



Universities UK
International

Building the global reputation and delivery of UK transnational online higher education

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A TASK & FINISH GROUP

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Summary:

In July and August 2020, a Task & Finish Group was convened by Universities UK International (UUKi) with a view to exploring ways to develop and communicate a narrative around the quality of UK degrees delivered online or through blended learning overseas and how the sector can collaborate with other organisations in the public, private and not-for-profit spheres to innovate in this area.

This report summarises the main findings from the meetings and sets recommendations stemming from the discussions of the group.

Audience:

UK academic providers, HE sector bodies, government, and sector representatives such as the International Education Champion, as well as individuals and organisations based overseas who are involved or interested in transnational education (TNE).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report summarises the main ideas, concepts and proposals to come out of a Task & Finish Group on Transnational Online Higher Education convened under the recommendation of Universities UK International's (UUKi) TNE Advisory Group.
2. The group's aim was to develop a set of recommendations to be addressed at provider, sector and government levels responding to two questions:
 - a. How can higher education providers, sector bodies and government best develop and communicate a narrative around the quality of UK degrees delivered online or through blended learning overseas?
 - b. How can higher education providers collaborate with other organisations in the public, private and not-for-profit spheres to innovate in the area of transnational online higher education?
3. Transnational online higher education is defined as provision delivered mainly through digital means (including blended learning) to students based primarily overseas (including where there are study periods in the UK). A plausible estimate is that there are at least 400,000 students studying UK programmes overseas fully or partly through digital means, which represents 60% of the total number of transnational students.
4. The main motivation for undertaking transnational online higher education is to facilitate access to UK higher education for students who would otherwise not be participating in UK onshore provision and who are not able to participate in mobility-based international education.
5. The main barriers that providers find in developing transnational online higher education relate to limited understanding of the student experience and student outcomes (particularly employability), surface-level perceptions of low quality, access to appropriate technology and training, and taxation of digital transactions.
6. The Covid-19 pandemic has driven a multiplication of initiatives at governmental, sector and provider levels implemented at remarkable speed in the transition to remote learning. Many have been developed in partnership with commercial organisations. Better coordination of these initiatives is seen as key to supporting more students wishing to access UK transnational online higher education.
7. The recommendations stemming from the Group are divided into five thematic areas:
 - a. information and data
 - b. quality, standards and recognition of qualifications
 - c. access (barriers to)
 - d. communications
 - e. the role of government
8. This report was submitted to UUKi's TNE Advisory Group for scrutiny in October 2020, and an action plan to implement the recommendations will be developed.

INTRODUCTION

9. In 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned a study of online distance learning provided in the HE sector as part of a Department of Business, Innovation and Skills' Online Learning Task Force formed to 'make recommendations regarding the development of excellence in online learning'.
10. A number of findings and recommendations from that study resonated in the discussions of the 2020 Task & Finish Group: in particular, the inherent advantages of online learning as a mode of delivery for students in full-time work, and the importance of appreciating that their motivations, needs and aspirations may differ significantly from those of campus-based students.
11. Although this report is not a continuation of the HEFCE study, it does to an extent build on its findings in an effort to make further progress in the sector's understanding of what elements are necessary to widen access to UK online higher education programmes transnationally.
12. The report is divided into two sections. The first section identifies the benefits of transnational online and blended higher education as a model of choice for students globally, and also highlights the challenges that must be overcome for it to reach its full potential. The second section presents recommendations to support the expansion of UK transnational online higher education. A number of case studies illustrating successful practice are then presented.
13. No quantitative or qualitative research was undertaken for this report, and there are no specific findings as such, beyond those which stem naturally from the advice and experience of members and experts in the Group.
14. This document aims to contribute to discussions being held at provider, sector and governmental levels on how the UK can leverage the existing expertise and best practice regarding online higher education, which has accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of supporting universities to facilitate access from overseas students to this particular form of higher education delivery.
15. This report uses the term 'online' to designate degrees that are taught primarily using digital means (whether through synchronous or asynchronous teaching and learning), while the term 'transnational' refers to students based primarily overseas. The report recognises that students may have access to other types of provision (including onsite provision) and may study in different locations (including the UK) during the course of their degree. For details on definitions please refer to Appendix C.

UK TRANSNATIONAL ONLINE AND BLENDED HIGHER EDUCATION

What is the need we are responding to and why is it important?

16. Identifying the benefits and challenges of UK transnational online and blended higher education is important because it affects a large number of UK universities and their students.
17. Returns from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) indicate that 120 providers reported in excess of 120,000 students under code 3 'distance, flexible or distributed learning' of the Aggregate Offshore Record (AOR) in 2018-19. They also reported c. 375,000 students studying for UK awards but registered at an overseas partner organisation under HESA AOR codes 4 and 5.¹ About 80% of students reported under codes 4 and 5 were studying at two providers of supported distance learning. A plausible estimate is that at least 400,000 students in 2018-19 were studying overseas for UK awards at least partly through digital means, which represents 60% of the total number of TNE students.
18. Added to this number are those students who, since early 2020, began or continued their studies remotely from their home countries due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While it is difficult to estimate the total number of students, it is likely to be a significant proportion of the more than 480,000 EU and international students studying for degrees in the UK at the start of the pandemic.
19. Both these groups of students are likely to have different experiences, perceptions, and possibly

Note

¹ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c18052/a/type>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>

outcomes, and any recommendations should be mindful of these differences. However, the above numbers act as a powerful indicator of the economic and educational significance of transnational online higher education for the sector.

20. The cross-government International Education Strategy launched in March 2019 also acknowledged the importance of online higher education, indicating in Action 20 that the Department for International Trade (DIT) will work to resolve regulatory barriers including those related to the recognition of online and blended learning programmes, through international agreements and the work of the International Education Champion.²
21. What, then, are those barriers and how can the sector leverage its collective expertise to widen access to UK transnational online higher education?
22. The key message to emerge from the 2010 HEFCE study was that 'the substantive challenge was not the pedagogical model...but planning the configuration of the infrastructure, resources and business models required to support the development and delivery of ODL [open and distance learning] programmes.'
23. The study also made several recommendations that are relevant in the context of this paper, in particular to improve definitions (taxonomy) and data collection, to issue guidance on successful business models and to conduct further market research on online learning's student profile and motivation, employer attitudes and international competition.
24. More recently, the Learning and Teaching Reimagined project undertaken by Jisc drew similar conclusions,³ which could signal that there has been at most partial achievement of the original

³ Jisc (2020) *Learning and Teaching Reimagined*. Available at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/learning-and-teaching-reimagined-change-and-challenge>

recommendations. The project has also added considerations of digital poverty and access, which have come to the fore of students' and providers' concerns as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

25. The Group noted that the competitive market-based international education environment may at times have hindered collaborative approaches to address some of the recommendations stemming from previous reviews. Early adopters tend to develop their online offer with commercial partners, with associated confidentiality implications.

26. Within this frame, the Group reflected on the individual and societal benefits of transnational online higher education, mentioning the following:

- a. inclusivity and adaptation to the individual circumstances of students;
- b. widening access to a UK higher education for underrepresented groups;
- c. allowing students to stay in or near their home country, decreasing the risk of permanent brain drain;
- d. building capacity in students to apply their learning in a way that makes real impact in their communities;
- e. diversifying UK education exports and increasing UK universities' income base;
- f. enhancing the UK's soft power through UK universities' partnerships and networks, including of alumni;
- g. reducing carbon emissions to tackle climate change.

27. The Group acknowledged that transnational online higher education faces a specific set of challenges that deserve separate treatment, mentioning the following:

- a. perceived internal resistance and lack of agility to adapt a provider's infrastructure (such as admissions processes or student management systems) to support new modes of learning;

- b. lack of expertise and experience in developing online business strategies;

- c. high start-up costs and uncertainty of returns, including due to taxation of digital transactions;

- d. sustaining innovation and the high levels of support required for effective online learning;

- e. perceptions of quality and resulting barriers related to overseas recognition and regulation of online learning;

- f. the digital divide and access to hardware, software, an internet connection, technical support, study spaces, support materials, digital literacy, or training.

The transnational online learner and access to higher education

28. The 2010 HEFCE study found that most online learning courses are usually delivered at postgraduate level in disciplines closely related to the professions. Common features of these subject areas are a need for working professionals to regularly update their skills and knowledge, to change or develop their career, to receive a quantifiable benefit, to be sponsored by employers and to have flexibility of attendance.

29. The study also found many level 4 and level 5 courses delivered through online learning. These courses were mainly addressed to individuals who had not yet studied for a higher education qualification, thus contributing to widening participation.

30. The Group confirmed the above findings apply at transnational level, noting that often a provider's motivation for undertaking online delivery is to facilitate access to UK higher education for students who would otherwise not be participating in

existing onsite provision and who are not able to participate in mobility-based international education.

31. The rapid dissemination of new information and communication technology has also made it easier for providers to include online learning components in core face-to-face programmes, including transnationally. The worldwide shift to remote learning during Covid-19 has accelerated this trend and has brought innovation at the provider level and flexibility in recognition around the globe.
32. There is also anecdotal evidence that transnational online higher education widens access for specific demographic groups. The Arab Open University, for instance, teaches a growing proportion of underrepresented groups in Gulf countries in partnership with The Open University. UNICAF, a large online higher education platform, has received UK development aid funding to expand higher education access in Africa using mobile technology that is widely accessible to youth in the continent.
33. Nevertheless, the issue of the digital divide has also been raised as a significant barrier to transnational online higher education. Digital barriers can encompass a lack of access to hardware, software, an internet connection, technical support, study spaces, support materials, digital literacy, or appropriately trained teaching staff.
34. Contrary to perceptions that teaching online should be a more economical option than onsite teaching, transnational online higher education can be expensive. There are technology costs but also pedagogical adaptation, development and regular modification of high-quality digital materials, and continuous upskilling and reskilling of staff. Significant changes to student support services may be required. The application to online learning of regulations designed to tax cross-border digital transactions can also add to the cost of delivering higher education online across borders.
35. The Group confirmed the above views, indicating that the recruitment of transnational online students does not compete with or subtract from

the recruitment of campus-based international students. The Group noted the need for better identification of specific demographic groups served by transnational online higher education, and the distinct barriers they encounter.

36. Finally, the Group noted that issues of cost and access for students should be delineated more clearly. Minimum requirements for access to transnational online higher education (in terms of hardware and software, but also digital literacy, contact time, feedback and assessment, and pedagogical practice) should be made explicit and development aid/tax exemptions should be sought to reduce costs and widen participation.

Data and metrics

37. A key finding of the 2010 HEFCE study was the lack of formal collection of data related to higher-level distance learning activity. The study identified the difficulty of assessing the overall level of distance learning activity across the sector as one of the main challenges, with no data relating specifically to distance learning courses and no existing publications on the UK distance learning market.
38. At transnational level HESA's AOR provides a headcount of students studying for UK awards wholly outside of the UK, but does not provide information on the subjects and disciplines taught, the nature of the provision and its relationship to the host provider or system, or the outcomes graduates achieve.
39. Transnational online learning is sometimes delivered in partnership with commercial organisations and providers overseas, who play a crucial role in various aspects from technical support to marketing and recruitment, but who are not required to report to HESA. There is also provision delivered as single-standing modules or courses that may escape HESA's data collection mechanisms.

40. In November 2019, HESA announced a review of TNE data collection that could lead to the introduction of an individualised student record, though this has since been delayed due to Covid-19. HESA's review will concentrate on the requirements for the collection of personal data to meet public interests, the exercise of official authority, and compliance with legal obligations, but may also identify other potential legitimate interests for data on TNE, including for online learning.

Quality, regulation, and recognition

41. The Group identified that regulatory constraints related to the recognition of online learning such as minimum onsite teaching requirements were significant barriers to the development of UK transnational online higher education.

42. The Group noted that often a surface-level perception of online education as being of lower quality than onsite provision underlies regulatory barriers overseas. Understanding and addressing the causes of this perception is crucial to overcoming regulatory barriers.

43. The Group noted that online teaching and learning is subject to the same centralised quality assurance and regulatory processes as onsite teaching. Occasionally, additional quality standards are put in place, such as student/tutor ratios, contact hours or response times, with the result that it may in fact be scrutinised more closely than traditional onsite provision.

44. The Group argued strongly against developing a separate set of quality assurance or enhancement processes for transnational online higher education. Existing processes were considered sufficiently robust to underpin the quality of education delivered online transnationally.

Technology

45. The Group identified technology as a key enabler to transnational online learning, and noted that unequal access to technology can act as a significant barrier for students to access transnational online higher education, and may affect inclusive and equitable access to this mode of education. This is particularly significant

in countries where internet access or the use of appropriate devices is unequally distributed along territorial, ethnic, class or gender lines.

46. Beyond the enabling role of technology, other substantive challenges to delivering successful online learning are ones of design, management, support (student and tutor) and marketing. As technology matures, the main issue becomes managing student and staff comfort and familiarity with using the tools/platforms.

47. One of the most significant challenges, in terms of a provider's culture change, is not staff acquiring new technical skills but the shift in teaching approach it requires. With the content transmission elements of teaching increasingly handled by online platforms, teaching staff may require additional support related to cultural perceptions and styles of communication used by transnational students.

Working in partnership

48. The global pandemic has driven a significant level of resources towards developing online learning capabilities. The number of initiatives taking place at the governmental, sector and provider levels has multiplied. These initiatives have been implemented at remarkable speed and have greatly helped the sector in its, for the most part, successful transition to remote learning.

49. Recently, the Office for Students launched a digital teaching and learning review commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education that is expected to report its findings in Spring 2021. This review, although not focused on TNE, exemplifies the interest in harnessing best practice developed during the pandemic, for the common good.

50. Many of these initiatives include partnerships with commercial organisations. The Group noted that, notwithstanding differences in

organisational culture, commercial organisations have played an increasingly important role for UK transnational online higher education providers in terms of capital investment, international reach and entry into new degree levels and forms of delivery, although access to commercial support could be challenging for smaller providers.

51. The Group agreed that a coordinated approach to implementing these initiatives would support widening access to online higher education delivered transnationally. This could include streamlining, combining and disseminating public and private sector initiatives focusing on online learning, and others that, although not fully related to online learning, could be leveraged to support this mode of provision.
52. This work could entail building communication channels between existing representative networks of constituencies with an interest in widening participation in transnational online higher education, such as Pro-Vice-Chancellors for International and Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education, Directors of International and Chief Information Officers. A second phase could entail the development of a project plan to implement a common narrative of quality that would underpin the future growth of transnational online higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

53. The following recommendations are grouped into five thematic areas: information and data, quality, standards and recognition, access, promotional activities and the role of government.

Information and data

54. Higher education providers should establish how their data and information processes address transnational online higher education, and in particular any gaps in capturing:
- a. data on student profiles;
 - b. data on the student experience;
 - c. data on student outcomes (especially employment outcomes);
 - d. data on the financial value of transnational online higher education;
 - e. information on employers' views of online learning (e.g. what digital certificates they seek in graduates);
 - f. information on barriers to access that students experience (the digital divide).
55. Jisc/HESA should address the challenge of data collection for students studying online transnationally in the future review of the AOR, including in any eventual individual student record for TNE, and address the identification of students studying single-standing modules or studying through blended delivery.
56. UUKi should consider how to address TNE and the experiences of TNE students studying online in upcoming activity by regulators related to data and information requirements (e.g. in England, the OfS review of the NSS, the Independent Review of TEF, and consultation on the regulatory framework and B conditions of registration).
57. The Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for International Trade (DIT) should include transnational online higher education in their work to identify more accurately the overall

value of TNE to the UK economy as part of Action 19 of the International Education Strategy.

Quality, standards and recognition

58. Higher education providers should identify gaps in maintaining quality and standards in transnational online provision, including differences in the student experience and student outcomes compared to those who study onsite.
59. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) should identify how quality and standards in transnational online provision are maintained and enhanced within the services it currently provides as the Designated Quality Body in England and the apex body for quality assurance and enhancement in the UK.
60. UK NARIC should identify and publish challenges and obstacles to the recognition of online qualifications in key markets and suggest strategies to address these (including ways to address online learning in trade talks and mutual recognition agreements).
61. DfE/DIT should include the recognition of qualifications obtained through online learning in government-to-government trade dialogue, including recognition by Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Bodies (PSRBs).

Access

62. Higher education providers should share information on issues of access to cross-border digital education in key markets affecting their transnational online provision, in order to explore sector-wide approaches to addressing existing barriers.
63. Jisc should incorporate transnational online higher education into their ongoing work on addressing the digital divide in the UK and overseas, including through cooperation with national research and education networks to provide global connectivity solutions.

64. ucisa should provide a platform to help technology and software suppliers to understand the barriers transnational online higher education providers are facing (e.g. if a university wants to become involved in parallel degrees, what this might mean for a commercial VLE supplier in terms of interoperability/identity access management).
65. UUKi should explore how resources could be pooled to share advice on overcoming barriers to access, including those related to taxation of digital transactions, in collaboration with sector bodies where appropriate (e.g. BUFDG).
66. DfE/DIT should seek the exemption of transnational online higher education from taxation of cross-border digital transactions in key markets, through government-to-government dialogue and the work of the International Education Champion.
67. DfE/DIT should engage with relevant government departments (e.g. FCDO) to address the issue of the digital divide in transnational online higher education, including through providing seed funding for initiatives linked to international development.

Communications

68. Higher education providers should capture and publish information on transnational online student characteristics and outcomes and case studies of successful transnational online higher education provision (emphasising flexibility, employability and outcomes) through their websites and through sector-wide platforms (e.g. those provided by the British Council).
 69. Higher education providers should invite partner organisations (commercial and overseas partners) to join sector-wide promotional platforms in transnational online higher education, and explore how those resources can be combined for more effective communications.
 70. UUKi should include transnational online higher education in its activities (delegations, conferences and sector-to-sector dialogue) to showcase the quality of transnational online higher education internationally.
71. The British Council and UUKi should facilitate specific training opportunities to ensure that universities are equipped with information on best practice, as well as the latest data and insight into taxation and other barriers.
 72. The British Council should include transnational online higher education in its promotional campaigns as a distinct activity within the UK's higher education offer, informed by data and a set of promotional lines on this mode of education's unique value proposition.

Role of the government

73. DfE/DIT should create an enabling policy environment for online higher education domestically, including through measures related to immigration (e.g. the impact of online study on access to immigration routes) and through ensuring that the Office for Students' review of digital learning takes into consideration the needs and aspirations of transnational students.
74. DfE/DIT should create an enabling policy environment for online higher education overseas, including transnational online higher education in trade dialogue (e.g. the JETCO series) and in trade agreement negotiations. This should include action in favour of the recognition of qualifications obtained through online learning and the exemption of online learning from taxation of cross-border digital transactions.
75. DfE/DIT should consider developing seed funding initiatives open to transnational online higher education providers in order to spearhead the development of innovative forms of delivery and identify champions to present as examples of best practice internationally.

CASE STUDIES

Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance

BA (Hons) Theatre Studies Online⁴

Launched: 1996

Numbers: <100 in 2020–21 (pending 2nd entry)

Academic Staff: 2 permanent, 6 freelance

Profile of students

Ages 18-70 (returning learners, industry practitioners, teachers, enthusiasts, some school leavers.)

75% female; 25% male

7% EU; 21% International

Main benefits

1. Enhancing the institution's international focus by developing a global learning community online. TNE recruitment continues to rise (28% of current cohort domiciled EU/International).
2. Engaging with an emergent learning model increasingly attuned to cultural diversity and the needs of geographically dispersed participants.
3. Building skills in delivering arts provision at a distance to meet the needs of wider markets (e.g. programme annual retention regularly 92%–95%).

Main challenges

1. Being a small-scale higher education institution and coping with the associated limitations – especially in terms of resources, support and costs of development; limited opportunities to apply for external funding.
2. UK student fees – especially for those unable to access/afford loans – and limited scholarship opportunities for online students.

3. The strength of the pound and its impact on affordability of UK education for non-UK citizens.
4. Global differences in interpretation of grades awarded.
5. Limited support systems for international students.
6. Time zone differences when attending webinars.
7. Finding reputable courses online: judging reputability of providers, especially in an emergent market.

Why students choose the programme

- the currency afforded to UK provision: “thorough and well-organised”; “international recognition”
- clarity of UK regulatory practices
- “flexibility” of learning routes allowing for “working alongside studying”
- variety of specialist study topics (rather than a liberal arts approach) “I am learning what I am wanting to pay for”
- international recognition
- UK students are “not ‘spoon-fed’” – focus on independence and transferable skills
- competitive fee costs (vs USA)

Why employers choose students from the programme

- employment-readiness of graduates
- institutional reputation in the sector
- institutional process-led work ethic

Main recommendations for universities wishing to deliver similar programmes

1. Delivering programmes online is not a cheap or easy option: it requires awareness of the singular needs of the students and the challenges to teaching online, and it requires long-term investment in the development of high-quality learning materials and platforms.

Note

⁴ Other online provision includes BA (Hons) Opera Studies, postgraduate developments, blended provision and non-credit-bearing courses.

2. Online learning and teaching can involve practice-based topics and collaboration; active participation contributes to retention.
3. Institutions can benefit from seeking opportunities to unite attendance and online-mode students as a community.

Teesside University

MA Digital Management

Teesside University and Hyper Island⁵ first partnered in 2010 with the aim of providing innovative, sector-leading programmes for the 21st century.

The MA Digital Management programme was launched in the 2011–12 academic year, a development which marked the start of online supervision being routinely used to complement conventional delivery methods.

Main benefits

1. Mutual Brand Recognition: students receive a qualification from both an accredited university and a global leader in management innovation.
2. HE/Industry Knowledge Exchange: access to industry-based lecturers who are at the cutting edge of innovation within their field. TU provides university infrastructure and support.
3. Furthering of both partners' strategic objectives, simultaneously: by working in collaboration, both partners are able to make use of each other's resources whilst remaining agile enough to meet the demands of working professionals.

Main challenges

Maintaining growth in numbers. These programmes are specialised, and their success relies on establishing tight-knit cohorts with personalised supervision, rather than large groups.

Why students choose the programme

"I believe the MA in Digital Management programme at Hyper Island is relevant to the current and future needs of the financial services

industry, its current and future workforce, both in Singapore and in the Asia Pacific Region. As a recent graduate of the programme, I can attest to the fact that the module curriculum, research, projects and assessments I have been through have helped shape and guide the transformational efforts I have implemented in my organisation. I would recommend more people in the financial services industry to undertake this programme."

Akeel Munshi, Head of DevOps, Agile and Testing,
Standard Chartered Bank

Why employers choose students from the programme

"At Havas Group, we see the Hyper Island Masters' programmes as a real opportunity to support our strategy to develop our people throughout the business. We started a graduate recruitment discussion with Hyper Island after not finding a match for many years. We immediately found in them a partner that shared our passion and enthusiasm for creating high-performing individuals that we want to recruit. Their passion and energy, combined with their progressive and creative approach, makes their graduates the perfect cultural fit for our business."

Ewen MacPherson, People Director at Havas Group (multinational creative agency)

"The Institute of Banking and Finance's knowledge-sharing events are a key platform in helping us deepen industry competencies and most of our events would not have been possible without the support of our industry learning partners, with Hyper Island as one of our key learning partners."

Singapore Institute of Banking and Finance

Main recommendations for universities wishing to deliver similar programmes

1. Identify a partner who can offer something your institution cannot offer alone.
2. Support them to grow into new markets and areas, offering them stability when this is needed.

Note

⁵ Hyper Island is a Swedish digital creative business school with a consultancy side specializing in industry training using digital technology.

3. Focus on quality and innovation above all.

The Open University

The partnership between the Open University and the Arab Open University

This partnership goes back to 2002 when Arab Open University (AOU) campuses in Kuwait, Jordan and Lebanon were approved for delivery of Open University (OU) validated programmes. Since then, the partnership has expanded and it now includes approved sites in nine sovereign states: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan and, most recently, Palestine. Currently there are approximately 30,000 AOU students enrolled on OU-validated programmes.

Students can choose from three undergraduate and five postgraduate programmes covering Business, English Language and Literature, and Computing and Education. The programmes are offered as dual awards, so students receive both an AOU certificate and an OU certificate.

Main benefits

Initiated and sponsored by the late HRH Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz, President of the Arab Gulf Development Programme (AGFUND), the AOU was set up to improve access to higher and continuing education, irrespective of age, gender, income, geographical location and employment across the Arab region. This closely aligns with the OU's values, and through this collaboration, the OU has been able to promote its mission to widen access to education on a global scale.

The expansion of the AOU into nine countries has enabled affordable higher education for students to not only study in English, but also gain a dual award, providing wider employment opportunities both locally and globally.

The blended learning model with daytime and evening classes allows students to learn whilst they earn. Furthermore, the AOU's flexible learning model caters for students with caring responsibilities, in particular female students, who often outnumber male students in programme enrolment.

The quality of curricula and robust academic standards, required and monitored in line with UK Quality Code expectations, enhance student

employability and have reinforced the AOU's reputation across the region. Competition for students is fierce, so the dual award is a credible and attractive proposition.

Main challenges

As the partnership formed, it was important for the OU to recognise that for the AOU's various branches to operate as a private university, they must each be accredited by their own country's Ministry of Education and adhere to that country's by-laws, as well as meet UK requirements. As an example, local by-laws may mean students are segregated in the classroom, which would not be seen as standard practice in the UK.

As the validating partner it remains important to understand, work with and respect local by-laws and not perceive them as a barrier to the partnership.

Why students choose the programme

"I was looking for a university to continue my studies without conflict with my work hours. AOU is a university that opens its door to every student regardless their age, nationality and budget. It was the only university which offered such a great learning opportunity within a very reasonable budget as well as the dual certification – one from the UK Open University and the other from Arab Open University. All these factors made me choose Arab Open University among all the other universities in Bahrain.

Besides the efficient academic experience, I have also been given the chance to participate in competitions and other activities that have added to my social and academic life at the university. I have honestly enjoyed an overall exceptional learning experience."

Aisha Qureshi, registered on the BSc (Hons) Information Technology & Computing programme, AOU Bahrain.

Why employers choose students from the programme

"We really value the student's contribution, their ways of thinking and determination to accomplish the task."

Feedback from a local employer.

“The AOU and the OU(UK) partnership has been instrumental in the evolution of the Arab Open University as a credible educational distance learning institution within the Arab world. AOU takes a great pride in the international status conferred by its partnership with the Open University. The dual award arrangement is one of the main distinctive features that attracts large numbers of individuals to join the Arab Open University”

AOU Senior Management.

Main recommendations for universities wishing to deliver similar programmes

The partnership between the OU and AOU is well-established, with embedded quality assurance processes ensuring academic quality and academic standards meet the UK Quality Code expectations.

For any UK institutions considering entering into international partnerships you might want to first consider:

1. Does your validation model suit international partnership, and if not, what adjustments need to be made to ensure UK standards and local requirements are met?
2. Have you considered cultural differences and potential language barriers that could impact on the partnership?
3. Have you factored in enough initial investment to onboard your international partner and maintain a continuous level of support?
4. What if it all goes wrong: do you have an exit strategy, does your partner have a robust Student Protection Plan and what impact would this have on your institution?
5. With the current global travel restrictions, what is the impact on assuring quality and how does your institution manage this risk?

University of Dundee

BEng (Hons) in Biomedical Engineering

Established in 2018, the Joint Educational Partnership between the University of Dundee (UoD) and Northeastern University in China offers a BEng (Hons) in Biomedical Engineering to 120 students each year. Students study in China (years

1–3) and Dundee (year 4), with UoD staff delivering teaching on campus in all four years. UoD teaching in 2020 was moved online.

Main benefits

Top four benefits to moving online:

1. cost- and time-effective due to avoiding travel to the partner country
2. students benefit from the flexible learning environment, with freedom to learn at their own pace, location and time
3. attractive to world-leading guest lecturers, as there is less demand on their time
4. high quality online resources available to supplement learning

Main challenges

Top four barriers to moving online:

1. connectivity and access to UK online resources
2. time difference between the UK and China
3. new way of teaching/learning for many staff/students
4. practical activities cannot be replaced by online sessions at short notice

Why students choose the programme

“When the new coronavirus suddenly attacked China and the world, I realised that the treatment of patients needs not only professional doctors and nurses, but also lots of medical equipment. I read a lot of relevant materials, and finally chose biomedical engineering as my major.

Territory does have bounds, but knowledge has no bounds. It is very important to have an education system which transcends national boundaries. Here, Northeastern University and Dundee University stand together to make our dreams more realistic, and let us stand at a higher starting point.

Northeastern University meets Dundee University, and we meet the world. Many people say that biomedical engineering has built a bridge between Northeastern University and Dundee University. At the same time, each of us has built a bridge between China and the UK in medical treatment.

Because of the strong support of two famous universities, I feel more excited and motivated.”

BEng Biomedical Engineering Year 1 student

Why overseas providers choose to partner with the programme

“Working together with the University of Dundee, we have made careful plans to maintain our Biomedical Engineering programme at the exceptionally high levels of academic achievement required by our students.

Through online learning in this academic year, our students have been through this new learning platform together and have benefited from a building of trust, co-operation, closer communication with staff, and widened access to knowledge. This enhances their employability and future career prospects greatly.

Online blended learning has also opened opportunities for our partnership inviting more world leading research and industrial and clinical expertise to our programme. This strengthens our national and international reputation in Biomedical Engineering.”

Dean of School, Northeastern University

Main recommendations for universities wishing to deliver similar programmes

1. Programmes need to strongly align with university strategy.
2. There needs to be a clear management structure and QA process, along with a strong team approach.
3. Be open minded and prepare to see challenges as development opportunities.
4. Adopt a blended learning approach, making proper use of synchronous meeting time and asynchronous teaching for a wider range of learning information.
5. Make use of the variety of online resources for additional learning opportunities.
6. Encourage peer group work and interactive learning to enhance student-to-student communication.

University of London

Institution and programmes

The University of London (UoL) began its transnational provision in the nineteenth century, and today has 50,000 online students in some 190 countries – all supported by a sophisticated learning platform. The programmes include business, finance, economics, management, computing, marketing, law, education, health and psychology among others. Key to this delivery is a network of independent teaching centres that provide local study support, especially to undergraduates benefitting from face-to-face provision where they live.

Main benefits

Our students say that the most important benefits are access, flexibility and employability.

We provide multiple entry routes for those without formal academic qualifications but with relevant work experience. We also provide access programmes and intermediary qualifications to enable students to build their way up to their desired award.

The flexibility of the programmes allows students to fit their studies around work and family commitments, wherever they are, with up to six years to complete an undergraduate degree and up to five years for postgraduate.

Employability is embedded in the curriculum and supported by business placements, careers micro-modules and focussed webinars and drop-in events. With 85% of our global graduates in work or further study, we are on a par with UK campus-based providers.

Main challenges

Barriers include recognition, finance and completion.

The university works closely with regulators, professional bodies and employers to help underpin recognition of our degrees.

We have a growing portfolio of scholarships and bursaries to help broaden opportunities for many, but recognise that there is always more to do. Emerging new tax liabilities for providers bring additional pressures in this context.

A dedicated student experience team works to ensure students get maximum support in progressing through their studies, with strands on

online community-building; development of digital services; employability initiatives; and resources for mental health and well-being.

Why students choose the programme

UoL students say that the top three impacts of their study are:

1. Progression towards long-term career aspirations
2. Enhanced social and intellectual capabilities beyond employment
3. Enhanced quality of life

Students share their views about their studies at UoL:

“The degree has made me confident in my chosen field, which will be so much more familiar thanks to the vocational background of the course. The esteem in which this degree is held by recruiters and finance professionals provides a flying start.”

Fatema Daud, UAE, BSc Accounting and Finance

“The programme is very flexible, with online seminars including open discussion, assignments, course materials, and expert support. The programme also helped me to enhance current technical practices.”

Anil Thakur, India, MSc Information Security

“I evaluate my professional success by how I can translate what I have learnt into working ideas for societal impact. This programme has also given me the tools to better structure and execute business ideas for more efficient goals and sustainable impact.”

Irene Uti-Egbeogu, Nigeria, Global MBA (Leadership)

Why employers choose students from the programme

Regarding UoL graduates, employers say:

“Diligent and committed individuals ... thirst for knowledge, with a sense of responsibility and a positive attitude.”

BDO LLP, Singapore

“Their passion and experience on community service and CSR has inspired us.”

Galaxy Communications, Vietnam

“Keenness to develop their business acumen; and to be effective in tackling real world scenarios.”

Talent Acquisition, Pakistan

Regarding the multi-year collaboration with the University of London in building ODL capacity across the Nigerian university sector, the Nigerian National University Commission’s Executive Secretary, Professor Abubaker Rasheed, said:

“In Nigeria, we are interested in the transition from a foundational mode of teaching to open and distance modes. We have taken the decision to model our future practice along the lines of the University of London, being a pioneer, a model that has appealed to us and that we believe will address our major concerns here in Nigeria: those of widening access and deepening quality. Our aim is that through this relationship, Nigeria will build a credible profile of experts and specialists that will address the needs of our country in open and distance education.”

Main recommendations for universities wishing to deliver similar programmes

1. New providers need to be clear about the distinctiveness of their offer in a crowded TNE market.
2. Ensure alignment with national skills strategies.
3. Stay abreast of evolving regulatory requirements.
4. Commitment to an academic partnership of equals is key; joint, dual and parallel degrees are in demand.
5. Be aware of evolving tax regimes.
6. Invest for the long term.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Background

This report is the result of the work of a Task & Finish Group on Transnational Online Higher Education (the Group), convened by UUKi, that met three times between July and August 2020. The Group was formed at the behest of UUKi's TNE Advisory Group.

The Group was chaired by Professor Helen O'Sullivan, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) at Keele University, and included eight members representing a spectrum of higher education providers across the UK nations, regions of England, type of institution and online learning models (see Appendix B for a full list of members).

Expert advice was provided by representatives from the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), the British Council, the Department for Education, the Department for International Trade, Jisc, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (ucisa) and UK NARIC.

The group's aim was to develop a set of recommendations to be addressed at the provider, sector and governmental levels responding to two questions:

1. How can higher education providers, sector bodies and government best develop and communicate a narrative around the quality of UK degrees delivered online or through blended learning overseas?
2. How can higher education providers collaborate with other organisations in the public, private and not-for-profit spheres to innovate in the area of transnational online higher education?

The Group focused on the long-term impact of recommendations to expand the number of overseas students who access UK higher education programmes through online and blended learning. It also took into account the new opportunities created by the rapid transition to online learning due to the Covid-19 outbreak, especially in countries that have made enabling adjustments, for example through increased regulatory flexibility and/or recognition of online qualifications.

This report was presented to UUKi's TNE Advisory Group for scrutiny and with the intention that it will help define a plan of action to implement the recommendations to expand access to UK transnational online higher education.

This report is directed at UK higher education providers, sector bodies, and government and sector representatives such as the International Education Champion. Individuals and organisations based overseas that are involved or interested in transnational education (TNE) may also benefit from the insight provided in the report.

Appendix B Membership of the Task & Finish Group on Transnational Online Higher Education

Representative	Position	Organisation	Status
Prof. Helen O'Sullivan	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education)	Keele University	Chair
Lynn Evans	Strategic Director, University of Liverpool Online	University of Liverpool	Member
George Hunt	Director of International Development	Teesside University	Member
Dr Aulay Mackenzie	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Partnerships (Home and International)	Wrexham Glyndŵr University	Member
Prof. Robin Mason	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International)	University of Birmingham	Member
Jason Norris	Director of Global Partnerships	University of Dundee	Member
Jayne Richards	Curriculum Manager for Online Learning and Teaching	Rose Bruford College	Member
Dr Suzanna Tomassi	Deputy Director (Partnerships)	Open University	Member
Mike Winter	Director of Global Engagement	University of London	Member
Aisling Conboy	Education Specialist	Department for International Trade	Expert
Dr Maren Deepwell	Chief Executive Officer	ALT	Expert
Dr Alison Felce	Head of Accreditation & International Services	QAA	Expert
Sean Gater	Policy Adviser, International Higher Education	Department for Education	Expert
Anna Mathews	Head of Policy and Projects	ucisa	Expert
Celia Partridge	Assistant Director, Partnerships and Mobility	UUKi	Expert
Eduardo Ramos	Head of TNE	UUKi	Secretary
Griff Ryan	TNE Projects Officer	UUKi	Expert
Dr Fabrizio Trifiro	Head of Quality Benchmark Services	UK NARIC	Expert
Kevin Van Cauter	Senior Higher Education Advisor	British Council	Expert
Dr Esther Wilkinson	Head of International	Jisc	Expert

Appendix C

Definitions

The Group considered TNE provision delivered through online or blended learning, leading to UK higher education awards, as defined in code 3 of HESA's AOR.⁶ Under HESA definitions, this comprises students studying for the whole of their programme of study outside of the UK, or with study periods in the UK equal or inferior to a block of eight consecutive weeks.

The Group also considered online and blended provision that, due to data return categorisation, may not be included in code 3 but that is delivered transnationally. This includes, for instance, provision that is delivered primarily online but where the student is registered at an overseas partner organisation, with the award validated by the reporting provider; such provision typically falls under codes 4 or 5 of HESA's AOR.⁷

Beyond HESA definitions, there is no common language to describe higher education delivered primarily through digital means to students located overseas. Terms such as digital, virtual, online, blended, hybrid, distance or remote are often used interchangeably.

The 2010 HEFCE *Study of UK Online Learning* found that 'distance learning' was by far the most common term used by UK HE and FE providers, but considered this term outdated as a key descriptor for courses delivered online.

More recently, the QAA, while acknowledging that online works well as an umbrella term as it is in common use beyond the UK higher education sector, points out that this type of definition may be viewed as a less desirable option for those students who want a greater degree of social and face-to-face interaction or who have limited access to software, hardware or an internet connection.⁸

This resonates with TNE practice, where online learning often involves varying levels of support from delivery partners overseas, or periods of onsite study in different locations (including the UK). One such case is that of 'parallel degrees', which enable students to simultaneously complete two courses of study, one onsite at an overseas provider and the UK degree primarily online.

Some commentators are already pointing to a 'Global Delivery Model' with an accelerated convergence where courses are designed to allow for the mixture of onsite, offshore and online delivery and the location of the student 'does not act as a restriction to learning or lead to economic discrimination, but is seen as an opportunity'.⁹

Note

⁶ Registered at UK HE education provider - Distance, flexible and distributed learning UK HE education provider award where the location of the student is known to be overseas.

⁷ Registered at overseas partner organisation - studying overseas for an award of the reporting provider.

⁸ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/building-a-taxonomy-for-digital-learning.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2020082111264620>

Appendix D

Contributing expert organisations' activities in transnational online higher education

Association of Learning Technologists (ALT)

Key considerations in relation to technology when delivering content online to students located overseas should include copyright, privacy laws and data protection regulations, as international baseline examples from the Certified Membership of ALT (CMALT) framework of professional practice demonstrate. As a starting point, courses should include a glossary of common terms relating to the technology used and help materials should reflect the diversity of the student cohort through both the language and imagery used.

Furthermore, access to technical infrastructure, digital devices and appropriate study space are of particular concern and an essential element of achieving equitable access to transnational education. This is of particular importance for learners from the Global South but also of concern in the context of the pandemic and its long-term impact on BAME communities around the world. Work pioneered through ALT's Open Education Conference relating to Pedagogies of Care has been continued and established resources for community-building activities led by Equity Unbound educators.

Examples from ALT's Annual Survey show a marked increase in strategic Learning Technology roles, highlighting the importance of Learning Technology expertise in creating successful strategies for transnational education.

British Council

Student-facing messaging for online learning is a core part of the British Council's messaging framework: for example, in the narrative around quality, flexibility, affordability and employability. These messages can be tailored in countries where online learning is established and in those where it is less well understood. In priority markets we work to promote all forms of TNE, including online, through marketing campaigns and targeted messaging.

We also undertake analysis of market opportunities, raising awareness of UK online learning as well as capability and flexibility in-country. At the policy level, we work to understand barriers to recognition of online learning and bring together stakeholders to tackle these. We also work to help build capacity to deliver online programmes, as, for example, with our work in Nigeria to expand online learning opportunities through partnerships and to tackle issues of recognition and reputation.

Earlier this year, our Virtual Higher Education Dialogue series focused extensively on the future of online learning, with sessions on the future of online assessment, emerging technologies and models.

Jisc

Optimising the quality, speed and reliability of the connection between the home (UK) campus and host country should not only be about enabling and supporting ODL, but an opportunity to enhance the student experience to be at least equitable to that of peers studying onsite in the UK. Access to content, applications and platforms will either be directly from the UK-based VLE on campus or, increasingly, Cloud-based.

As a result of working with members and trialling solutions, Jisc have established a Global Education Access Framework to enhance access to international education wherever that may need to be delivered in the world. Whilst initiated from the need to reach students in China unable to return to or start their studies in the UK, the solutions are also directly applicable to ODL and to support TNE, and, as the lines between forms of international education blur, can support students anywhere in the world.

Key considerations for providers embarking on this journey should include (i) options for cross-border connectivity and routing; (ii) intra-country connectivity, including the quality of regional/local connectivity

and the 'last mile' connection; (iii) legal and regulatory restrictions which may prohibit use of technologies or specific applications; and (iv) the security of the connection.

The AOR Review is on hold due to Covid-19. It is unlikely that the OfS will put any more burden on the sector or increase data collection, and therefore the Review might not be restarted any time soon. Until further data is available it is difficult to know what metrics should be put in place; however we have made the suggestions below:

1. percentage of provision by type, country, and provider
2. growth in overseas distance learning
3. financial breakdown (revenue/fees are hard to pinpoint/isolate/understand at present)
4. fuller details of the partner educator to provide insights into partners, as well as refine and improve the ability to understand the nature and scale of partnerships (as headcount cannot be linked to specific partnerships/partners)
5. A move beyond headcounts towards an individualised record, leading to better understanding and comparison of student numbers, etc.
6. A richer taxonomy and development of the 'Type of Activity' codes – one that would make it clear where something was ODL

At present, most courses developed in partnership with a UK higher education provider have an output linked with that provider's awarding powers; i.e. the student would at the very least be on a course of study that led to an award from the UK higher education provider (as opposed to also being 'registered' with them). There is already provision for this in the AOR.

QAA

Quality and standards for all modes of learning, including online, distance, flexible, distributed and hybrid, whether on campus within the UK, or internationally through TNE, fall under the same arrangements. Higher education providers are responsible for ensuring that all their qualifications, whatever the mode or location of delivery, achieve the same standards and that these standards meet those set for all UK higher education.

As the UK's quality experts, QAA has conducted regular reviews of the UK's TNE offer. The most recent review programme focused on one country which is a key destination for UK TNE per annum. A representative sample of the range of provision by mode of study, type of provider, type of partnership, etc. was identified and a small review team carried out site visits and evaluations of each provider.

In July 2020, Universities UK and GuildHE commissioned QAA to develop a new approach to reviewing and enhancing the quality of UK TNE. The new method, Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK Transnational Higher Education Provision 2021–22 to 2025–26, is out for consultation in October and November 2020 and will be implemented from September 2021.

In response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on UK higher education and TNE, QAA led on a range of activities to garner information and provide guidance to the UK HE sector and international partners, quality agencies and HE providers. The guidance published includes:

- questions to inform a toolkit for enhancing quality in a digital environment
- building a taxonomy for digital learning
- advice to degree-awarding bodies on mitigating the disruption of studies to TNE students caused by the Covid-19 outbreak
- effective practice in UK Transnational education during the Covid-19 pandemic

- preserving quality and standards through a time of rapid change: UK HE in 2020–21
- QAA International Partners' Forum Report

The full range of guidance is available on the QAA Covid-19 website.

ucisa

Some universities have indicated that their overseas students have poor broadband connectivity, which makes downloading large files and streaming difficult. Recognition of this is leading to a greater use of asynchronous online teaching and learning activity.

Software usage and licence restrictions in certain countries can cause challenges, therefore providers who are looking to significantly increase their online offerings to overseas students are encouraged to investigate options and costs at an early stage.

UK NARIC

In response to the sudden shift to online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic, UK NARIC has published a Guide to Recognition Issues in International Distance Learning, highlighting recognition issues in international distance learning in key countries. This guide is designed to complement the information on quality assurance and qualifications made available to UK NARIC members on its International Comparison database. It forms part of a wider strand of UK NARIC's resources to support the education sector in driving progressive change in the international understanding and fair recognition of credible distance learning, supporting global mobility and opportunity for graduates and providers.

The TNE Quality Benchmark (TNE QB) scheme developed by UK NARIC serves the primary purpose of improving international understanding of and confidence in TNE qualifications, with a view to supporting the global portability of TNE qualifications, and the growth of quality and relevant TNE provision.

The service is based on an international peer-review assessment against TNE benchmarks aligned with accepted international reference points. The standards apply to all modes of TNE delivery, including online learning. When reviewing online TNE provision, the inclusion in the peer-review team of experts in this modality of delivery is aimed at securing the appropriate application of the TNE QB standards. An international advisory board offers an additional layer of independent peer scrutiny.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the eight university representatives who were members of the Task and Finish Group on Transnational Online Higher Education for their generous support. This document would not have been possible without their contributions, based on expertise developed over many hours of dedication to the field of higher education. Our appreciation also for reviewing the document , and for contributing a number of highly illustrative case studies.

We also wish to thank the representatives from partner organisations and from government bodies for providing expert advice during the meetings and for their contributions contained in Appendix D. Without them the many exciting initiatives that are taking place in the sector to support transnational online higher education would not have been adequately captured.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor Helen O'Sullivan for expertly chairing the Task & Finish Group meetings, and supporting the proceedings before, in between and after the end of the meetings. Her leadership was essential for the development of this document.

Celia, Eduardo & Griff

UUKi TNE Team