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Transnational Education (TNE) Review: Summary

TNE Review is the review process through which QAA, on behalf of Universities UK and Guild HE and in the interests of UK higher education, contribute to safeguard and improve the academic quality and standards of UK higher education delivered overseas, also referred to as transnational education or TNE.¹ A primary purpose of the review of UK TNE is to provide assurance to governments, relevant bodies and students in host countries and to provide opportunities to increase mutual understanding and trust. TNE Review focuses on the following aspects:

- testing the implementation of policies and processes for safeguarding standards and enhancing the quality of TNE provision
- gaining a detailed understanding of the TNE student experience
- disseminating good practice in TNE provision to the wider UK higher education sector
- enhancing cooperation with quality assurance bodies in UK TNE host countries.

TNE Review adopts a proportionate and risk-based approach that recognises the diversity within the UK sector and in overseas regulation and processes. It is informed by the strategic engagement that QAA undertakes on behalf of its own subscribers with overseas stakeholders, in order to strengthen cooperation and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the quality assurance of TNE. TNE Review adopts a country-based approach, and allows for flexibility to take into account the different operating environments in which TNE is offered. It has been designed by consideration of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).²

A three-year programme of TNE Review was developed in 2016 identifying those countries selected for review for the period 2017-2019 on the basis of a set of indicators, including an analysis of the UK TNE landscape, the strategic importance of different countries for UK higher education, and the particular features of the local operating environment. Depending on the quantity of TNE provision in the selected country, a representative sample of TNE arrangements is chosen for review or case study. The selection of delivery sites to be visited and case studies will take into account the need to focus on perceived risks to academic standards and the quality of the student experience, and to facilitate the sharing of good practice.

TNE Review is carried out by a team of peer reviewers with relevant competence. The reviewers will be guided by the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code).

TNE Review culminates in the publication of three types of report:

- quality assurance reports on the TNE arrangements of the individual providers selected for review, offering recommendations and highlighting areas of good practice
- case studies led by providers aimed at offering a better understanding of specific aspects of TNE provision and facilitating the sharing of good practice
- a country overview report, outlining the scale and scope of UK TNE in the selected country of review, the local operating environment and the key thematic findings from the review and case study visits.

¹ TNE refers to ‘all types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based.’ UNESCO/Council of Europe definition in Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001), available at: www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/Code%20of%20good%20practice_EN.asp.
² Available at: www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/.
Chapter 1: Introduction and overview

Introduction

The purpose of this Handbook is to:

- state the aims of TNE Review
- set out the underlying approach
- give guidance to providers taking part in, and preparing for, TNE Review.

Aims of TNE Review

The aims of TNE Review are to:

- test the capacity of UK providers to safeguard standards and improve the quality of their TNE provision
- safeguard the interest of TNE students and enhance their experience
- safeguard and enhance the international reputation of UK higher education
- strengthen cooperation with local quality assurance authorities to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of quality assuring UK TNE and minimising the burden on UK providers.

The TNE Review process is designed specifically to address these aims by:

- reviewing how providers implement policies and processes for safeguarding standards and enhancing the quality of TNE provision
- gaining an understanding of the TNE student experience
- providing public information via reports and case studies and disseminating good practice in TNE provision
- liaising with host countries’ quality assurance bodies to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of TNE Review.

Outcomes and reference points

To achieve these aims QAA looks at selected provision in the country identified for review. Selected provision is looked at through review visits undertaken by peer reviewers, which take place either in the UK or at the overseas delivery site.

Review visits result in recommendations and highlight good practice. Degree awarding bodies often have multiple TNE arrangements. For this reason, no formal judgement on their ability to manage TNE provision is made, as it is not possible to reach such a broad judgement by looking at only one example.

Recommendations are made by referring to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, taking in particular consideration to the Advice and Guidance on Partnerships. They represent the conclusions that a review team is able to come to, based on the evidence and time available. Equally, good practice represent the judgement made by the review team based on their experience, and the evidence and time available. Recommendations and good practice are aimed at supporting the continuous development of individual providers and the sector.

Case studies are produced by selected providers to focus on specific aspects of TNE provision that are of particular interest to the whole sector. They seek to identify lessons that could benefit the sector widely. This may include examples of good practice, ways in which challenges have been met, and initiatives of continuous development.
Scope and coverage

TNE Review applies to all UK degree-awarding bodies, and encompasses the following:

- all UK higher education provision delivered outside the UK leading to UK awards or credits at levels 4-8 of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and levels 7-12 of the *Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS),

- integrated foundation year programmes delivered overseas, which are designed to enable entry to specified degree programme or programmes on successful completion.

TNE Review includes provision delivered through partnership arrangements, branch campuses, and distance learning. When looking at partnership arrangements, and visiting partners QAA considers how the UK degree-awarding body is fulfilling its responsibility for safeguarding standards and enhancing the student experience when working with delivery partners. Partners themselves are not subject to review or scrutiny by QAA, although they might be subject to review or scrutiny by partner agencies if engaging in joint review activity. QAA can advise if providers are uncertain about whether specific activities are in scope of a TNE Review.
Chapter 2: A risk-based, efficient and flexible approach

A country-based approach

TNE Review is a country-based review process. A country-based approach is more practical than an institutional-focused approach given the extensive geographical spread of UK TNE around the world and the growing number of UK providers delivering TNE. A country-based approach means that rather than sending review teams to different parts of the world several times a year to look at different providers’ TNE arrangements, a single review team is sent on an annual basis to look at selected provision in a country, or region, as part of a single trip.

This approach allows review teams to gain a better understanding of the local operating environment of the country or region selected for review, with its specific features, challenges, and opportunities. This is important to ensure an informed assessment of TNE arrangements in the context of their particular local regulatory and cultural context.

A country-based approach further enables QAA to establish stronger links with the host country quality assurance bodies. This, in turn, allows us to better coordinate quality assurance activities with the ultimate aim of lessening the quality assurance burden on TNE providers, and on the quality assurance bodies themselves.

Selection of target countries

QAA in 2016, in consultation with the funding bodies and the UK-wide Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, developed a three-year programme of TNE Review activity. The three-year programme indicates the countries targeted for review and an indicative timeline.

When selecting countries, particular consideration was given to those with significant amount of UK TNE provision and/or of growing strategic importance for UK higher education. We also took into account concerns raised by host countries' agencies, as well as the extent to which QAA can rely on the oversight of local quality assurance bodies. Consideration was also given as to whether and how recently a country had already been selected for review, and any significant changes in its operating environment.

Selection of delivery sites

Once the target country or region is selected, QAA identifies all UK TNE provision in that country by carrying out a survey of all degree-awarding bodies' TNE activity in the location selected for review. If the scale of provision in the country (or region) is wider than can be covered by TNE Review, QAA chooses a representative sample of TNE arrangements. The sample will include provision of significant scale or complexity as well as small operations; a representative range of provision types, including at different FHEQ/FQHEIS levels, provision from different nations of the UK if applicable; good practice; and specific aspects of TNE provision to inform case studies.

The selection is informed by information, data, and intelligence gathered from:

- a survey of all UK TNE provision in the selected country/region of review carried out by QAA (informed by available data)
- an understanding of the diversity, needs and track record of UK providers, including communication with TNE providers themselves
- local quality assurance authorities, including their perceptions of risk and their quality assurance decisions, and other stakeholders such as professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).
Consideration is also given to whether a provider has recently already been subject to TNE Review, although this does not preclude selection.

**Cooperation with host country quality assurance bodies**

Cooperation with local quality assurance bodies is a key feature of the approach to TNE Review. Whenever possible, QAA will liaise with local authorities to enhance the efficiency of TNE Review and avoid duplicating efforts. Cooperation will be particularly sought in the areas of:

- information, data and intelligence sharing
- undertaking forms of joint-review activity
- recognising each other’s quality assurance decisions.

Host countries’ quality assurance bodies may hold current and comprehensive data and information about inbound TNE provision. QAA will seek to rely on this data and information whenever possible. This will reduce the information collection burden on providers. QAA will also seek host countries’ agencies’ knowledge and intelligence to inform the selection of providers and delivery sites to be visited.

QAA will also explore the possibility of undertaking joint review activity. This will help to reduce the number of review visits that TNE providers will undergo by combining the visit of the home and host country’s agency. The possibility for joint-review activity, and the specific form joint review will take, will depend on the particular operating environment in which the local quality assurance body operates. It will also include factors such as the host country review schedule. Where joint review is not possible, QAA will offer the host country quality assurance body the opportunity to join review visits as observers.

Whenever local quality assurance bodies have frameworks for quality assuring inbound TNE in place, QAA will consistently seek to make progress towards recognising their quality assurance decisions. This will prevent the need to undertake future TNE Review in those countries. Cooperating in data and information sharing and undertaking joint-review activity may constitute a preliminary step towards recognising other agencies' quality assurance decisions.
Chapter 3: Conducting the review

The TNE Review team

TNE Review is conducted by a review team comprising three peer reviewers. The review is overseen by a QAA International Review Manager.

TNE reviewers are selected from QAA’s pool of trained reviewers, which include reviewers with specific experience of TNE. QAA peer reviewers have current or recent senior-level expertise and experience in the management and/or delivery of UK higher education provision. This expertise and experience includes the management and/or administration of quality assurance arrangements. The cohort of reviewers appropriately reflects the diversity of the sector, including geographical location, size and type of providers, as well as reflecting those from diverse backgrounds.

The selection of reviewers for a particular round of TNE Review takes into account their experience and knowledge of the target country/region of review and/or their experience of particular aspects of the TNE provision being reviewed during that particular TNE round. It will also take into account any possible conflict of interest with providers selected for review.

QAA’s International Review Manager briefs the review team soon after its appointment about the TNE Review process and the operating environment of the country of review. Whenever possible, QAA involves the host country’s quality assurance authorities in briefing the review team.

Desk-based analysis

TNE Review comprises two stages: desk-based analysis, and review visits.

QAA will ask selected providers to submit a set of existing information outlining their policies and processes for safeguarding the standards and enhancing the quality of their TNE provision. Providers will be asked to document how these are implemented in the specific delivery site selected for review. An indicative sample of the information set likely to be requested is outlined in the Annex. For TNE provision with a large number of programmes of study, programme-level information will be limited to a sample of programmes selected in consultation with the provider. The reviewers will then conduct a preliminary desk-based analysis of the provider’s submission.

On the basis of this preliminary desk-based analysis, the reviewers and the International Review Manager will decide whether any additional information might be needed, and whether the review or case study visit will take place in the UK or at the overseas delivery site. It might also be possible for the review team to complete the review only by video-conferencing.

Review visits

The number of visits to be undertaken will vary depending on the country selected and the extent and type of UK provision. However, it is expected that an average TNE Review will involve visits to a couple of providers in the UK and eight to 10 visits to overseas delivery sites.

Review visits, either in the UK or overseas, are conducted by two reviewers and managed by the International Review Manager. They normally take place over one day for each provider, and involve meetings with staff, including senior management, teaching and administrative staff, and students. The review team will use communication technology, such as video-conferencing, so that they can meet staff and students based at the overseas delivery sites.
site during visits in the UK, or vice versa with staff in the UK undertaking visits overseas. Review visits focus on issues highlighted by the desk-based analysis and will seek to gain a clear sense of the experiences and view of students.
Chapter 4: The review process in detail

This part of the Handbook explains the activities that providers might expect to carry out to prepare for and take part in a TNE Review.

First contact and survey of TNE activity

For each TNE Review round the first contact with providers will be to notify them of the start of the review process. This begins with a survey of UK TNE review activity in the country/region selected for review. The survey is aimed at gathering information about existing TNE arrangements and TNE student numbers at partner and programme level. In certain countries QAA might rely on census data collected by local regulatory bodies.

The indicative timeline involves QAA sending the survey no less than 16 weeks before the start of UK visits, and no less than 22 weeks before the in-country visits. Overseas visits might take place at a later time depending on the logistics associated with the particular location of review. Providers have three weeks to return the scoping survey.

No later than two weeks after receiving the survey returns, QAA will notify those providers whose TNE arrangement have been selected to take part in that year’s TNE Review round.

Request for information

Selected providers will receive a standard information request (see Annex). QAA will request evidence of how the provider implements its internal review process, ensuring the quality and standards of that TNE provision are within the scope of the review.

Providers are requested to submit a short, self-reflective overview with supporting documentation. The self-reflective overview should guide the review team through the desk-based analysis. It should place the provision selected for review into context, outlining the rationale for its establishment and its origins, and should illustrate how the UK degree-awarding body has been delivering its responsibilities for quality and standards as set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. The key expectation for all TNE provision is that a provider has in place

‘effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure, and the academic experience is high-quality, irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them’.

The body of the self-reflective overview should identify and clearly reference the evidence to support the narrative.

The specification in the Annex provides guidance on the sort of evidence providers might consider submitting in support of the self-reflective overview.

Where TNE arrangements involve a large number of programmes, a sample of these are selected for scrutiny by QAA in agreement with the provider, and programme-level information will need to be provided only for the programmes in the selected sample.

Providers have at least four weeks to submit the requested information in an electronic format. QAA will give instructions on how to upload the requested information onto our system when we first request it.

When notifying providers that they have been selected for TNE Review, QAA provides the names of the review team and the International Review Manager, and ask providers to advise of any potential conflicts of interest. QAA may make adjustments in light of that.
Notification of visit

Once providers have submitted their information, reviewers and the International Review Manager analyse the submission. QAA may ask providers to submit additional information if the review team has identified any gaps. Requests are strictly limited to what the review team needs to complete the desk-based analysis, and providers are entitled to ask why the team has asked to see any additional information.

Three to four weeks after submission, QAA notifies providers about whether the visit will take place in the UK or at the delivery site overseas. At this stage, QAA will start discussing suitable visit dates with the provider, and confirm arrangements for the visit, including the proposed meeting schedule. UK visits offer more flexibility with dates than those requiring travel overseas. Visits in the UK can begin four weeks from the notification of location of the visit, taking the availability of the provider into account. UK visits take place before the overseas visits.

Overseas visits take place as part of a single overseas trip of the QAA review team. This will normally last between one to two weeks. The duration of the overseas review visits will be influenced by a number of factors, including the host country agencies' availability, local holidays and weather conditions, and other considerations that might affect the local context. This means that overseas visits may occur later (though generally no earlier) than 22 weeks after first contact. In this case, there will be more time to carry out the visits in the UK.

In preparation for the visit to delivery sites overseas QAA liaise with the UK provider only. It is for the latter to liaise with its partner(s) overseas. The review visit schedule is normally confirmed at least one week before the visit in the UK, and at least two weeks before the visit overseas.

Case studies are led by providers. The International Review Manager will liaise with selected providers to agree the specific focus of the case study. Case studies will normally focus on understanding challenges, lessons learned and good practice relative to a particular aspect of TNE provision. A first draft of the case study should be submitted two weeks before the date of the overseas visits.

The review visit

Review visits either in the UK or overseas, are expected to last a whole day.

Activity carried out during a visit will not be the same for every review visit. However, visits will generally include meetings with senior management, teaching staff, administrative staff, and students, including graduates. The review team will make use of video or teleconference facilities to meet people who may find it difficult to attend on-site, such as distance-learning students or alumni, and staff and students based at the overseas delivery site when a review visit takes place in the UK (and vice versa).

The review visit will typically include a final meeting between the review team and senior staff of the provider. This will be an opportunity for the team to follow up any eventual outstanding questions and clarify the next steps.
Reports

TNE Review reports will include:

- individual review reports
- case studies
- a country overview report.

Individual review visit reports are normally no longer than eight pages. They include recommendations and highlight good practice. Recommendations are made by reference to the Expectations of the Quality Code, and are aimed at supporting providers’ and sector-wide continuous improvement.

Case studies are drafted by providers and focus on a specific topic and will normally be shorter than review reports. They will provide detailed insight into particular aspects of TNE provision with a view to facilitating the sharing of experience and good practice between all UK providers.

The country overview report summarises the landscape of UK TNE and the local operating environment in the host country of review. It also provides a summary of the findings from review and case study visits, highlighting and analysing general themes emerging from the TNE Review round.

All TNE Review reports are published about 10 working weeks after the team has returned from overseas. Four weeks after the return, QAA will send all visited providers a draft copy of their review report to comment on factual accuracy. Those providers who had a UK visit might receive a draft report before then. Providers should respond within seven working days from receiving the draft. Any factual inaccuracies must relate to the period before the on-site visit; the review team will not amend the report to reflect changes or developments made by the provider after the on-site visit ended. Case studies written by providers are edited by QAA to ensure consistency of style and that content is appropriate. Providers will receive the edited case studies for a final accuracy check before publication.

Once the reports are finalised they be published on QAA’s website and provided to the funding bodies.

Follow-up

Following the publication of outcomes, QAA will liaise with reviewed providers to organise a workshop where QAA and providers can discuss and share the lessons learned from the review visits. Providers not involved in the TNE Review visits may be able to attend, depending on places available. The workshop will normally take place between eight to 12 weeks after publication of the reports. A dissemination event will also take place in-country to raise the visibility of the TNE review visits and its findings.

Complaints and appeals

QAA has formal processes for receiving and dealing with complaints. Details of this process are available on the QAA website.

As there are no formal judgements reached in TNE Review there is no appeals process.
Timeline summary

A schematic summary of a standard timeline for a TNE Review is given below. Please note that depending on the specific TNE Review round the activities in the timetable might take place over a shorter or longer time period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working weeks</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 0             | Notification of start of review  
|               | Scoping survey sent to all degree-awarding bodies |
| 3             | Survey returned to QAA |
| 5             | Providers selected for review are requested to submit information set  
|               | Providers selected for case studies start agreeing the focus of the case study with the International Review Manager  
|               | Review team composition notified to providers |
| 9-10          | Information set returned by providers |
| 12-13         | Providers are notified whether the review visits will take place in the UK or overseas  
|               | Eventual additional needed information requested  
|               | International Review Manager starts to liaise with providers to set date for UK and overseas visits and define visit programme |
| 16-17         | Start of UK visits (depending on providers availability) |
| 22 or later   | Overseas visits |
| 28 or 6 weeks after overseas visits | Draft report shared with providers to check factual accuracy |
| 30 or 8 weeks after overseas visits | Draft report returned by providers with comments on factual inaccuracies |
| 34 or 12 weeks after overseas visits | Reports published on QAA’s website |
| 46 or 12 weeks after reports are published | Follow-up sector-wide workshop |
Annex: Indicative information requirement for TNE Reviews

Establishing and operating the TNE arrangement

- Relevant institutional strategies, might include:
  - strategic plan
  - international/internationalisation strategy
  - TNE/collaborative provision strategy.
- Evidence of undertaken due diligence, including permission to operate in the selected countries, where applicable.
- Written agreements clarifying the responsibilities of each party involved in the selected TNE arrangement.
- Operational manual for link or equivalent (if separate from written agreement).
- Reports from approval (and review) visits to selected provision by UK institution
- Relevant annual return(s) to local agencies.

Assuring the academic standards and quality of programmes delivered overseas

- Quality assurance manual or equivalent.
- Programmes approval and re-approval reports (as applicable) - minutes of relevant committees (past two academic years).
- Annual programme monitoring reports - minutes of relevant committees for the previous two academic years.
- External examiner reports and response to issues raised - minutes of relevant committees for previous two academic years.
- Most recent periodic review report(s).
- Arrangements for the recognition of prior learning and how entry levels are established for top-up programmes.
- Where not clearly included in annual programme monitoring or other information above, data and analysis of:
  - student admissions, achievement and progression
  - graduate employment (if available)
  - student feedback and satisfaction.
- Any reports from PSRBs, and local accreditation/quality assurance bodies, where applicable.

Assessment

- Assessment strategies and processes for managing assessment.
- Programme regulations and assessment policies and procedures (if not included in the quality assurance manual).
- Minutes of assessment boards - past two years.
- Other policy and procedural guidance relevant to the topic.
The student learning experience

- Policy and procedures for:
  - student admissions including the responsibilities of partner institution
  - student support, including arrangements for induction and access to UK-based staff
  - student engagement, including student representation and feedback mechanisms at delivery site
  - staff appointment, induction and development
  - making learning material available to students (including access through the virtual learning environment).

- Information on staffing models and key roles.
- Procedures and contingency plans for the termination of an agreement with a partner.

Information on higher education provision

- Publicity material including links to relevant websites.
- Process/policy for the approval of information produced by the partner institution or delivery site.
- Student handbooks at institution and programme level (if separate).
- Information on appeals and complaints.
- Information on student transfer to UK institution.
- Example of degree certificate and record of achievement.