



# UK university libraries supporting transnational education (TNE) partnerships

This article outlines the development and delivery of transnational education (TNE) by UK higher education institutions and reviews how libraries in the sector are supporting this. It reflects on findings from a library survey and event held in 2019 and the expectations and concerns about the support available to TNE students. It argues that whilst licensing of electronic content for TNE programmes is a key focus for both partners in a TNE relationship, effective library support for quality TNE provision also necessitates good internal and external communication and collaboration. Some suggestions on ways forward for libraries supporting TNE are made.

## Keywords

TNE; transnational education; collaborative provision; partnerships; licensing; collaboration; libraries

## Introduction

Effectively supporting transnational education is a concern of many UK higher education libraries. Although current scholarly literature examines the maintenance of quality assurance of TNE programmes, there is a noticeable lack of research around the supporting role that library services play in ensuring a good quality TNE student experience. This article considers feedback from the sector about how this is currently being undertaken, reviews some of the key areas of that support and make suggestions for ways forward.

The authors are librarians directly supporting TNE partnership activity, with over 25,000 TNE students in all subject areas across their two institutions, and have been prompted to better understand the scope of, and means to best undertake, such activity in the UK context. This article is the result of informal meetings with other UK and partner librarians, discussions at a national event organised by the authors on this topic and the associated survey of experiences in the sector.<sup>1</sup> The article largely presents a UK partner perspective of the TNE relationship, responding to initial UK library community concerns, and acknowledges that progressing the discussion with input from the international partners is a crucial next step.

TNE is defined as 'education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based'<sup>2</sup> and includes overseas campus delivery, collaborative provision (franchised or validated), and distance learning delivery.

The UK is the second largest provider of TNE globally, with most UK universities delivering programmes overseas.<sup>3</sup> This represents around 10% of the global market, at just under 700,000 students in 225 countries. Only seven UK universities reported more than 12,000 students in their TNE programmes for 2017–18. Twenty institutions reported between 4,000 and 12,000 students and 109 universities reported fewer than 4,000 TNE students. Forty-nine per cent of TNE students with UK institutions are based in Asia, followed by Africa (21.5%) and the EU (14%).



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2 Though there can be significant total numbers of TNE students, the TNE provision within individual partners is typically small. Only 5% of the provision involves partnerships with institutions where there are more than 1,000 partnership students, whilst 90% involves fewer than 250 partnership students, according to the HESA aggregate offshore return.<sup>4</sup> Each partnership institution may have many partnership students however, by running programmes with more than one partner.

The value and reputation of UK higher educational experience is a major factor contributing to the ongoing expansion of TNE education. HEGlobal's (British Council and UUKi [Universities UK International]) 2016 report identifies specific elements that attract overseas students to UK education, such as critical thinking and lifelong learning.<sup>5</sup>

Library professionals have a role to play in enhancing the experience of TNE partner students, similar to the role they play for their UK campus-based students. Access to good quality online resources is important to this along with information literacy and academic skills. In a TNE relationship there is the additional consideration of responsibility for provision of these elements across all partners.

There is a need for the involvement of the UK higher education institution (UK HEI) library in the processes which develop and quality assure TNE to ensure decision makers are aware of these issues and to secure a comparable experience with UK campus-based students with regard to resources, facilities and support.

'Library professionals have a role to play in enhancing the experience of TNE partner students'

In reviewing this support for TNE, the following will be considered:

- UK library community experiences in supporting TNE
- licensing of resources
- internal collaboration within UK HEI
- external collaboration with TNE partners.

## UK library community experiences in supporting TNE

In February 2019 the authors held the 'Partnerships beyond licensing' event to bring together those UK university libraries that are actively supporting, or seeking to support, TNE partners. It considered the wider role of the library and librarians' contribution to supporting the development, delivery and quality assurance of TNE, and not solely the licensing of resources. Preceding the event, a survey of the sector was undertaken.<sup>6</sup>

The online survey targeted UK university libraries and gathered 46 responses revealing an established TNE activity with the respondents. Most (79%) of those involved in TNE have been active for over five years. Few (16%) libraries have specific staff roles supporting this activity, with most including the work within existing roles, most frequently (40%) within collections or acquisitions teams.

'the disparity between aspirations for supporting TNE and the reality of making it happen'

A strong theme emerging from this survey and associated event, was the disparity between aspirations for supporting TNE and the reality of making it happen. Sixty-three per cent said that their overall support was adequate but 23% said it was poor.

This disparity appears in many of the comments gathered in the survey, such as:

- 'I say "yes"; really the answer is "sometimes"'
- 'having said yes to the involvement and resources question – this is yes in a perfect world. It does not always happen in practice'
- 'we should be asked to comment on partnerships as part of a project approval process but this is not compulsory so does not always happen'.

3 Similarly, on quality assurance and approval, 51% of respondents said that they were involved. Despite this, however, 51% of respondents also said that their library was not informed about resources and existing support provision at the partner institution prior to the formation of the partnership. Forty-five per cent of respondents felt that their understanding of local partner resources was poor and 63% said their involvement in development of partnerships was poor; all indicating gaps in development and communication.

The key skills respondents said were necessary for a library role in supporting TNE were communication, negotiation and interpersonal. All of these rated significantly higher than 'traditional' library skills, for example, information literacy, subject knowledge and teaching. This perhaps reflects the needs identified in the responses to earlier questions.

Libraries' strong desire to effectively support TNE is indicated from respondents to the survey but there is often a self-identified gap in effectiveness in doing so, which was echoed during the event. This feedback points to the importance of internal collaboration within the UK HEI and externally with TNE partners, with the library voice influencing TNE design and delivery and the resulting student experience. Before looking at these issues we review licensing for TNE partners.

## Licensing

The licensing of online library content for partner students is a key concern for most UK HEIs involved in TNE. Ensuring an equitable experience for TNE students requires access to appropriate content to support the learning. Some publishers' licences exclude access to partners, require additional payment for this access, or are simply unclear as to whether they are 'authorised users'. Licensing restrictions for partners and any associated costs for obtaining access can impact the learning experience. The nature of the TNE relationship will influence the approach taken, with most UK HEIs licensing partner students as a subset of total students, some licensing them as separate entities as in some branch campus scenarios, and others not licensing them at all (with the provision of information resources to support programmes referred back to the partner to resolve).

'The licensing of online library content for partner students is a key concern'

For UK HEIs providing TNE partner access to university online library collections there are four interlinked considerations.

### Negotiating access for TNE partner students and staff through licences

Commonly, existing library processes are used but this requires considerable additional resources due to the complexity of partner licensing. Issues include a lack of understanding of the nature of the TNE relationship with publishers, few shared definitions, counting and reporting of students and, of course, negotiating cost.

### Managing costs

Many publishers will impose additional charges calculated on different models. The way the recovery of these costs by the library is dealt with varies and can include not licensing where there is a cost, absorbing costs within an existing budget, or specific internal funding from the HEI for the costs incurred. There can sometimes be a lack of institutional visibility of the existence or scale of these costs. Access for partners remains volatile and each new renewal provides a potential for increased costs or loss of partner access.

The Jisc TNE subscription service seeks to bring clarity within the sector around access and costs by providing common definitions of student status, sources of data to support these and by negotiating with publishers on this basis. This has positively impacted the way libraries consider their TNE students and informs the dialogue concerning partner students with both Jisc and non-Jisc consortia publishers.

## Enabling authentication and authorisation to access resources

Institutions are required to identify their TNE partner students and staff on student records systems and directories, with the appropriate granularity for any required differentiation in access according to publisher licence restrictions. There is also the requirement to adapt current, or implement new, methods for authorising access to specific resources that TNE partners have been licensed to access.

### Communication

Details of resources that are, and are not, available to support any particular TNE partner programme, and any additional costs that may have to be recovered, need to be communicated to programme teams planning and delivering learning at both partners in a timely manner. The impact of licensing on access to resources for partner delivery of programmes can be significant. This requires effective collaboration.

'The impact of licensing on access to resources... can be significant'

## Internal collaboration within our own institutions

In most cases UK HEI libraries are impacted by the development of programmes for partner delivery, with regard to licensing and access to resources and any skills support for students and staff. The scale of this impact can sometimes be hidden. Libraries differ in their approach to licensing for partners and in their level of engagement with skills support, but both impact the quality of the student experience.

One common comment heard through the survey is that libraries are often not aware of a particular partner delivery of a programme until programme delivery has started.<sup>7</sup> Of the several phases of possible involvement – partner approval, partner programme approval, programme review, partnership boards, university and/or faculty TNE collaborative provision committees and partnerships/TNE office – the earlier library involvement occurs, the better the library will be able to act on concerns and set actions to address them. Libraries can build on existing processes supporting home provision and develop additional consultative mechanisms for partner provision.

'How the students are supported across the two partner institutions is key'

The connections between the library and the approval and quality assurance processes of their UK HEI will influence the ability of the library to ensure that the resources and support in place fit with the needs of the students, that implications of licensing are managed and that other student support needs are addressed. How the students are supported across the two partner institutions is key in this and points to the importance of external collaboration.

## External collaboration with TNE partners

In looking at establishing a fluid collaboration between library services at the UK HEI and library services at the partner it is important to consider what type of relationship this could be, with a clear understanding of the respective roles of the library partners. Library services can be a source of knowledge regarding access to resources and the support needed for students to progress.

There is a clear set of expectations of the role the library must play to support UK campus-based students, what resources must be available and what guidance should be on offer to help students developing skills required not only for a successful completion of their academic journeys, but also for employability. The role and expectations of a library service at partner institutions can differ from that of UK HEI libraries. Library resources and responsibility for academic skills are frequently different roles at TNE partners. Awareness of these differences, ensuring an appropriate student experience, in keeping with UK HEI quality assurance, and collaborating to best maximise the support offered

5 by both institutions is important. Often these issues can be overlooked when establishing collaborative provision delivery of programmes.

The expectations of library services from within the UK HEI can be varied and may include sharing good practice or information with library staff at the partner, training or even consultancy. However, these expectations need to be considered in the light of the expectations of the TNE partner which can likewise be varied, reflecting the nature of the partner and their relationship with the UK HEI. It can be the case that a balance needs to be achieved requiring mindfulness of the collaborative nature of TNE. Similar concerns can often be held by partner libraries working within their institutions facing associated considerations in TNE development. In order to ensure clarity of all these expectations, with internal and external stakeholders and to support the relationship, the library needs to be included in the conversations around partner approval and programme development as early as possible. UK library experiences in TNE suggest that a lack of good communication early on can result in potential problems.

## A way forward

Access to online collections as part of the TNE offer from the UK HEI is an important element in many TNE arrangements but it may not be the only objective of good library support. Access to online collections cannot be successfully delivered without collaboration, liaison and effective communication amongst the stakeholders in the TNE relationship.

To support the institutional aspirations for engagement in TNE and the quality of the TNE student experience, libraries need clarity on their own goals in supporting TNE and to establish effective collaboration, within and outside of their university, to achieve them.

There are advantages to the library of being involved in the early stages of the relationship. It allows management of external and internal expectations such as the availability of texts that are recommended in the programme and courses' reading lists, addressing an often-held assumption that everything will be available online with no licence restrictions. Early discussions enable clarification of the support available for student development in the proposed programmes. All these issues can be addressed, or at least explored, during partner and programme approval processes. Additionally, early discussions can initiate processes to enable communication not only between institutions, but also among other stakeholders, including the library teams.

'There are advantages to the library of being involved in the early stages of the relationship'

Clarity of expectations from the library team at the UK HEI could be in the form of a guidance document for programme approval teams, or other contributions to due diligence processes. Potential areas addressed could include terminology and working towards expected standards such as physical collections, facilities, opening hours, study spaces, internet speed and skills development support (information literacy and digital skills).

Achieving appropriate engagement necessitates highlighting the contribution and impact of the library into those processes at an institutional level, working with existing library relationships and skills but also extending these into other TNE specific contexts. It is important to understand the extent to which any library service will engage with these processes and their impact on staffing and other resources beyond licensing.

'one approach will not suit all situations'

TNE partnerships are key for the UK higher education sector and the way libraries support these partnerships is becoming increasingly important for many university libraries. Licensing of resources for TNE students is central but wider collaboration is also relevant. There is a diversity of structures, involvement with TNE and experience within the sector, and one approach will not suit all situations. Understanding of local institutional and partnership structures and developing the library's place and voice within these is key for effective collaboration to deliver the quality for which UK TNE is known.

- 6 Further research is required, utilising existing relationships built between library partners, to gather more of the partner voice and better understand partner involvement in setting expectations and delivering partnership support. The research should seek information on similarities or identify additional barriers needing to be addressed, in order to ensure quality of experience for the TNE student in relation to access to resources and the support of skills.

There is a need to share good practice in library support of TNE and a follow-up to the 'Partnerships beyond licencing' event will be run in the 2020–2021 academic year to help the sector, and our partners, to think about solutions to some of these issues.

#### Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

#### Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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