

**Abstract**

Transnational education (TNE) in China has been closely related to the concept of capacity building. However, its relative academic weakness and the way it operates impede knowledge transfer and organizational learning. After 30 years of development, TNE is still at the periphery of the Chinese higher education system, with only a marginal impact on capacity building.

## Marginal Revolution: The Impact of Transnational Education on Higher Education in China

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Since the 1980s, transnational education (TNE) has proliferated in China with the support of the government. It unfolds mainly in two forms: transnational institutions and transnational programs. A transnational institution offers at least three transnational programs. According to the ministry of education (MoE) website, in March 2016, there were 73 transnational institutions and 1,100 transnational programs offering undergraduate and postgraduate education in 28 of the country's 34 provinces. The Chinese government allows overseas higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide TNE only in collaboration with Chinese HEIs: 1,173 transnational institutions and programs were provided by 611 overseas HEIs from 35 countries and regions, in collaboration with 414 Chinese HEIs.

In China, TNE has been closely related to the concept of capacity building. In the late 1970s, when China experienced sweeping economic and social reforms, the nation's higher education system proved obsolete and malfunctioning. TNE emerged as a nascent power and was expected to help to fundamentally transform the system. The Chinese government has attached greater importance to transnational institutions than to transnational programs. Whereas transnational programs are located in, and administered by, a local faculty (in the sense of "school"), transnational institutions operate side by side with local faculties and are therefore expected to import administrative practices as well as teaching resources from their overseas partners. In 2013, the MoE began to evaluate TNE in 23 provinces. One of the evaluation indicators was "internal benefit in terms of teaching, research, and academic strength to domestic faculties that participate in TNE."

### The "Academic Weakness" of TNE Teachers

Contrary to government expectations, TNE fails to serve as an incubator for organizational and sectoral changes. In the article "[Lost in Internationalised Space: The Challenge of Sustaining Academics Teaching Offshore](#)," Shelda Debowski tells a story in which teachers at the business school of an Australian university who participated in a transnational program were considered "lesser researchers" because they spent considerable time teaching overseas and consequently published fewer papers than their counterparts in other business schools. The same happens with Chinese teachers participating in TNE.

Transnational institutions/programs mainly focus on teaching, whereas local faculties/programs put top priority on research. A criterion for the recruitment of TNE teachers is their willingness and ability to teach, whereas applicants compete for a position

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in local faculties/programs based on their research profiles. TNE's recruitment criterion for research is looser than that of local faculties/programs, and transnational institutions/programs employ teachers who might be turned down by local faculties/programs on grounds of "academic weakness."

Teaching in a foreign language adds an additional workload for local teachers. Many TNE teachers have international exchange experience and/or earned degrees at foreign universities. However, preparing teaching content, designing examinations, and evaluating students' coursework in a foreign language still consumes a large portion of their time, which could have been spent on research. TNE teachers often complain that producing academic output is a luxury for them because of their otherwise heavy teaching workload. As a result, TNE teachers are considered academically weak and subordinate to their colleagues in local faculties/programs.

### **The "Academic Weakness" of TNE**

TNE itself is regarded as being academically weak, despite the fact that some transnational institutions/programs are cooperatively offered with top universities. Many transnational institutions, mainly taking care of daily administration, rely heavily on part-time teachers from local faculties to provide courses. Thus, they run the risk of becoming "hollowed out," since their expertise is not "endogenous," but "borrowed" from local faculties. Lacking independent academic strength, transnational institutions are generally not named according to their scholarly expertise (such as "Faculty of Engineering") but according to the international collaboration on which they are based (such as "Sino-British College" or "China Europe International School"). Sometimes, social sciences and humanities programs and science and engineering programs are affiliated to the same institution if foreign partner HEIs are located in the same sending country/region (for instance, one transnational institution cooperates with several French universities in economics, advertising, and computer science programs).

Nevertheless, transnational institutions have become popular in recent years. Compared with transnational programs scattered among different faculties, transnational institutions are able to take advantage of a scale effect to attract attention. This makes them appealing to international students and allows relevant HEIs to present themselves as "reformers."

Transnational programs are similar to transnational institutions. Affiliated with local faculties and relatively small in scale, they collaborate closely with local faculties for educational and service delivery. Consequently, transnational programs face the same risk as transnational institutions of becoming "hollowed out."

### **Limited Impact of Alternative Practices**

Most transnational institutions and programs employ a considerable number of teachers from local programs on a part-time basis, who are expected to apply and transfer good transnational teaching practices to local teaching. However, this is far from happening. In reality, teachers simply "muddle through" transnational teaching and have no interest in disseminating alternative practices.

Moreover, some transnational institutions/programs respond mainly to market demand and function as a springboard for students going abroad for their third and/or fourth year of study at a foreign partner HEI. Teachers from Chinese partner HEIs and their foreign colleagues teach the same transnational institution/program, but to separate groups of students: local teachers cater to first- and second-year students, who mainly stay in China and study foundation courses, while foreign teachers provide teaching to third- and fourth-year students, who often go abroad and/or study core/advanced courses. Although local teachers have many opportunities to participate in TNE, they are rarely exposed to foreign practices.

### **A Marginal Revolution**

TNE's status and impact on higher education in China can be characterized as a "marginal revolution." Proposed by Ronald Harry Coase and Ning Wang, the term "marginal revolution" describes a process of dramatic change in the Chinese economy in the past 30 years. The change is triggered on the edges of the economy, with the regeneration

of nonpublic sectors operating outside the constraints of existing institutional frameworks. These marginal forces finally enter the economic mainstream and fundamentally transform the nation's economic system.

Like nonpublic sectors at the onset of the economic reform, TNE operates outside the regular institutional framework of higher education. However, it has failed to achieve a similarly broad and deep transformation. Due to the “academic weakness” of TNE and its teachers, transnational institutions/programs often find themselves at the bottom of HEIs’ regular performance evaluations, which place great emphasis on research. TNE has become marginalized in the Chinese higher education landscape, unable to provide models to local HEIs. For a variety of reasons, imported foreign expertise seldom reaches local faculties. Ultimately, after 30 years of rapid growth in quantitative terms, TNE remains at the periphery of the higher education system and exerts only a marginal impact. ▲

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