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The Effectiveness of Transnational Education: A Case Study from Oman

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Introduction:

Transnational Education (TNE) refers to educational activities or programmes designed in institutions located in one country but delivered to learners in a different country. Due to several factors, TNE has become a common practice in several countries, especially developing countries. Unemployment, globalization, mobility of human resources, political tensions and humanitarian crises, enter alia, around the world increasingly force higher education institution (HEIs) to offer TNE alongside national programmes. Despite governments' efforts to regulate the delivery of TNE, questions about the effectiveness of the programmes remain largely unanswered.

This paper reports on a joint research project carried out collaboratively by researchers from Aston University and its Omani affiliated partner, Muscat University where three different undergraduate TNE programmes are delivered. The research aims at investigating various critical factors affecting the effectiveness of TNE and suggests ways of improving these programmes to fit the Omani context while ensuring a high-quality of education.

The Context:

As a rapidly growing country in the Gulf Region, Oman has made astonishing achievements in the field of higher education during the last few decades. According to 2016/2017 statistics (Education Council, 2016) published by the Omani Education Council, which is the highest educational authority in the country, Oman has 70 public and private HEIs including institutes, colleges and universities. As a government requirement, most of the private colleges and universities must offer their programmes in collaboration with internationally recognized institutions. This collaboration usually takes the form of academic affiliation. Nonetheless, the arrangement of academic affiliation varies from one institution to another depending on the role of the international partner. While some affiliation arrangements entail validation of programmes only, others entail joint delivery and quality assurance.

Despite these quantitative achievements, the Omani government, employers and parents share the view that the quality of Omani higher education system still needs significant improvement. A recently published document by the government (Education Council, 2018) titled (*The National Strategy for Education 2040*) states that: “While the Sultanate has achieved a lot in the sector of education, it is noticed that the government has focused on spreading education and providing access where the quality remained a great challenge”. This 20-year national strategy aims at overcoming this challenge through recommendations addressing almost all components of the higher education system in Oman.

Striving to improve the quality of higher education, several private sector companies and prominent Omani figures had collaborated to set up a university with a robust academic affiliation arrangement to provide high quality TNE programmes and an excellent student experience. Three years ago, the project was successfully launched. Muscat university and Aston have been collaborating in delivering undergraduate programmes under a ten-years collaboration agreement. The programmes mainly fall under three study areas, namely, Engineering, Business and Logistics. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities govern their partnership. To ensure quality and world class outcomes, students will receive their degrees upon completion of their bachelor degrees from Aston university as well as from Muscat university. Therefore, both universities are equally responsible for quality assurance.

Achieving and assuring high quality of TNE is a long journey that requires not only collaborative work from both institutions but also an adaptive process in which various stakeholders can participate proactively in improving the effectiveness of the delivered programmes and the overall students’ learning experience.

The idea of this research is based on this adaptive process in which information about crucial factors affecting TNE is collected and used as a continuous feedback particularly in these early years of establishment. This work is an example of a serious academic affiliation arrangement that aims at assisting young people to acquire knowledge, skills and values they need in order to participate effectively in various professional fields.

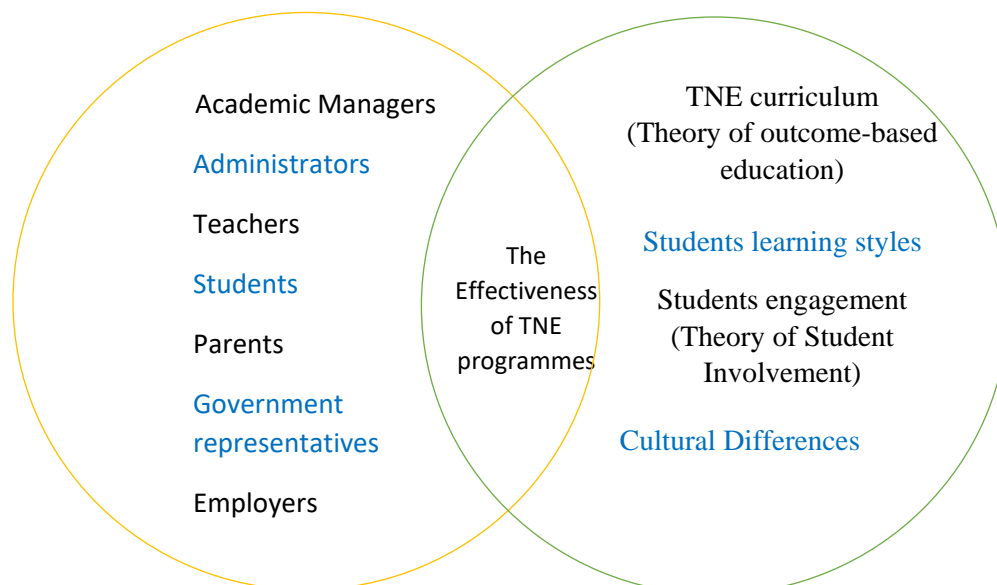
The Research Problem:

This emerging partnership has already raised several questions around the effectiveness of programmes delivery, mainly due to contextual differences. To what extent students are equipped to interact with these programmes? To what extent those programmes are based on students' prior knowledge? To what extent the social and cultural environment supports TNE? are among questions raised by academics as well as by students and parents. These questions and others are frequently posed and discussed by members of the joint steering committee which has been established as part of the agreement between the two universities. All stakeholders, including the Omani government, are excited about this long-term collaborative educational project and genuinely hope that it will be a success story and will contribute to raising the quality of higher education in the region. However, if these questions are not answered through a scientific research and appropriate data-based decisions are taken, this is unlikely to happen. Hence, the idea of this research was proposed and approved by the joint steering committee. Researchers from both universities have been collaborating for more than a year to plan and execute this research project.

Methodology:

With written consent, this research is being carried out in Oman using the same research instruments designed originally by Phuong Phung, a PhD student at Aston Business School, supervised by Professor Helen Higson and carried out initially for investigating the effectiveness of TNE programmes in Vietnam. The research instruments were then adapted to the Omani local context. Developed interview guides based on clearly defined theoretical framework are used to interview seven different stakeholders including students, parents, academics, academic managers, administrators, government officials and employers. These stakeholders are involved whether directly or indirectly in the TNE process. In order to investigate the factors affecting the success of TNE programmes and suggest ways of improvement, these guides aim at answering the following general questions:

- What is meant by the “effectiveness of TNE programmes”?
- What potential factors influence the effectiveness of TNE programmes?
- What are the ideal and practical ways to design TNE programmes?



Based on five theories, namely, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), outcome-based education theory (Spady, 1994), learning styles theory (Kolb, 1976), student involvement (engagement) theory (Kahn, 1990), and cultural differences theory (Hampden-Tumer and Fons, 1994), the guides consisted of questions related to stakeholders' general perceptions of TNE effectiveness, curriculum design, learning styles, students' engagement, cultural differences and TNE impact on graduates' performance.

The interviews have been conducted by two qualified researchers holding degrees from both Middle-Eastern and British HEIs with extensive experience in quantitative and qualitative research. In addition, they have been involved in the establishment of Muscat university and development of its partnership with the Aston university from the early stages. For validity and reliability purposes, conducting the semi-structured interviews using the mentioned interview guides involved the following steps:

- Skype meetings with the team at Aston university to understand the background of the project and the original context of the research design and its instruments.
- Meetings held by the team of Muscat university to discuss the theoretical framework of the research project and its instruments.
- A skype meeting with the team Aston university to agree on contextual changes to be introduced to the research instruments in order to be consistent with the Omani society. The two teams agreed that in some cases the interviews would be conducted in Arabic.
- Oman team piloted all interview guides prior to conducting the actual interviews.
- Another skype meeting with the team in the UK had been held to share the results of the pilot interviews and agree on some changes in the interview guides.
- The two researchers at Muscat university agreed on the time frame for conducting interviews, transcribing, analyzing and reporting during this academic year.

The researchers have completed interviewing all stakeholders and transcribing the interviews. Currently, they are in the process of analyzing their data. This involves coding, categorizing, identification of themes and patterns for each item in the interview guides. This process will be fully described in the final report of this work. According to the research plan, they expect to produce their findings and their final report end of 2019.

Why this research is crucial?

The results of this joint research are expected to inform TNE curricula development processes in the UK as well as the delivery processes in Oman. Further, they will provide opportunities for producing other research papers allowing cross-cultural comparison between the two sets of results obtained in Oman and Vietnam. More importantly, they will deepen the understanding of contextual and cultural factors contributing to TNE effectiveness in the recipient countries and, as a result, contribute to developing the TNE theory globally.

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