



## Between sameness and difference: challenges for TNE

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*Suggested citation:*

Dang, QA. & Morini, L. (2023) Between sameness and difference: challenges for TNE.

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230308142944937>

Published 11 March 2023.

## **Between sameness and difference: challenges for TNE**

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‘Same same, but different’ has become a catchphrase in Southeast Asia. It means two things are similar but not actually the same. The catchphrase’s connotations resonate with the dilemma faced by collaborative higher education programmes between the United Kingdom and Southeast Asian countries – better known as UK transnational education (TNE).

These TNE programmes are often promoted as ‘international’ and ‘the same’ as the original UK programme, but also as ‘national’ and ‘different’.

Recently, [the PEER project](#), funded by the British Council and led by Coventry University, has examined this contradiction of ‘sameness’ in Southeast Asia-UK TNE and here we consider some of its causes and consequences.

### **TNE programmes: remaking the higher education space**

UK TNE refers broadly to degree programmes provided entirely, or partly, outside the UK but leading to a UK award or a dual award. TNE takes different forms in different countries, ranging from self-study distance learning, franchising and collaborative twinning to top-up programmes and branch campuses.

The PEER project has focused on collaborative TNE partnerships involving both UK and Asian institutions in developing curricula, delivering courses, implementing internal and external quality assurance.

The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have become recognisable hosts of TNE programmes offered by the UK. Since 2010, 10 ASEAN countries have hosted nearly 1.4 million UK TNE students, while sending about 0.44 million students to study in the UK, according to 2022 figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

When franchise models were introduced in the 1990s to ASEAN, many private institutions used TNE to meet expanded domestic student demands for higher education while public universities implemented a quota system.

Our interviewees have said TNE programmes were promoted to be the same as programmes offered at the ‘parent’ university in the UK in terms of course contents, academic standards and qualifications awarded. However, in practice, the recognition of TNE qualifications and student experience varied across programmes within the differentiated landscape of TNE in Asia.

From the mid-2000s, many ASEAN governments introduced stricter regulations on TNE to encourage or require local and UK partners to develop collaborative TNE curricula to make TNE locally relevant.

These host countries use this approach as part of their internationalisation strategies, moving away from an ‘importer’ status to a ‘partner’ position, or becoming a new education hub, with the idea of TNE creating a ‘trans-national higher education space’ where national or local and international or global knowledge and pedagogical practices are mutually

constitutive.

Collaborative TNE partnerships also brought challenges for curriculum developers who had to meet not only the requirements of the local quality assurance agencies but also ‘pass’ the validation approval of UK partners and quality assurance authorities, and above all, meet the ‘sameness’ preference of students (and their middle-class parents).

Here we look specifically at [UK TNE programmes in Vietnam](#) – the fastest-growing host country, and Malaysia – the largest host in the ASEAN region.

### **Between sameness and national identity**

The idea of ‘sameness’ has been crucial to defining UK TNE programmes within differentiated TNE landscapes in Vietnam and Malaysia.

‘Advance programmes’ (better known locally as ‘*chuong trinh tien tien*’) at undergraduate level were introduced in major Vietnamese public universities as part of a flagship internationalisation initiative between 2005 and 2020. These were, in essence, a state-sponsored TNE scheme which imported curricula from the world’s top 200 universities and delivered them to talented Vietnamese students.

As part of a national agenda, the scheme is presented as preserving Vietnamese academic values and strengthening the academic standards of leading Vietnamese universities, thus boosting their reputation.

At the same time, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training and universities expect the intact delivery of foreign curricula and maintain this ‘sameness’ principle by inviting (and paying) academics from partner universities to teach courses and train Vietnamese academics. Efforts by Vietnamese academics to localise the foreign curriculum are generally not recognised.

In the internationally competitive Malaysian HE sector, the majority of TNE providers are private institutions which explicitly pride themselves on offering degrees that are not only equivalent to British ones, but also closely modelled on their curricula, pedagogy and assessment – “a British Education in Malaysia”, to quote our interviewees.

Despite the different historical links between the UK and Malaysia and Vietnam, there is a pro-Western sentiment prevailing in both contexts, with ‘British education’ being perceived by students, their families and the general public to be synonymous with better quality and giving degree holders a positional benefit.

In practice, poor feedback systems mean students’ views about their studies are not always heard and they appear to take a back seat to the ‘sameness’ agenda. This sameness perception was actively and purposefully leveraged by both private providers and public regulators, although it also raises questions in legal terms and about whether this de-contextualised learning might ultimately prove meaningful for local students.

Indeed, cultural relevance and contextualisation are widely acknowledged to boost student success – for instance, the employability of individuals and the marketability of TNE programmes. However, they can cause tension where they diminish the sense of

'sameness' (affecting the marketability of programmes), while also raising questions for UK partners about whether TNE courses can still be evaluated according to the same standards. In other words, whether 'sameness' means quality.

The 'sameness' issue also makes it easier for TNE programmes to pass quality assurance hurdles promptly, that is, approval by the British partner or by the Asian authority agency.

In Vietnam, 'sameness' with the world's top universities helps Vietnamese partners secure government funding for the advance programmes. In Malaysia, the accreditation of a TNE programme by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency facilitates access to student loans, thus increasing enrolments. The 'sameness' indirectly provides British partners and quality assurance agencies with stronger leverage to shape HE landscapes in Vietnam and Malaysia.

Meanwhile, in order to uphold national identity, philosophies of education and distinctive values, both Malaysian and Vietnamese governments have introduced mandatory courses. Malaysia promoted the Malay identity through the module "*Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia*" (Islamic and Asian Civilizations, or "TITAS") in all TNE programmes, while Vietnam promoted communism through the Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought courses in all advance programmes.

### **Between sameness and autonomy**

The autonomy of local staff appears to be diminished by the 'sameness' doctrine, with UK partners providing the bulk of curricula and limiting Asian partners' influence to basic re-contextualisation of the materials, although there are marked differences across countries. The degree of 'sameness' may also vary depending on the nature of the partnership and its duration, i.e. the longer the partnership, the greater the autonomy the Asian partners gain.

This pervasive 'sameness' mandate, in turn, requires the development of local staff's ability to contextualise the curriculum or to help them become familiar with UK practice, which has at times led to resentment and distrust among both students and staff, who feel squeezed between globalised expectations and local demands.

To address this dilemma, local universities increasingly employ UK alumni or people from the Asian diaspora who by default have affection for and identify themselves with the UK education system. The 'sameness' of TNE curricula partly comes from the knowledge and preferences of these people and perpetuates power asymmetry.

We see 'sameness' as the locus where tensions occur and the TNE brand clashes with the demands for national identity and institutional autonomy. At the time of writing, the UK government plans to curb international student visas, meaning TNE could become an even more important survival strategy for many UK universities. With the growing desire for autonomy (and financial leverage) on the part of Asian hosts, TNE should offer the best of both worlds, but the 'sameness' problem threatens this goal.

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