

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Navigating Challenges of Italy's Transnational Education Landscape

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This article explores Italy's transnational education perspective and current state of play by analyzing its complex landscape both as a TNE importer (branch campuses, filiations, off-shore campuses, and multinational corporate universities) and TNE exporter (branch campuses and virtual universities). Furthermore, it focuses more closely on the Italian approach in addressing emerging challenges in quality assurance and recognition of such TNE qualifications.

Transnational education (TNE)—a structure that enables students to pursue foreign degrees while remaining in their home country—has become a key pillar of global higher education. Defined as cross-border mobility of academic programs and education providers, TNE fosters an intercultural network where students, staff, and institutions often navigate uncharted waters of differing norms, expectations, and practices between sending and host countries. This interplay of global and local dynamics highlights the need for consistent frames of reference to address issues and promote sustainable partnerships. For instance, the Mediterranean Automatic Recognition Network (MAREN) project, led by the Italian Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence, shed light on the complications related to the automatic recognition of qualifications within TNE.

Each country involved in TNE approaches these challenges differently. In the case of Italy, its evolution as both a TNE importer and exporter has allowed a plethora of institutions to flourish.

Italy as TNE Importer

The following types of TNE operate in Italy within a multilayered environment: branch campuses, filiations, off-shore institutions, multinational corporate universities, and virtual universities.

Branch campuses allow foreign institutions to offer study programs and award degrees recognized in Italy. Some examples are Johns Hopkins University - School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, St. John's University in Rome, and the French ESCP Business School in Turin.

A peculiarity of Italy is the filiation, which enables foreign providers to decentralize part of their academic offer for study-abroad purposes, mostly attracting foreign students wishing to deepen their knowledge in Italian culture, art, and design. Such

programs generally grant credits to be transferred to the respective home institutions but do not award diplomas or degrees. There are currently over 130 "study abroad centers" in Italy, all operated by American universities, regulated by Law No. 4 of 14 January 1999 and authorized by the Ministry for University and Research, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Three varieties of filiations can be identified. A first category comprises institutions open to students enrolled at any foreign university (some examples are Fairfield University, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Florida State University in Florence, and Saint Mary's College in Rome). A second category are institutions open exclusively to students enrolled at the home universities (e.g., the University of Washington Rome Center and the University of Arkansas in Rome; Stanford University and New York University in Florence; and Monash University in Prato). Lastly, a third type encompasses institutes established as a result of multilateral agreements, such as the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Florence and the Duke University Center in Rome. Some of these latter filiation models are highly complex entities. For example, the Duke University Center, often referred to as "The Centro," is a stand-alone institution, which was established in 1965 by representatives of 10 American colleges and universities and currently counts over 100 member institutions. Under a long-term agreement with the consortium members, Duke University administers its "Duke in Rome" program, which focuses on the study of classical antiquity.

Off-shore institutions represent another common model of TNE. These are autonomous entities, entirely managed by the sending country in organization, structure, and quality assurance. Some examples in Italy include the American University of Rome and John Cabot University in Rome.

Finally, multinational corporate universities are part of the current Italian panorama. These institutions have been launched by big transnational corporations interested in organizing their own education offer, and award labor-market-targeted qualifications that do not belong to any national education system. As the focus is on direct transfer to the labor market, accreditation is not prioritized by these institutions. Some current examples based in Italy are the French-Italian corporation STMicroelectronics in Catania and Eni Corporate University in San Donato Milanese.

Italy as TNE Exporter

In addition to the extensive landscape of TNE within Italy, Italy is also a significant TNE exporter. The first Italian export venture was the establishment of a University of Bologna branch campus in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Virtual universities are another model of successful TNE exporting for Italy. These institutions are located in Italy, but their programs are specifically tailored for learners outside Italy. Università Telematica Guglielmo Marconi, Consorzio Nettuno, and Consorzio Icon are leading this sector.

Italy also hosts a number of renowned institutes offering programs/qualifications that do not belong to any specific education system. These are the result of agreements between Italy and international organizations or intergovernmental agreements between Italy and other countries. The most famous of these are the European University Institute in Florence, Venice International University in Venice, and the European University Centre for Cultural Heritage in Ravello.

Challenges in Quality Assurance and Recognition

Overall, the Italian approach aims at moving beyond compliance toward meaningful intercultural engagement and partnership resilience. However, tackling both quality assurance and recognition in TNE has turned out to be challenging.

While the extensive Italian TNE panorama shows networks of growth and opportunity, effective quality assurance presents remarkable challenges for both host and sending countries. Instances of poor quality provision and the existence of rogue providers pose considerable risks for both students in the host country and for the reputation of the sending country's higher education system.

Furthermore, independent and collaborative forms of TNE provision may call into question the reliability of quality assurance. In the former (e.g., branch campuses), the sending institution takes full control over academic provision and governance, and local partners have limited action in quality assurance and curriculum design. In contrast, collaborative models involve shared development and co-governance (quality assurance, joint curriculum design, cross-cultural staffing). TNE initiatives in Italy have often shown particularly blurred boundaries. Such fluidity highlights the need for a flexible, nuanced framework for analyzing TNE arrangements. Partnerships evolve over time in response to shifting strategic priorities or external pressures.

Regional and international agencies also play a crucial role in sharing best practice guidelines, research, and data, which helps to ensure the development of quality assurance procedures. Italy abides by the ENIC-NARIC guidelines for transnational providers: accreditation in the country where the institution overseeing academic studies and awarding qualifications is located, license to operate in the host country (by home and host authorities), and adherence to the principles outlined in the Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education and in the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education.

In order to address challenges to ensure the recognition of qualifications awarded by TNE institutions, Italy adopted the Ministerial Decree No. 214 of 26 April 2004, thereby adhering to article VI.5 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention by setting regulations and procedures for the establishment of foreign higher education institutions within the Italian territory. According to the Decree, any TNE institution and its programs must fulfill specific requirements and comply with strict quality and equivalence criteria, including institutional recognition in the home country, scientific relevance, adequate facilities, and faculty qualifications verified by Italian institutions.

As countries grapple with the complexities of a wide range of TNE models, most notably branch campuses, franchising, validation, joint/dual degrees, and online learning, Italy has developed its own landscape, comprising both exporting and importing activities. Its experiences can serve as a useful model for other countries interested in expanding their TNE offerings.

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