

Equitable UK transnational education partnerships: lessons from three partnership case studies

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About this report

This insights piece sets out how UK universities can take practical steps to build equitable and sustainable partnerships as they grow their transnational education (TNE) provisions, using case studies from three UK institutions and their TNE partners.

UK TNE provision is expanding rapidly across complex and uneven global contexts. Within this growth, the quality of partnerships matters more than ever. Equitable partnerships are more likely to be sustainable, responsive and valuable for both sides – helping institutions move beyond transactional models towards stronger provision, richer learning environments, capacity-building, social impact and long-term international engagement.

Student numbers have grown steadily in recent years, including a 7% increase between 2023–24 and 2024–25. There has been particularly strong growth across Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East – regions where population growth, labour market needs and limited university places mean that demand for higher education is rising faster than national systems can expand. In these contexts, TNE can help widen access and support national priorities, including skills and workforce development.

Building on UUKi's *Developing equitable TNE partnerships (2024)*, this insight brief uses three case studies to identify practical recommendations for the sector. It explores how institutions are putting equity into practice, what is working well and what supports these approaches. We talked to three UK-TNE partnerships across Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East to hear their experiences:

- University of Greenwich's partnerships with MSA University in Egypt (validated programme model)
- Lancaster University (LU) Ghana (branch campus model)
- University of the West of Scotland's (UWS) partnership with Lincoln University of Business Management (LUBM) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (franchise model)

We interviewed staff from both UK and partner institutions, focusing on those with direct responsibility for partnership management, governance and academic oversight. Across the three case studies, institutions are already putting equity into practice, while also navigating practical constraints that shape how equity is understood. Our findings explore what is working well, what supports these approaches in practice, and where institutions are still working through challenges.

The recent International Education Strategy 2026 renewed the UK Government's focus on TNE and its commitment to supporting growth over the next five years. This makes it a timely moment to look again at how that growth can be underpinned by equitable and sustainable partnerships.

What does it mean to take an equitable approach to TNE partnerships?

UUKi's 2024 report, *Developing equitable TNE partnerships*, proposed five core principles that characterised equitable TNE partnerships:

1. co-creation of programmes and curricula
2. shared decision-making and clear roles
3. recognition of non-financial value in partnerships
4. integration of different knowledge systems
5. long-term trust and collaboration

The case studies support these principles, while also highlighting equity in student experience as an additional important theme.

Equity does not look the same in every TNE partnership, and understandings of the term differ, partly because partnerships sit within diverse global contexts and complex structural relationships. The case studies show that these differences are closely linked to how partnerships are formed, how they mature and what each partner is trying to achieve.

University of Greenwich and MSA University, Egypt

The partnership originated through personal academic collaboration in architecture rather than a formal institutional strategy. It expanded organically into science and engineering in response to disciplinary overlap and demand, developing into a validated model. MSA frames the relationship as a continuation of its long-standing 'British direction', with formal validation arrangements beginning around 2003. The partnership aims to deliver international, UK-equivalent curricula that produce global graduates while supporting wider academic collaboration.

Partnership model: validated provision.

Length of partnership: 23 years.

Programmes and wider collaboration: provision spans several faculties, including architecture, science and engineering. Programme development is shaped by UK quality standards, Egyptian national frameworks, industry requirements and local market demand. For example, MSA developed a nutrition programme after identifying a local need. Wider collaboration includes curriculum development, science provision, student mobility and postgraduate scholarships.

MSA develops and delivers programmes, while Greenwich validates them against its academic standards and provides academic oversight. The approach places particular emphasis on labour market relevance and linking theory to practice.

Lancaster University Ghana

Lancaster University Ghana is a long-established branch campus developed with Transnational Academic Group (TAG) around 2012–13. The partnership aligned with Lancaster's ambition to expand its global presence in Africa, widen access to Lancaster education, and strengthen its expertise on the region through research and engagement.

Partnership model: international branch campus, with governance reflecting a typical franchise structure.

Length of partnership: 13 years.

Programmes: English language and foundation provision, alongside undergraduate programmes in business, computing, law and politics-related subjects.

TAG provides infrastructure and operational delivery, while Lancaster retains degree-awarding authority, regulatory responsibility and oversight of academic quality. Local academic staff contextualise teaching and bring regional knowledge and professional experience into delivery.

University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and Lincoln University of Business Management (LUBM), UAE

Established in 2020, this franchise partnership was developed to provide high-quality international education to working professionals in the Middle East. The partnership reflected a strategic decision to expand beyond an existing partnership with a European business school and offer qualifications from a UK public university. The MSc Project Management programme was selected in response to regional demand, identified by LUBM, and designed to allow students to study alongside employment. The partnership is underpinned by a shared commitment to widening access for working professionals and women, and to supporting regional skills development.

Partnership model: franchise arrangement.

Length of partnership: six years.

Programmes: MSc Project Management, delivered largely through distance learning so students can study alongside work. The programme was selected as a distinctive offer that complemented rather than duplicated LUBM's existing UK partnerships and responded to demand in construction, oil and gas, events and infrastructure.

Student profile: largely working professionals, including middle managers in organisations in Dubai.

UWS retains responsibility for the programme, academic standards and quality assurance. LUBM manages local delivery and student engagement, drawing on its knowledge of regional industry needs and the circumstances of working learners.

The three case studies represent different partnership models, origins and stages of development. Together, these examples show how partnership type, origin, areas of collaboration and maturity shape how institutions interpret equity and put it into practice. They also highlight the need for recommendations that are flexible enough to work across different TNE models and institutional contexts.

What works? Practical lessons from the case studies

Across the case studies, institutions are embedding equity through programme shaping, shared governance, contextualised delivery, student and staff engagement, industry links and long-term relationship-building. These lessons point towards actions that other institutions can adapt to their own partnership models and local contexts.

- **Partners shape programmes and bring in local knowledge:** involve partners before major design decisions are made, so local perspectives can shape programmes and processes from the start.
- **Shared governance and regular communication:** use joint boards, reviews, link tutors and regular communication to keep partnerships aligned, ensure partner views are heard and build shared understanding of regulatory responsibilities.
- **Mutual understanding of contexts and requirements:** mutual understanding of the regulatory contexts that both institutions are working in to support the approval and quality assurance processes.
- **Partnership value goes beyond financial return:** recognise the wider benefits of TNE, including mobility, research collaboration, student development, cultural exchange, global profile and longer-term relationships.
- **Building trust and relationships over time:** support regular contact, visits, professional exchanges, staff development opportunities and mobility to build trust, strengthen knowledge exchange and create long-term benefits for both partners.
- **Engaging industry and stakeholders strengthens relevance:** use employer and stakeholder input to keep programmes relevant to labour market needs and strengthen opportunities for placements, applied learning and knowledge exchange.
- **Supporting students consistently across locations:** make sure students have access to comparable quality, support and opportunities across locations, while adapting provision to local needs.

How partners shape programmes and bring in local knowledge

Partners shape programmes in different ways, depending on the type of model, degree arrangements and regulatory responsibilities. Across the case studies, partner input often happens through consultation, feedback and adaptations to delivery – with some partners more directly involved in programme design. These routes provide opportunities to discuss new programmes, adapt teaching to local needs and bring local perspectives into delivery.

For two of the institutions, LU Ghana and UWS-LUBM, the overall curriculum structure and learning outcomes are set by the UK institutions, with efforts made to bring in the knowledge and expertise of local academic staff. Teaching materials include national and regional case studies, and local academic staff bring labour market insight and professional experience into the classroom. The level of integration can vary depending on local needs, capacity and the maturity of the relationship.

The Greenwich–MSA validated model works differently. MSA develops the curriculum, while Greenwich ensures the programmes meet equivalent standards and outcomes. In the science programmes, the partners started from a blank slate, with alignment to UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmarks taking place after the joint design process rather than at the beginning. This was described as ‘co-editing’ rather than full co-creation, as MSA plays an active role in shaping the curriculum across UK, Egyptian and industry requirements.

Approaches that involve partners from the outset, rather than treating local adaptation as an afterthought, are more likely to successfully reflect diverse knowledge traditions and local contexts. This points to the need for institutions to identify earlier and clearer routes for partner input into programme aims, curriculum choices and assessment approaches.

Shared governance and regular communication

Across the case studies, the most effective arrangements combine formal governance with regular day-to-day communication. Joint boards, annual reviews and validation cycles give partners structured opportunities to contribute, review progress and ensure their perspectives are heard, even where UK institutions retain final responsibility for academic standards and assessment. Ongoing contact between link tutors, academic teams and professional services staff then helps partnerships stay aligned in practice.

The case studies also show that shared governance does not always mean equal governance. In models where the UK institution retains responsibility for curriculum design, quality assurance or degree-awarding standards, partnerships may focus instead on fairness, respect, clear communication and mutual understanding. Practices such as co-chairing arrangements and alternating chairs in teaching and learning meetings can help make governance more inclusive, even where responsibilities are not evenly distributed. Roles such as senior academic leads and link tutors can also strengthen shared ownership where they move beyond quality assurance to support teaching, research and delivery-level problem solving. This underlines the importance of being explicit about where shared decision-making is possible and where clear, transparent processes are needed instead.

Building trust and relationships over time

Trust is central to equitable TNE partnerships, particularly where institutions are navigating operational challenges such as different working weeks, academic calendars, staff turnover and unfamiliar regulatory or local operating environments. Across the case studies, regular contact, open communication and sustained engagement helped partners understand each other’s priorities, contexts and constraints, address issues early, and build confidence in decision-making over time.

Formal governance structures remain important, but relationships are also built through day-to-day interaction. Joint committees, link tutor roles, cross-campus staff networks, in-country visits and informal

communication all help partners stay connected, streamline communication and work through challenges. Staff development opportunities, doctoral pathways, professional exchanges and training can also strengthen institutional growth and mutual benefit. At LU Ghana, staff exchanges and relationship-building helped strengthen mutual understanding and local autonomy over time.

The case studies suggest that these relationships should be embedded across academic teams, professional services, quality teams and student support functions, rather than relying on a small number of individuals. Consistent engagement helps partners feel connected to the wider institutional community and makes collaboration easier to sustain. Shared moments can also reinforce partnership community: UWS's approach of bringing partners to graduation ceremonies shows how relationship-building can strengthen a shared sense of purpose beyond formal meetings and reporting structures. Relationship-building should therefore be treated as a core part of partnership management, not an optional extra.

'Allowing local staff to sit with their counterparts and understand why things are being done builds a really good understanding between the two sides.'

Mutual understanding of contexts and requirements

Clear explanation of regulatory requirements is essential, and both partners should seek to understand the regulatory contexts they are working within. The case studies show how this can be done in different ways, with partnerships putting equitable practice into action across different models and contexts.

Before entering a TNE partnership, institutions should take time to understand the information, expectations and requirements on both sides. Targeted orientation and training should be refreshed regularly to build shared understanding and support more effective collaboration. At LU Ghana, staff noted that assumptions can sometimes be made about how well partner institutions understand UK quality assurance processes, even though these can be complex and unfamiliar in other regulatory contexts. Clear explanation of these requirements helped reduce misunderstanding and supported more effective collaboration. Ongoing partnership frameworks should balance regulatory responsibility with meaningful partner participation.

This can be supported by strengthening existing mechanisms, such as early-stage consultation, joint governance structures and ongoing input through roles like link tutors, to ensure partner perspectives are embedded throughout programme design and delivery. In practice, this means making regulatory navigation a shared task from the outset, so partners can plan together for timelines, approval processes and quality expectations.

Partnership value goes beyond financial return

Another opportunity to incorporate equity in TNE is through maximising the positive impacts of partnerships beyond financial income. For UK institutions, this might include contributing to global sustainable development, raising their global profile, and developing deeper regional expertise and connections. Lancaster's ambition to become a hub for African research is one example of this. Approached through this more holistic lens, TNE partnerships can also support wider internationalisation efforts, facilitating mobility, research collaboration, capacity building and longer-term institutional engagement.

For partner institutions, particularly MSA, the value of TNE is strongly linked to student transformation and the wider societal impact. This is reflected in the long-running summer abroad programme, postgraduate scholarships to study at Greenwich, and visiting UK academics delivering specialist teaching. These opportunities are seen as transformative for students, helping them to build skills, confidence and increase their international experience and global exposure. MSA also highlighted positive feedback from parents and wider stakeholders, suggesting that the partnership delivers value beyond the institution itself.

Capacity-building is also evident across all three case studies, including staff development programmes such as access to Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education routes, PhD pathways, professional exchanges, and training. In the UWS partnership, strategic investment in staff development and mobility has helped strengthen knowledge exchange and relationships. Incorporating diverse measures of success – beyond raw income or student numbers – can lead to deeper, more resilient partnerships.

Engaging industry and stakeholders strengthens relevance

TNE partnerships can be strengthened through sustained engagement with industry partners, helping to ensure that programmes remain relevant and responsive to evolving labour market needs. In the case of LU Ghana, the campus engages regularly with industry stakeholders, including through an annual corporate reception that brings employers into discussions on internships, graduate skills and workforce expectations. Feedback from these engagements informs curriculum review processes and supports alignment with local employment contexts.

More broadly, working closely with industry can create opportunities for student placements, employer-led teaching and applied learning, while also supporting research collaboration and knowledge exchange. UK institutions can build on this by drawing on the established industry networks of their local partners, enabling more locally embedded and mutually beneficial engagement with employers.

Supporting students consistently across locations

Across all three case studies, participants emphasised that equity should be judged through students' experience and outcomes. While the partnership models differ, there was a shared view that students should have access to an equivalent quality of education, support and opportunity wherever they study.

This is supported in different ways across the partnerships. At LU Ghana, student representatives contribute through formal committees and Boards of Study. At Greenwich–MSA, students take part in Boards of Study, can raise issues directly with staff, and benefit from opportunities such as the long-running Summer Abroad Programme, postgraduate scholarships and visiting UK academics. At UWS–LUBM, induction, orientation, and academic and pastoral support help students access the same core information and expectations as students on the home campus.

The case studies also show that equivalent outcomes do not necessarily require identical provision. Student support, feedback routes and mobility opportunities need to be adapted to local contexts and student needs, with ongoing monitoring to ensure students receive a comparable quality of experience.

'Adapting to local culture and custom, recognising that this is how things operate in a certain country, because every country is different.'

Further progress may require greater recognition of local cultures, customs and regulatory contexts. Institutions could grow their understanding of how education systems differ across countries, including whether students have been educated within UK-style academic traditions. Traditional academic writing conventions can create barriers for students studying in a second language, even where they have strong subject knowledge.

Additional support can include bilingual or multilingual teaching as well as more flexible assessments that allow students to demonstrate learning and professional knowledge in ways that are inclusive and appropriate to their contexts. This means student engagement and support models should be designed around local student demographics, cultural expectations, patterns of study and regulatory contexts – rather than simply replicating UK campus models.

Opportunities to enhance partnerships

While the case studies show the immense contribution and reciprocal benefits that TNE partnerships can bring, challenges remain. Partnerships are complex and must continue to evolve, shaped by degree-awarding responsibilities, regulatory requirements, different academic systems, language and assessment expectations, student demographics, and the legal or cultural context for student engagement. Institutions must continuously and actively navigate these challenges if they are to strengthen partnership practice.

Recognising the limits and possibilities of equity in TNE

In TNE partnerships, equity is indelibly shaped by how responsibility and authority are shared. Where the UK institution is the degree-awarding body, these are often distributed unevenly by design. UK partners often retain responsibility for regulatory compliance, learning outcomes and assessment processes. These responsibilities are important for maintaining academic standards, and they also shape the extent to which decision-making can be shared. Across the case studies, co-creation was therefore more likely to happen through consultation, delivery-level adaptation and contextualisation than through full joint design. This looks different across partnership models.

In an international branch campus model, the UK institution retains ownership of the academic brand, governance structures and ultimate accountability for standards, while the branch campus has significant day-to-day operational autonomy. At LU Ghana, for example, Lancaster retains degree-awarding authority and senior academic leadership on campus, while TAG manages campus infrastructure and operational delivery, and local staff retain autonomy over teaching contextualisation.

In validated partnerships, the partner institution may have greater autonomy over curriculum and delivery, but the UK institution still validates provision against its own academic standards. The Greenwich–MSA partnership illustrates this dynamic: MSA designs and owns much of the curriculum, while Greenwich validates provision, chairs exam boards and conducts five-yearly revalidation.

Even in necessarily asymmetric arrangements, partner institutions can exercise real agency in shaping the relationship from the outset. LUBM's decision to partner with UWS, for example, was a strategic choice, made to move beyond an existing European partnership and secure a UK-recognised qualification. The MSc Project Management programme was selected because of strong regional industry demand and because it offered a distinctive UK qualification not otherwise available through LUBM's partners in the market. This suggests that, even where curriculum ownership sits with the UK institution after a franchise agreement is in place, the partner's choice of institution and programme can be an important site of agency.

Making equity practical within different partnership models

There is no single approach to equity in TNE. Full equality may not always be possible, but partner institutions can still have meaningful agency. In this context, equity is often about parity, fairness and transparency in day-to-day partnership processes, rather than identical roles. UK institutions may emphasise collaboration and mutuality, while partner institutions may prioritise clear structures, regulatory alignment and tangible outcomes.

Where roles, responsibilities or resources are distributed unevenly, institutions should be open about this from the outset, both internally and with partners. Alongside shared ambitions, partners should be clear about how decisions are made, how responsibilities are shared and where partner input can shape the process.

The case studies also suggest that there is scope to go further over time. Contextualisation at the level of delivery is now well established and brings clear benefits, but local perspectives could be more fully reflected in programme design.

Much TNE provision will continue to operate within established academic frameworks and standards, which remain essential for quality and consistency. The opportunity for the sector is to consider how partnership models can evolve so that a wider range of perspectives and educational traditions can inform programme development, while maintaining robust standards. This reinforces the need for recommendations that focus on parity, transparency and practical routes for partner agency, rather than assuming equity in every area.

Navigating regulation without losing flexibility

Regulatory requirements play an important role in TNE partnerships and can shape how institutions build in flexibility. Institutions often need to work across more than one regulatory system, but these case studies have shown that this can be possible. These include UK regulatory and quality expectations, such as those set by the Office for Students (OfS) and QAA. These must be balanced alongside host-country requirements, for example from the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Higher Education or the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority.

In the Greenwich–MSA partnership, this means new programme proposals must be approved by Egypt's Supreme Council of Higher Education before Greenwich can finalise its own validation. The two institutions therefore need to align with separate approval timelines, rather than treating UK and Egyptian regulatory processes as sequential or interchangeable. Working across these frameworks requires careful planning, but it can also help partners build a shared understanding of timelines, quality expectations and opportunities for flexibility. The case studies show how institutions can work together to navigate these requirements.

UK quality assurance frameworks play an important role in maintaining high standards in TNE and increasingly emphasise the importance of equitable and inclusive partnerships in their international work. At the same time, these frameworks are rooted in particular academic traditions around assessment standards and institutional governance that have developed within a specific cultural and institutional context. This complexity is increased by the four different approaches to quality assurance taken across the four nations of the UK, and TNE partners working across multiple arrangements may find navigating these an even greater challenge. As a result, benchmarking all TNE provision against them can make it more challenging to incorporate alternative approaches to curriculum and assessment design. This is not a criticism of quality assurance itself, but an opportunity for the sector to consider how existing frameworks might continue to evolve, supporting rigorous standards while creating space for a wider range of educational traditions and practices.

Equivalent outcomes, different student experiences

Student engagement often needs to be designed differently in TNE contexts. Distance, cultural expectations, institutional structures and student demographics all shape how students engage. In the same way that UK universities will adapt support and structures to respond to the particular requirements of different cohorts in their institution, in TNE partnerships student voice and feedback routes need to be designed for each context, rather than assumed to work in the same way across all partnerships.

At UWS–LUBM, for example, many students are mature working professionals with family and employment commitments, so they may engage with feedback mechanisms in different ways. Some students may also be cautious about using formal feedback routes because of confidentiality concerns or uncertainty about whether feedback will lead to change.

In other contexts, legal or regulatory requirements may shape formal students' unions or representative structures, while visa and travel rules can affect access to some opportunities. These differences do not mean that student experience should be weaker or less consistent across TNE partnerships. They show that equivalent outcomes matter more than identical provision.

While the student experience should retain some consistent core elements, it does not need to be identical across all TNE partnerships. Students should have access to comparable quality, support, opportunities and outcomes, but the routes through which these are delivered may need to vary by context. Variation is not necessarily a weakness; where it is intentional and carefully monitored, it can help institutions provide student engagement and support that is more inclusive, realistic and responsive to local needs. This points to a practical recommendation: design for equivalent outcomes, while allowing student voice, support and engagement mechanisms to vary by context.

The recommendations below draw together the practical lessons from the case studies and translate them into actions that institutions can apply across different TNE models and contexts.

Practical recommendations for equitable TNE partnerships

- **Move from consultation to earlier co-design where possible.** Partners are often consulted once broad programme decisions have already been made. Institutions should identify where partner input can shape programme aims, curriculum choices and assessment approaches at an earlier stage.
- **Be explicit about where shared oversight is necessary, where it is possible and desirable, and where it is not.** Rather than using broad language about equal partnership, institutions should clarify which decisions are genuinely shared, which sit with the degree-awarding body, and how partner perspectives will still influence the process.
- **Design for parity in process and esteem, not identical roles.** Where fully shared responsibility of aspects of the partnership is not possible, partnerships can still be more equitable by agreeing fair, transparent and consistent processes for consultation, escalation, review and decision-making.
- **Create stronger routes for partner contribution to programme development.** Build flexibility into academic models and create opportunities for partner staff to contribute to curriculum review, assessment design, teaching, research and knowledge exchange.
- **Strengthen student engagement models for TNE contexts.** Student voice mechanisms should be designed around local student demographics, cultural expectations, confidentiality concerns, legal constraints and patterns of study, rather than simply replicating UK campus models.
- **Build shared understanding of regulatory requirements.** Co-develop a shared understanding of the approach to quality assurance, approval processes and regulatory responsibilities together from the outset, creating opportunities for partners to raise concerns, challenge assumptions and navigate requirements collaboratively.
- **Invest in relationships across the institution, not just at senior level.** Try to embed relationships across academic teams, professional services, quality teams and student support functions, so partnership knowledge does not depend on a small number of individuals.
- **Evaluate partnership value more broadly and consistently.** Institutions should assess TNE not only through income or student numbers, but also through value added, for example staff development, student outcomes, research links, mobility, local impact, employer engagement and the strength of the partnership over time.

Equitable TNE partnerships are built through practical choices over time: how decisions are made, how partners communicate, how students and staff are supported, and how institutions respond to context. Selecting a partner and investing in a long-term collaboration are strategic decisions made by autonomous institutions, incurring significant opportunity costs: investing time, resources and building trust. With many potential partnership opportunities available, establishing a shared understanding, clear expectations and mutual benefit from the outset is not simply desirable, but essential to a partnership's long-term success. For UK universities and their partners, the next step is to keep strengthening the practices that make partnerships more transparent, responsive and mutually beneficial.

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