Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education

12th Seminar of HKVŠ
29 April 2011

Douglas Hajek
Director | Prague College
Polska 10 | Prague 2 | Czech Republic
doug@praguecollege.cz
Tel.: +420 602 624 684
Background – The TNE Report

• There is no systematic collection of information about the activities of international universities or foreign degree programs in the Czech Republic, and without such information there is little opportunity to address issues of whether the provision of foreign degree programs is strong or weak, of high quality or low, a threat or an opportunity.

• Without such information it is difficult to consider how the Czech higher education sector may interact with the transnational higher education sector and whether to reconsider current policies and methods of interacting.

• My report had three objectives:
  • to map current transnational higher education activities
  • to ascertain current interaction between the foreign and domestic sectors,
  • to analyze the new information and data brought forward in this report.
Definition

- Transnational education (TNE) is defined as any program where the learners are situated in a country that is different from the one in which the institution awarding the degree is situated (UNESCO & COE 2007).
- The Czech higher education sector refers to such activities as foreign degree programs.
Mapping TNE in the Czech Republic

- A total of 33 institutions offering foreign degree programs from 37 universities were identified.
- It seems that 29 of the 33 identified institutions work with universities that would meet the conditions of proper higher education accreditation in their home countries, and offer adequate local resources for the delivery of programs in the Czech Republic.
- The range of programs and institutional mission is relatively broad and diverse.
  - Programs related to business, economics and management are dominant.
  - Although 10 countries are represented by TNE activities, the United States and United Kingdom account for 65% of the universities.
  - The language of instruction and the institutional profiles of student origins are diverse.
- Starting with a sample of 9 institutions representing 4,400 students, the total size of the TNE sector is currently estimated as 7,000 students. This is equal to 3.2% of the entire Czech university sector, and 25% of the Czech private university sector.
- The sample of 9 institutions identifies that 64% of the students are Czech citizens.
Czech context and policy

- The report reveals that the issue of quality, which is perceived as a potentially positive or negative characteristic of TNE, is of greatest importance to the Czech higher education sector and the TNE organizations themselves.
- This preoccupation with issues of quality is broadly in line with what previous studies and reports about TNE in Europe during the last decade have shown.
- A range of constructive ideas about how TNE activities can be monitored was uncovered, and most issues could be resolved with a single recommendation to modify the way in which foreign degree programs are listed by MŠMT.
- Long-term planning of the Czech higher education sector is beginning to consider the TNE sector, and some ideas for grounding interaction between the domestic and TNE sectors in policy can be discerned.
  - Principles of international quality assurance, and the role of the exporting and importing countries are considered in the local context.
  - The legislation around foreign degree recognition, and its effect on the TNE sector is clarified.
Key issues arising from the report

- The implications of ‘officialising’ TNE are considered.
- A European context of best practice regarding domestic interaction with TNE is identified, leading to a recommendation that could be implemented with some relatively small but crucial changes to current practice.
- No serious threats to Czech universities or the system of Czech higher education can be sustained by analysis of the data in this report.
  - TNE is mostly a niche activity for independent organizations, as well as some Czech higher education institutions
  - However it does provide alternative programs and options for both students and institutions to consider.
- The experience and know-how brought to the domestic sector by TNE organizations can be recognized as an opportunity to be considered in meeting threats that are facing the Czech higher education sector in general.
- A series of recommendations are made specifically for the Czech higher education sector, TNE organizations and Czech universities.
Other contexts

- The *Transnational Education Project Report on Western Europe* was commissioned in 2001 by the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences, now the European Universities Association (EUA), and led by Stephen Adam of the University of Westminster, hereafter referred to as the Adam Report (Adam 2001).

- The subsequent *Recognition, Treatment, Experience and Implications of Transnational Education in Central and Eastern Europe 2002-2003* was a report led by Ulf Öhlund for the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, hereafter referred to as the Öhlund Report (Öhlund 2003).
MŠMT

- MŠMT relatively recently commissioned a report analyzing the implementation of the European credit transfer system in Czech universities and Joint/double/multiple degrees, hereafter referred to as the Alevia Report (Alevia 2010).
  - The report was delivered by a private higher education consultancy and was originally expected to provide a rationale for excluding the provision of Joint/double/multiple degrees from my TNE report.
  - However, the Alevia Report uncovered a possibility that some of this activity may be TNE delivery, rather than the joint delivery of Czech and foreign degrees that was expected.
United Kingdom

- Universities UK produced a report entitled *The growth of private and for-profit higher education providers in the UK* (Universities UK 2010) that provides some current and complimentary insights on the provision of foreign degrees in a comparator European country.

- Although this report is specific to a different national context, Section 3 looks at providers offering non-UK degrees and shows some points of reference in consideration of the development, and potential development of TNE activities in the Czech Republic.

- The Observatory on borderless higher education: Originally a collaborative initiative between the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and Universities UK, The Observatory joined the International Graduate Insight Group (graduate) in August 2010. http://www.obhe.ac.uk
UNESCO & COE Guidelines

- The Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education (UNESCO 2005) is a key document that reflects on various threats and opportunities that arise from the delivery of TNE education.
- This document underpins much of the analysis of quality assurance in TNE around the world and is a starting point for considering quality issues in TNE activity in the Czech Republic.
A students’ perspective

- The *European Student Handbook on Transnational Education* (ESIB 2003) was produced by the European Student Information Bureau (ESIB), now called the European Union of Students.
- This report identifies a broad spectrum of opinion, including that of students, about the opportunities and problems that they see arising from TNE activities.
- This report provides a useful comparator in considering what the local higher education sector and TNE providers see as threats and opportunities in the Czech environment.
The Report: TNE & the Czech sector

- A total of 7 interviews were undertaken with people representing 4 HE sector organizations.
  - The interviews began with an explanation of the purpose and inception of the project, as well as disclosure of the author’s dual role as both the researcher and representative of one of the institutions being studied.
  - The first part of the interview tried to gather examples of the participant’s previous experience with TNE organizations or activities.
  - The second phase asked for some opinions about how TNE could be monitored, who should undertake the monitoring, who should be responsible for quality assurance of the programs, and allow for the expression of some ideas on how and if the Czech HE sector could engage with TNE organizations.
  - Finally, participants were asked for their opinions on the outlook and likely trends in TNE activity in the Czech Republic.
Quality concerns

• All participants said that the quality of TNE provision is a key issue.

  • 1 person identified quality principally as a threat, in so far as low quality TNE provision could lower the quality of higher education in the Czech Republic in general.

  • 4 people identified quality as both an opportunity and a threat, pointing out that there could be examples of good practice coming from TNE activities that could be shared with the local sector, and that there could also be examples of poor quality and bad practice coming from the TNE operators themselves.

  • 2 people expressed expectations that TNE activity would be generally of good quality, and saw the threats arising from TNE activities as being more an issue of problems for the students concerning recognition of qualifications.
Monitoring

- Most participants believe the exporting university and exporting national agencies should monitor the quality of TNE providers. However, most would also like to see some kind of role for the agencies of the importing country.
  - 2 people proposed some kind of shared responsibility, or at least informal dialogue between the TNE institutions and the local HE sector.

- Problems that have previously been caused by TNE activities or organizations include:
  - Two institutions removed from the MSMT List since 1996 for not meeting the obligations to which they committed, or responding to requests for further information.
  - One organization was required to change its legal name, which had incorporated the words ‘vysoká škola’.

- No participants had an overview of how large the TNE sector might be, and which institutions might be involved, except for some information about the institutions with which they have come into contact, either personally or as part of their professional obligations.
  - Participants from MSMT pointed out that it is difficult to have an overview of TNE providers beyond that of the institutions who announce themselves for inclusion on the MSMT List, or when complaints from the public reach them. They indicated that they get enquiries from the public about individual TNE institutions about 4 or 5 times per year, and that the enquiries are generally of a negative nature, questioning the recognition and validity of the degrees.
Information gap

- All participants expressed a desire to see more information about TNE activities collected in a systematic way.
  - All except 1 person said that MSMT should be responsible for collecting and publicizing this information.
  - 3 participants pointed out that either voluntary or mandatory reporting of information by the TNE institutions would be helpful.

- All participants expressed an interest in seeing information about the size and quality assurance or national accreditation systems of the TNE institutions collected.
  - 1 person suggested information about academic staff could be collected.
  - 1 person suggested information about other activities of the foreign university should be collected (number and location).
  - 1 person suggested that the financial context of local TNE activities should be collected, especially regarding tuition fees, but also any other state support being accessed or financial assistance to students being extended.
  - 2 people suggested that success of graduates on the labor market should be collected.
Outlook for TNE

• No participant suggested that TNE providers should be treated any differently depending on the country or accreditation system of the foreign university with which they are affiliated,
  • Although 1 person did suggest that movement towards the European recognition of qualifications, and the National Qualification Framework could lead to a situation where universities accredited by agencies affiliated with The European Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) could enjoy some privileges.

• All participants expressed opinions that they expected the amount of TNE activity in the Czech Republic will increase. This trend was attributed to the competitiveness of TNE activities and the demand for lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

• Most, but not all participants suggested that TNE activities should be considered in the formation of the long-term strategic plan for higher education in the Czech Republic.
  • One person pointed out that the current Long-term Plan recently accepted by MSMT includes a proposal regarding safeguarding quality in the TNE sector.
Quality & Policy

• Quality and the perception of quality in the TNE sector ranks high, if not paramount in the minds of all participants in my study. Likewise,
  • The Öhlund Report on *TNE Experience in Central and Eastern Europe 2002-2003* identifies the main perceived threats as the impact on “consumer protection, e.g. when poor quality, unrecognized qualifications are provided to unsuspecting citizens.” Further it identified a worry of “driving down standards” and a “lack of information about quality of provision and internal processes” (Öhlund 2003, p.4)
  • The UNESCO Guidelines introduce the principle that academic quality “should be comparable” to that of the awarding institution, while “awarding institutions as well as providing institutions are accountable and fully responsible for quality assurance and control,” where such control should be “transparent, systematic and open to scrutiny” (UNESCO 2005)
  • The Joint Statement by the International Association of Universities, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the American Council on Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation also highlights accountability in delivering “the same high standards of academic and organizational quality no matter where it is delivered” (AUCC et al. 2006)
“Good practice” principles

- All leaders of TNE institutions interviewed for my report highlighted the quality assurance (QA) systems they were obliged to implement and follow by their partner universities.
  - The British universities require procedures identified by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in a *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* supported by individual policies of the university (QAA 2004). Revised in October 2010.
  - American universities have their foreign delivery sites individually approved by their accrediting agencies. The *Principles of Good Practice in Overseas International Education Programs for Non-U.S. Nationals* (NEASC 1990) provides a framework that most US accrediting agencies use for organization, monitoring and quality assurance of TNE operations (Adam 2001).
  - Other TNE providers who were interviewed for this project point to regular site visits by the awarding university, usually several times per year, and examination boards which are made up, in whole or part, of academic members from the home university.
Public awareness

- While such quality systems may be publicized on some TNE provider websites, they are not generally clear or widely disseminated to the local HE sector.
- The current system of registration on the MSMT List ensures that universities lacking appropriate home country accreditation will not be included.
  - This ensures ‘rogue’ or ‘degree mill’ organizations (Knight 2005) would be excluded.
  - Nonetheless, the registration process itself does not, and probably neither should nor could scrutinize any issues of quality or organization that the awarding university may have with the TNE partner providing education on its behalf.
  - The level of disclosure will vary among the institutions, and among the jurisdictions.
- However, the MŠMT List is created for a different purpose regarding social benefits, and therefore:
  - At least 17 other TNE organizations that were identified in the project could probably be listed.
  - Of the 12 TNE organizations on the MSMT List, many have only some of their TNE degree programs registered.
Key issues in TNE quality assurance

- TNE providers and the HE sector are united in a belief that maintaining and enhancing the quality of higher education provision, including TNE provision, is a priority.
- However, among interview participants there was only one example of opinion that generally regarded current quality in the TNE sector as a problem.
  - Nonetheless, there is little empirical evidence to make claims that TNE provision is of either high or low quality.
  - The only finding in this report related to quality of provision is that 29 of 33 organizations work with universities that have been both properly accredited in their own countries and operate regular administrative offices in the Czech Republic.
The MŠMT List is a useful proxy for registration of TNE providers that will separate bona fide institutions from ‘rogue’ providers or ‘degree mills’.

However, the MŠMT List is created for a different purpose regarding social benefits, and therefore:

- At least 17 other TNE organizations operate in the Czech Republic that could probably be listed.
- Of the 12 TNE organizations on the MSMT List, many have only some of their degree programs registered.
‘Officialising’ TNE

- According to the European Union of Students (EUS), “while some countries have tough regulations covering non-national providers of education that require their registration/licensing/approval (Hong Kong, Israel, Malaysia and South Africa), **in Europe the most common approach is not to regulate non-national providers** unless they seek to become officially recognized institutions within a national system” (ESIB 2003, p.19).

- However, the EUS points out that “**countries with open regulatory frameworks**, like Austria, the Netherlands or Norway, seem to have less problems with transnational education, because such open systems tend to absorb non-official education as it comes and by officialising it, some control is acquired.” (Ibid.)
Czech context

- The Czech Republic has been, since 1990, essentially a country with an open regulatory framework regarding TNE.
- However, the process of “officialising” TNE has emerged as a partial response to particular issues, rather than being founded on a direct approach to interaction with TNE providers.
- It would be useful to the entire sector if MŠMT could develop a voluntary registration process that would encourage TNE institutions to come forward for public registration.
  - This would allow for greater consumer protection.
  - It would encourage greater communication around issues affecting TNE operations.
  - It would also provide a mechanism for addressing ‘rogue’ and ‘degree mill’ operators.
A voluntary registration

- This registration process would not require conditions different from the ones used to determine eligibility on the current list. However, additional requirements to provide appropriate data to MŠMT on an annual basis could be introduced.

- The list should be public and promoted by MSMT.

- Although the list would be voluntary, being on the list would probably be highly desirable, since the alternative would have clearly negative implications on public reputation.

- MŠMT would not itself become responsible for the quality of the TNE organizations.
  - It only verifies the existence of foreign accreditation and other key material provisions, meeting the standard of ‘officialising’ without taking responsibility for assuring quality.
TNE provider responsibilities

- TNE institutions on the list should be encouraged to make their quality assessment reports from their home institutions (or quality agencies) available, and adhere to other general principles of good practice in the delivery of TNE.
  - Declared support for the UNESCO Revised Code of Good Practice or a similar document would be a good start.
  - An association of TNE providers, or perhaps several associations grouped around specific criteria, could be formed to help set up a framework for standards of good practice.
Threats

- Quality issues aside, it is hard to see TNE activities as any real threat to the Czech higher education sector in general.
  - Many TNE organizations are Czech HEIs
  - Much MBA provision is with Czech public universities
  - 84% of foreign universities come from the US, UK and Western Europe, where long experience has contributed to the development of clear guidelines and requirements for TNE delivery

- The threat to students and the sector will come from individual institutional failure, and in that respect, is comparable to the threats being managed in the Czech HE sector.
  - At least for the institutions on the current MSMT List, the consequences of a failure of a local TNE organization have already been addressed by a proposal from MSMT making foreign universities declare their commitment to ensuring the completion of local TNE programs (Vinš 2010).

- There is some pressure on the Czech HE academic and accreditation system that may arise from the alternatives that TNE provision offer, particularly for public universities organizing Joint/double/multiple cooperative programs. Nonetheless, pursuing TNE programs will be a niche strategy for individual institutions,
Opportunities

- The advantages that TNE provision can provide individuals were fairly well articulated by the participants in this project
  - access to different methods of teaching, different subjects
  - international study opportunities,
  - a positive impact on employability.

- TNE provision is also well placed to support policies of bringing more international students to the Czech Republic.
  - International students are likely to choose to start or continue their studies with Czech public and private universities as well.
  - International students also bring considerable income to a country (Vickers & Bekhradnia 2007).

- TNE contributes to a vibrant and diversified local sector, providing choices and alternatives for individuals, offering internationally oriented study programs and qualifications, as well as playing a significant role in lifelong learning, for example, through the delivery of MBA programs.
Cooperation

- TNE organizations are also outposts of foreign universities that can be engaged in the process of building networks for teaching and research.
  - They may harbor considerable skills in the administrative and academic demands of working with institutions internationally, and those skills could be transferred to people within the Czech sector that are starting to undertake global research and teaching projects.

- Crucial to the development of these networks, however, would be increased communication, on both informal and formal levels, between the various foreign universities, Czech HEIs and others in the domestic higher education sector.
Recommendations – Czech sector

- **Recommendation 1**
  Separate the mechanism for TNE organizations being listed by MSMT from the request for granting students social benefits.

- **Recommendation 2**
  Encourage informal and formal communication channels between TNE providers and the agencies and institutions that represent Czech higher education.

- **Recommendation 3**
  Encourage appropriate collaboration between TNE providers and Czech higher education institutions. Share know-how collected from the implementation of foreign university quality assurance systems with Czech institutions starting Joint/double/multiple degrees.
Recommendations – TNE providers

- **Recommendation 4**
  Ensure that your operations, partner universities and quality assurance mechanisms are clear and transparent to the public.

- **Recommendation 5**
  Develop your own networks, including formal associations of TNE providers, or associations of particular national university groups, that will promote good practice and communication, and serve as partners in discussions with the Czech higher education sector and the public.

- **Recommendation 6**
  Collect relevant data regarding student numbers and be prepared to share that data with MSMT in order to contribute to the transparency of the TNE sector.
Recommendations – TNE providers

- **Recommendation 7**
  Address any requests for information or remedy of behavior brought to your attention by the Czech HE sector promptly.

- **Recommendation 8**
  Ensure that your marketing operations comply with good practice and do not mislead, intentionally or otherwise, the people who enroll on your courses.

- **Recommendation 9**
  Engage with the Czech HE sector using evidence-based recommendations and advice.
Recommendations – Czech HEIs

- **Recommendation 10**
  Consider ways in which students can benefit from cooperation and interaction on international projects that include TNE organizations and their home universities.

- **Recommendation 11**
  Consider joining or building networks that include local TNE organizations and the foreign universities that have already shown a commitment to engage in activity in the Czech Republic.

- **Recommendation 12**
  If you are engaged in TNE activities yourself, make sure that you stay informed and keep up to date on changes in the sector that affect best


References


References


Vinš, V., 2010. Letter from the Head of the Higher Education Department to listed foreign degree providers, MSMT.

Chart 1: Foreign universities by country of origin

- Ukraine, 7.32%
- US, 29.27%
- Netherlands, 7.32%
- Germany, 2.44%
- Finland, 2.44%
- Russia, 7.32%
- Slovakia, 4.88%
- Switzerland, 2.44%
- Spain, 2.44%
- UK, 34.15%
Chart 2: Foreign universities represented as % of institutions in TNE sector
Chart 3: Breakdown of TNE institutions by categories used in the report (not including Type C)
Chart 4: Institutional Profiles

- Business, 63.41%
- Law, 7.32%
- Humanities, 7.32%
- Humanities, Music, 2.44%
- Religion, 2.44%
- Design, 2.44%
- Health, 2.44%
- Business, Computing & ICT, Art & Design, 4.88%
- Business, Humanities, 2.44%
- Business, Law, 4.88%
Chart 5: Origin of foreign university partners (interview group only)

X: Country of origin
Y: Number of institutions
Chart 6: % of teaching at institutions that is TNE (interview group only)

X: % of teaching that is TNE (banded to 10)
Y: Number of institutions
Chart 7: Just Czech citizens (interview group only)

X: % of Czech citizens only (banded to 10)
Y: Number of Institutions