In the case of collaborative TNE and partnership programmes, should quality assurance mechanisms encompass both the awarding and delivering institutions?
- Without a unified quality assurance system for both awarding and delivering institutions, how can it be ensured that the quality of a TNE programme in the host country aligns with the standards of the awarding institution's country while remaining locally relevant?
- Should the quality assurance approach recommended for the recognition of joint degrees be applied to all TNE modes?

With regards to the second area of concern:

- How can a clear distinction be established between the right to operate in a host country, the right to award degrees, and the recognition of those degrees by the host country?
- Is there a shared understanding of terms such as "licensure," "registration," and "accreditation" within the context of TNE quality assurance?
- If a shared definition of "licensure" is achieved, can it reliably serve as an indicator of quality standards for teaching institutions within TNE programmes? Furthermore, does licensure significantly influence the recognition of qualifications obtained through TNE?
- What role should national regulations in the host country play in ensuring the quality of TNE programmes delivered within its borders?

These unresolved questions underscore the need for a more harmonized and comprehensive framework for TNE quality assurance to promote equitable and consistent treatment of cross-border education qualifications.

4. Addressing the Gaps in Data and Information Provision for Transnational Education

Transnational education has rapidly expanded over the past two decades, evolving from a niche sector into a central component of higher education internationalization strategies. According to Universities UK, approximately 707,000 international students were enrolled in UK qualification programmes through international partnerships and franchised arrangements. In the 2016-17 academic year, 1.6 times more international students studied UK higher education programmes outside the UK than within the country's borders, with Asia hosting 48.7% of these students (2019, Universities UK International -UUKi). Similarly, data collected from the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) in 2023 indicates that the United States have more than 80 international branch campus worldwide (2024 C-Bert) and over 262 active higher education institutions across 80 countries, enrolling roughly 720,000 student compared to the 760,000 international students enrolled in more than 6000 stateside higher education institutions (Long, 2023)

Despite this expansion, the capacity to monitor TNE remains inconsistent across countries, leading to significant data gaps. While some nations, such as the UK, Australia, and the US, have developed comprehensive TNE data systems, others either do not collect TNE data systematically or lack transparency regarding the nature of the data collected (Knight & McNamara, 2017) The absence of consistent methodologies and the divergence in definitions of TNE provisions further exacerbate the issue, impeding the development of coherent global TNE policies.

4.1 The Importance of Monitoring and Data Collection

Comprehensive data collection and monitoring are essential for ensuring the quality, recognition, and sustainability of TNE provisions. Accurate information on TNE supports policy development, informs quality assurance (QA) processes, and enhances the recognition of qualifications by ensuring that educational offerings align with national frameworks and international standards (Knight, 2017).

Moreover, robust data facilitates student mobility, prevents fraudulent practices, and fosters mutual trust between sending and host countries.

However, the absence of a shared classification system and inconsistent accountability for data collection between home and host countries significantly undermines efforts to establish comprehensive databases. A 2015 report by the British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) highlights the challenges and opportunities in monitoring cross-border education. While the demand for such educational provision continues to rise, efforts to monitor its quality and scale have not kept pace. This lack of robust data results in an unclear picture of cross-border activities, particularly in host countries. A primary obstacle is the inconsistency in data collection methods. Sending and host countries often adopt disparate approaches, complicating efforts to draw comparisons. Additionally, the wide array of cross-border delivery modes, institutions, and the numerous local terms used to describe these provisions and stakeholders further compound the complexity of data collection.

In numerous instances, host countries depend on the QA mechanisms of the sending country, which may not always correspond to local regulatory requirements. This disconnect underscores the necessity for greater collaboration and the development of international standards for TNE data collection.

It is worth noting that while the major exporters of TNE, namely United States, UK, France, Russia and Australia (C-BERT 2023) are all signatory of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with Australia and UK being also signatory of the Global Recognition Convention, the situation of receiving countries is quite different. Major importers of TNE are located in Asia and Middle East, namely China, UAE, Singapore, Malaysia and Qatar of whom only China and Qatar have ratified the respective regional conventions (China signed the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education and Qatar the Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab State as late as 2022). None have signed the Global Recognition Convention yet. It is also worth noting that in some hosting countries, the impact of transnational education is particularly notable. In regions with a long history of cross-border education, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, it represents 10-20% of higher education provision. In Dubai, the percentage rises to around 50% of higher education provision, primarily in international branch campuses. (Knight, 2017)

In this scenario, some countries have made significant progress in developing TNE data collection frameworks. The United Kingdom, for example, relies on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to collect and publish annual data on TNE provision. The data includes the number of students, types of provision, and levels of study. In 2022-23, 606,485 students across 228 countries participated in TNE delivered by 173 UK higher education institutions (HESA, 2023). Australia similarly compiles offshore student data through the Department of Education, disaggregating figures by location, type of provision, and discipline (Australian Government, 2023). The United States, through the Global American Higher Education (GAHE) initiative, maintains records of US higher education institutions operating in 80 countries, with a concentration in Asia and the Middle East (GAHE, 2023).

Even among countries with advanced TNE monitoring systems, gaps persist. The absence of standardized reporting protocols and variations in classification create an incomplete picture of TNE's scale and quality (Knight & McNamara, 2015). Countries with specific cross-border education legislation, such as Italy and Hungary, adopt more structured data collection practices. They publish detailed lists of branch campuses and bilateral agreements, but in those contexts as well some inconsistencies can be found. Denmark and New Zealand, on the other hand, defer oversight to the QA processes of the sending country (Knight, 2017). Research consistently demonstrates that the responsibility for collecting data on transnational education (TNE) primarily lies with government agencies in most host countries. These agencies generally fall into one of two categories: either they are specific departments operating within the Ministry of Education (MoE), or they function as independent regulatory bodies that maintain a reporting relationship with the MoE. This centralized approach to oversight reflects the broader reality that the collection of TNE data is closely linked to the processes of registration and accreditation. (Knight & McNamara, 2015).

Typically, the registration and accreditation of cross-border education providers occurs in two distinct stages. The initial stage involves institutions applying for registration with the appropriate government body as a prerequisite to offering TNE programmes. This process establishes a formal

record of institutions intending to operate within the host country. Once registered, institutions must proceed to the second stage, where they seek accreditation for the programmes they wish to deliver. Accreditation serves as a mechanism to ensure that cross-border educational offerings adhere to national quality standards and regulatory requirements. This layered process underscores the pivotal role of government oversight in safeguarding the integrity and quality of transnational education. The degree of oversight applied to programmes and institutions varies depending on the maturity of the host country's QA and accreditation systems. Less developed systems often focus on the status of the foreign awarding institution in the sending country. In contrast, more developed systems conduct detailed assessments of the teaching institution and the programmes themselves, ensuring alignment with host country requirements.

4.2 Findings from Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Monitoring Report on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention offers valuable insights into the collection and provision of data on transnational education (TNE). Although the report does not cover all global regions, it provides a useful snapshot of practices across 52 countries, resulting in a total of 53 responses (due to separate submissions from different communities within Belgium). The report highlights discrepancies in the availability and quality of information provided, underscoring the fragmented nature of TNE data collection and publication.

Regarding host countries, the report reveals significant variation in how foreign TNE institutions are monitored and listed. Fourteen countries, representing 26% of respondents, publish comprehensive lists of foreign TNE institutions operating within their borders. In contrast, a significantly larger proportion—26 countries, or 49%—do not make such lists publicly available. Additionally, six countries (11% of respondents) report publishing lists that cover only specific types or categories of foreign TNE institutions, indicating partial transparency rather than comprehensive oversight. In several cases, the absence of published lists is attributed to the lack of foreign higher education institutions operating within the country. In two countries, TNE institutions are incorporated into the general list of accredited institutions.

Different approaches are adopted to manage TNE institutions. In some cases, foreign TNE providers are not required to register or seek approval to operate, as they are considered to remain under the supervision and quality assurance frameworks of their home countries. Other contexts may lack legal mandates for foreign TNE institutions to register in national information systems, leaving their operations outside the scope of direct regulation within the host country.

Finally, some national contexts do not fit into standard categorization. In certain cases, branch campuses of universities are included in the general list of recognized institutions. In other contexts, higher education institutions operating abroad primarily deliver study modules without awarding degrees. Additionally, while the use of terms like university may be regulated by law, there may not be a licensing system in place for independent institutions offering TNE.

Language accessibility also plays a critical role in the availability of TNE data. The report finds that 66% of the countries publishing lists of TNE institutions ensure this information is available in both their national language and English. However, one-third restrict access to their official language, which may present barriers to stakeholders from other regions seeking comprehensive data on cross-border education.

From the perspective of sending countries, the collection and dissemination of data on domestic institutions operating abroad appear less developed. Fifteen countries, accounting for 28% of respondents, do not publish lists of their own institutions providing education across borders. Conversely, 11 countries, representing 21% of respondents, maintain and publish such lists. A smaller subset—three countries, or 6%—restrict their lists to specific types of domestic TNE institutions, reflecting limited coverage of outbound provision.

The lack of harmonization and consistency in monitoring and publishing TNE data highlights the absence of a common framework for TNE oversight. This gap affects both host and sending countries, complicating efforts to compare and assess the quality and scale of cross-border education provision. Without standardized processes, stakeholders face challenges in evaluating the integrity and reach of TNE programmes. To address these gaps, the report recommends that higher education institutions

awarding TNE qualifications provide detailed and transparent information about the awarding and delivering institutions, aligning with the Diploma Supplement format. National information centres are encouraged to enhance transparency by offering clear insights into their TNE evaluation practices and publishing lists of national institutions operating abroad. Additionally, institutions and national authorities should ensure that quality assurance measures and any distinctions between TNE qualifications and their domestic counterparts are clearly communicated.

5. Conclusion

The recognition of qualifications awarded through transnational education (TNE) remains a complex and evolving issue in the internationalisation of higher education. The findings of this paper highlight three critical challenges that must be addressed to enhance the credibility, trust, and functionality of TNE systems globally.

Firstly, the absence of clear and consistent terminology significantly undermines efforts to regulate and recognise TNE. The lack of agreed definitions creates fragmented policies and hampers the development of cohesive frameworks. Different countries interpret TNE in varied ways, often conflating it with broader cross-border education, leading to confusion and inconsistency. Establishing standardised and widely accepted terminology is essential to improve transparency and foster mutual understanding among stakeholders.

Secondly, quality assurance (QA) frameworks for TNE are inconsistent and often inadequate, leaving space for substandard providers to operate in regulatory grey areas. Many host and home countries lack harmonised oversight mechanisms that account for the unique challenges of TNE. This issue is exacerbated by the emergence of diploma and accreditation mills, which threaten the credibility of qualifications awarded through TNE. To address these challenges, a common understanding of the QA approach applied to TNE is necessary, ensuring accountability for both awarding and teaching institutions. Shared responsibility between home and host countries is critical to safeguarding the integrity of TNE provisions.

Thirdly, data collection and monitoring practices remain deficient, preventing accurate assessments of TNE's scale and quality. Disparate methodologies and limited transparency hinder the comparability of data across jurisdictions, reducing trust in TNE qualifications. Comprehensive and globally accessible datasets are needed to improve monitoring, inform policy, and enhance mutual trust.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from international, national, and institutional stakeholders. This paper recommends adopting clearer definitions that reflect the broader scope of TNE, incorporating its role as a subset of cross-border education and emphasising the movement of knowledge. Harmonised QA frameworks should be developed to provide consistent oversight and ensure high standards of education delivery. International collaboration must be strengthened to address disparities and establish transparent and comprehensive information systems.

The implications of resolving these issues extend beyond TNE itself. Enhancing recognition mechanisms will improve student mobility, foster trust in international qualifications, and safeguard student interests and the quality of education systems. For both sending and receiving countries, robust TNE frameworks contribute to the integrity and sustainability of their academic landscapes.

However, unresolved questions remain. Future research should explore the impact of hybrid TNE models, investigate evolving regulatory landscapes, and assess the role of TNE in bridging educational inequities in developing regions. Policymakers and educators must continue to adapt to the dynamic nature of TNE, ensuring it fulfils its potential as a driver of global academic collaboration and inclusion.

6. Declaration of AI-Generated Content

ChatGPT has been used to proofread the manuscript before submitting. The manuscript has been reviewed again afterwards and minor changes have been made.

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