



Forum

Transnational Education in China: Moving from the Periphery to the Centre of Higher Education Internationalization

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Introduction

As one dimension of higher education internationalization, Transnational Education (TNE) refers to the delivery of courses, programs, or even entire institutions by foreign universities outside their home countries, enabling students to obtain internationally recognized qualifications without crossing national borders (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). In China, TNE is officially referred to as Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, a term that highlights the collaborative nature of such initiatives (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE), 2003). This commentary traces the development of TNE in China, with particular attention to recent policy initiatives, and contends that TNE is assuming an increasingly central role in the country's higher education internationalization efforts. It concludes with strategic recommendations for prospective TNE providers from outside China.



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The evolution of TNE in China

TNE first emerged in China in the mid-1980s, after the country reemerged from a decade-long Cultural Revolution and started to reengage with the rest of the world (see Liu & Huang, 2023). In its first decade of existence, TNE in China was largely an informal, incidental, and laissez-faire activity (Liu et al., 2023). However, the fast economic growth during this period incentivized a sharp rise in the number of Chinese students seeking international education, including TNE options within China (e.g. Mok & Han, 2017). Chinese students were attracted to TNE programs for the prestige of foreign degrees, access to English-language instruction, and enhanced employment prospects, while avoiding the much higher costs of studying abroad (Dai & Garcia, 2019; Li et al., 2023). To regulate TNE development, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a series of policies since the mid-1990s, including the 1995 Provisional Stipulation, the 2003 & 2004 Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools, and the 2010 Education Blueprint (Huang, 2003; Mok & Han, 2016; Mok & Khai, 2024). The 2003 & 2004 Regulations (MOE, 2003; 2004), in particular, solidified TNE's legal framework in China, providing greater policy clarity and limiting profit margins for foreign partners (Mok & Han, 2016).

The MOE regulations require that all degree-awarding TNE programs operate in partnership with a Chinese institution, thereby ensuring alignment with national education policies and broader development objectives (MOE, 2003; 2004). MOE policies also stipulate that international partners must commit significant teaching resources and curriculum development efforts (see, e.g., Zhang, 2024). Such requirements are expressed in the so-called "Four One-Thirds": 1) One-third of the Total Curriculum must be provided by the international partner; 2) One-third of the Core Curriculum must be sourced from the foreign institution; 3) One-third of Core Subjects must be taught face-to-face by faculty dispatched directly from the foreign partner; and 4) One-third of the Teaching Hours for the core subjects must be delivered by the foreign partner's faculty. Many overseas partners have found compliance with these requirements challenging, particularly in overseas instructor deployment to China for an extensive period of time (e.g. Ng, 2020).

New chapter of TNE development

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the landscape of China's higher education internationalization. The pandemic first disrupted the momentum of students' international mobility, both out of China and into China. In the post-pandemic era, however, the recovery of outbound student mobility has lagged significantly behind pre-pandemic levels, partly because of China's slower economic rebound (see Liu & Yang, 2025). Another factor is China's demographic shift toward population decline (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). A third possible explanation lies in the strained geopolitical climate

outside China, with heightened national security concerns in several destination countries contributing to a less welcoming environment for Chinese students and scholars (Liu & Glass, 2025). The momentum of mobility of international students into China will also take time to recover, due to reasons such as negative media portrayals of China in Western contexts, the limited global appeal of Chinese as a medium of instruction, comparatively weaker international perceptions of Chinese higher education relative to Western institutions, a slower post-pandemic economic recovery, and limited domestic public support for international student enrollment (see Liu, 2024).

However, TNE has been a salient growth point. China has become the world's largest TNE market (Zhou et al., 2024) with a total of 2,332 TNE programs and institutions approved by the Chinese MOE by 2020 (Clayburn, 2022). By 2025, approximately 800,000 students were enrolled in TNE programs in China (e.g., Nash, 2025). In 2025, the Chinese MOE approved a record number of 287 new joint institutes and programs, the highest annual total since 2013 (see e.g. Australian Government Department of Education, 2025). Several sources indicate that the Chinese MOE aims to increase TNE enrollment from the current level of 800,000 to as high as 8 million over the next 10 years (see e.g. Nash, 2025; ICEF Monitor, 2025; Koprowski, 2025). TNE is arguably moving from the periphery to the center of China's international higher education agenda. This increasingly supportive policy environment creates significant opportunities for overseas providers over the next decade. However, to benefit meaningfully from this policy window, foreign institutions must develop a nuanced understanding of the Chinese state's policy objectives that underpin the current expansion of TNE.

Policy objectives for TNE expansion

A core objective of higher education internationalization in China is to introduce Western-led global standards in teaching, learning, research and management by exposing academic staff, students and administrators to international practices (Liu, 2020). Given this general objective, TNE is likely to be viewed as a mechanism for importing high-quality educational resources into China. It must be stressed here that China is no longer a weaker player of world science. Instead, it leads many critical fields of research, such as 5G, green technology, quantum computing, biomedicine, and AI. In this context, the resources TNE programs (most of which are at the undergraduate level) are aiming to attract are not necessarily Western technology, but advanced curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and student service practices. Exposure to internationally benchmarked practices is expected to enhance the internationalization of Chinese universities. In addition, international curricula delivered in English or other foreign languages through TNE programs also help cultivate internationally competent graduates in China. With the declining birth rate, TNE is becoming a valuable platform to give them international exposure, while keeping them within China. The subject areas of recently approved TNEs have shifted from an initial concentration on

economics, business, and management toward a stronger emphasis on STEM fields (see e.g. Zhao, 2024). This shows that TNE policy is closely tied to China's labor market needs in national strategic areas.

In 2025, the State Council of China (2025) released the Outline of the National Strategy for Building a Leading Higher Education System (2024–2035). To build a leading higher education system in the world, TNE is likely to be increasingly perceived as a strategic instrument to enhance China's attractiveness as a destination for international students. Recent MOE approval rounds indicate a diversification of China's TNE partners beyond traditional Anglophone countries, with newly approved partnerships including institutions from Russia and several eastern European countries (e.g., Poland, Belarus, Hungary), alongside partners in Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand) (see Nash, 2025). This shows that TNE is also expected to serve as a platform for promoting Chinese educational philosophies overseas, thereby advancing the country's broader diplomatic objectives through international academic engagement. Currently, most students enrolled in TNE programs are Chinese domestic students. But given the declining domestic student population, TNE programs may be expected to recruit international students from outside China. A partnership with Western universities, offering dual degrees, will help boost the attractiveness of China as a destination for international students. The medium of English and other foreign languages as instructional languages will help bypass the Chinese language barrier.

The need for strategic engagement

In light of China's policy objectives outlined above, how can overseas partners strategically capitalize on TNE opportunities in the Chinese market? The geopolitical tensions are still placing constraints on international academic collaboration in China, particularly with Western partners. In several countries, universities face heightened political scrutiny, regulatory uncertainty, or self-censorship pressures, which may dampen enthusiasm for deep or long-term engagement in TNE initiatives with Chinese institutions (Liu et al., 2025). For example, a number of Sino-U.S. transnational education initiatives have faced heightened political scrutiny and, in some cases, program retrenchment or partnership reconsideration amid growing U.S. government pressure. Thus, an institutional risk tolerance assessment is required to determine the extent to which a university is prepared to uphold and project academic freedom in the face of potential government pressure or intervention in collaborations with China, particularly in sensitive but high-demand areas.

With the fast growth of TNE programs and the fast decline of university-age population in China, recruitment challenges are likely to intensify for TNE programs, with only those that demonstrate strong academic quality, brand recognition, and institutional reputation remaining competitive. Effective quality assurance in TNE depends on strong institutional partnerships grounded in aligned missions and values,

sustained leadership support from both sides, and a shared commitment to understanding and bridging different higher education systems (Montgomery, 2016). Although there may be some relaxation of the specific “Four One-Thirds” requirements in the future, the standards for quality and the level of resource commitment expected from overseas partners will continue to stay. Because students typically earn dual degrees from both institutions, overseas partners should have a strong vested interest in ensuring educational quality and safeguarding their institutional reputation, beyond generating revenues.

Conclusion

TNE in China is no longer a peripheral supplement to outbound mobility but has become an increasingly central instrument in the country’s higher education internationalization strategy. It is being repositioned as a key mechanism for importing global standards and strengthening China’s educational quality. To effectively capitalize on the significant TNE opportunities anticipated over the next decade, overseas partners must demonstrate clear risk tolerance and a sustained commitment to long-term institutional partnerships.

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