

Insight

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Transnational education

Protecting the interests of students taught abroad

Introduction

As the global higher education community becomes ever more interconnected, it is no longer a given that people will study with a university or college in the country where they live.¹ Many travel overseas for higher education, but increasing numbers choose to study with institutions elsewhere while staying in their own, or a third, country. This type of transnational education (TNE) can take various forms, including distance learning, the establishment of overseas branch campuses, and collaborative arrangements between universities in different countries.

England's independent higher education regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), exists to protect the interests of the students registered with the universities and colleges it regulates. Our responsibilities therefore apply not only to millions of students in England, but to hundreds of thousands living elsewhere. The OfS supports high quality and diversity of choice in English higher education, and TNE is an important part of this.

This Insight brief investigates the data available on the experiences and outcomes of students living abroad who study with English universities and colleges. It gives some details of

Summary

Transnational education, delivered across national borders to students living abroad, is increasingly important globally, and accounts for an ever larger percentage of the students registered with English universities and colleges. These students are entitled to expect the same quality and standards as those resident in England, and their courses are subject to the same regulation. Drawing on the latest data published by Jisc, this brief outlines the scale and shape of this activity, our interest in it and how we regulate it.

Terms used in this Insight brief

Transnational education (TNE): Education delivered across national borders. In the context of this brief, the term refers to higher education delivered by English universities and colleges to students living abroad.

Registered provider: In the context of this brief, a university or college registered with the OfS that is delivering TNE in another country.

Overseas partner institution: A university or college in the country of delivery that is in partnership with a registered provider.

Branch campus: A location where a university offers courses that is geographically, operationally and administratively separate from its main campus.

Distance delivery: Courses designed to be delivered primarily via the internet or by other remote means.

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

the scale and characteristics of this type of TNE, including how it has grown in recent years and its geographical spread. Finally, the brief explains the OfS's interest in this area and how we intend to regulate this type of higher education provision in future.

The scale and characteristics of English TNE

TNE constitutes an increasing proportion of the teaching of many English universities, and therefore an increasingly significant income stream and export industry. The overall scale is considerable: in 2021-22, English universities and colleges taught a total of 455,000 students in other countries. This is nearly a sixth (16 per cent) of the 2,798,000 students registered at English institutions that year. 146 English universities and colleges were involved in such teaching, which occurred across 233 overseas countries and territories.² Figure 1 shows the growth of these figures since 2014-15.

Just over two-thirds (69 per cent) of TNE students in 2021-22 were undergraduates, and the rest (31 per cent) postgraduates. Roughly a quarter (27 per cent) were taught by overseas partner organisations, and another quarter (25 per cent) by distance, flexible or distributed learning. 6 per cent studied at English universities' overseas branch campuses, with the remaining 42 per cent covered by other arrangements, including collaborative provision.³ These proportions have not changed significantly over recent years.

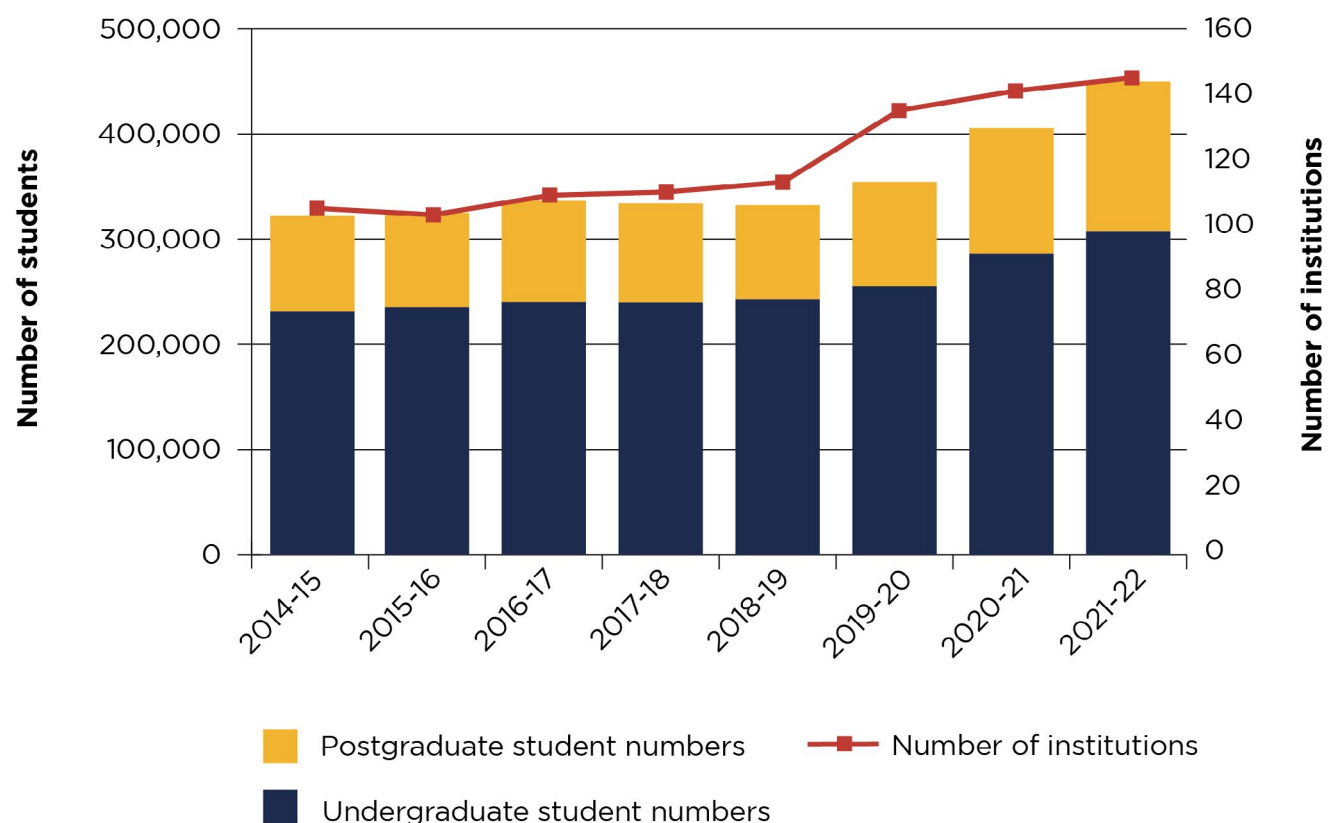
The largest provider of TNE based in England in 2021-22 was the Open University, which accounted for 46,300 students, 43,900 of them undergraduates. They equate to 10 per cent of the total, and 14 per cent of the undergraduate, TNE population. The University of London was responsible in 2021-22 for 37,400 students (8 per cent of the total) and Coventry University for 21,400 (5 per cent). Nine other English universities had

registrations of more than 10,000 TNE students, and a further 65 had 1,000 or more.⁴

Over half (52 per cent) of TNE students in 2021-22 lived in Asia. Of these, 61,505 were based in China. They represent some 14 per cent of TNE students, and 2 per cent of all students, registered with English institutions in 2021-22. Also strongly represented are Malaysia and Sri Lanka (with 9 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of the total TNE population), Singapore (with 5 per cent) and Hong Kong (4 per cent).⁵

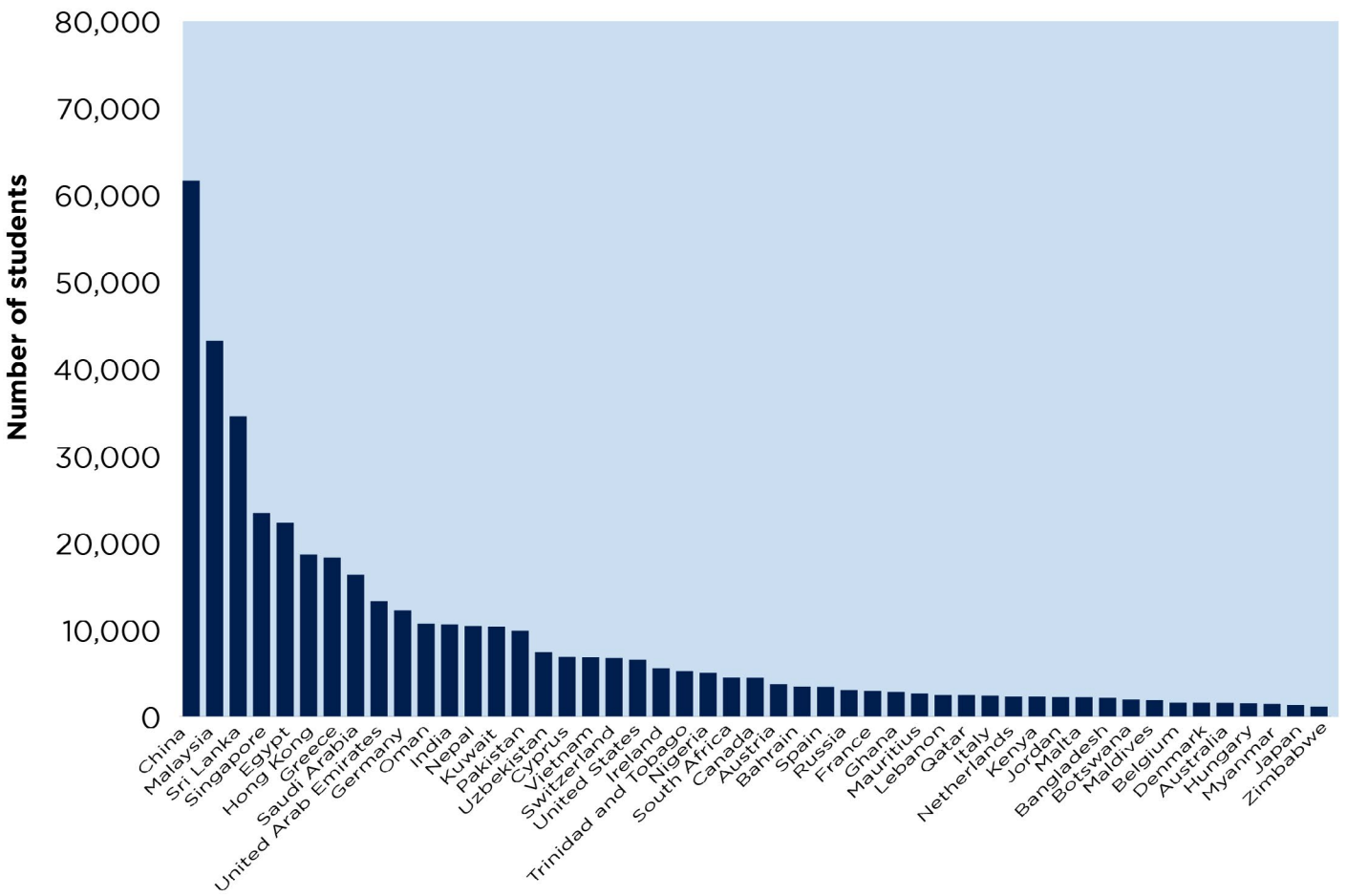
Nearly a fifth of TNE students were in Europe – 15 per cent within the EU and 3 per cent outside it. Lesser proportions were located in the Middle East (14 per cent), Africa (11 per cent) and North America (4 per cent), with still smaller numbers found in South America and Australasia.⁶ The largest national populations outside Asia are in Egypt and Greece, which respectively represent 5 per cent and 4 per cent of the total.⁹

Figure 1: Growth in TNE numbers at English universities and colleges



Source: Jisc, 'Where do HE students come from?', Table 21.⁷ Populations exclude Oxford Brookes University.⁸

Figure 2: Populations of TNE students registered with English universities and colleges in 2021-22



Source: OfS internal analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency aggregate offshore record (HESA AOR). Only populations of 1,000 or more are shown.

Figure 2 shows all national populations over 1,000, while Figure 3 locates the ten largest national populations, as of 2021-22.

Figure 4 shows changes over the past eight years in what are now the ten most significant markets for English TNE. Over this time, numbers from China have increased greatly (by 173 per cent between 2014-15 and 2021-22), while those from Malaysia have declined (by 22 per cent over the same period), as the former has replaced the latter as the UK's largest TNE market.

Since 2014-15, Singapore's number of English TNE students has also reduced, by 15 per cent overall, and Hong Kong's by 11 per cent. Meanwhile, numbers from Sri Lanka have grown by 249 per cent, making it the third largest market for English TNE. While lower overall, the numbers of students in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have more than

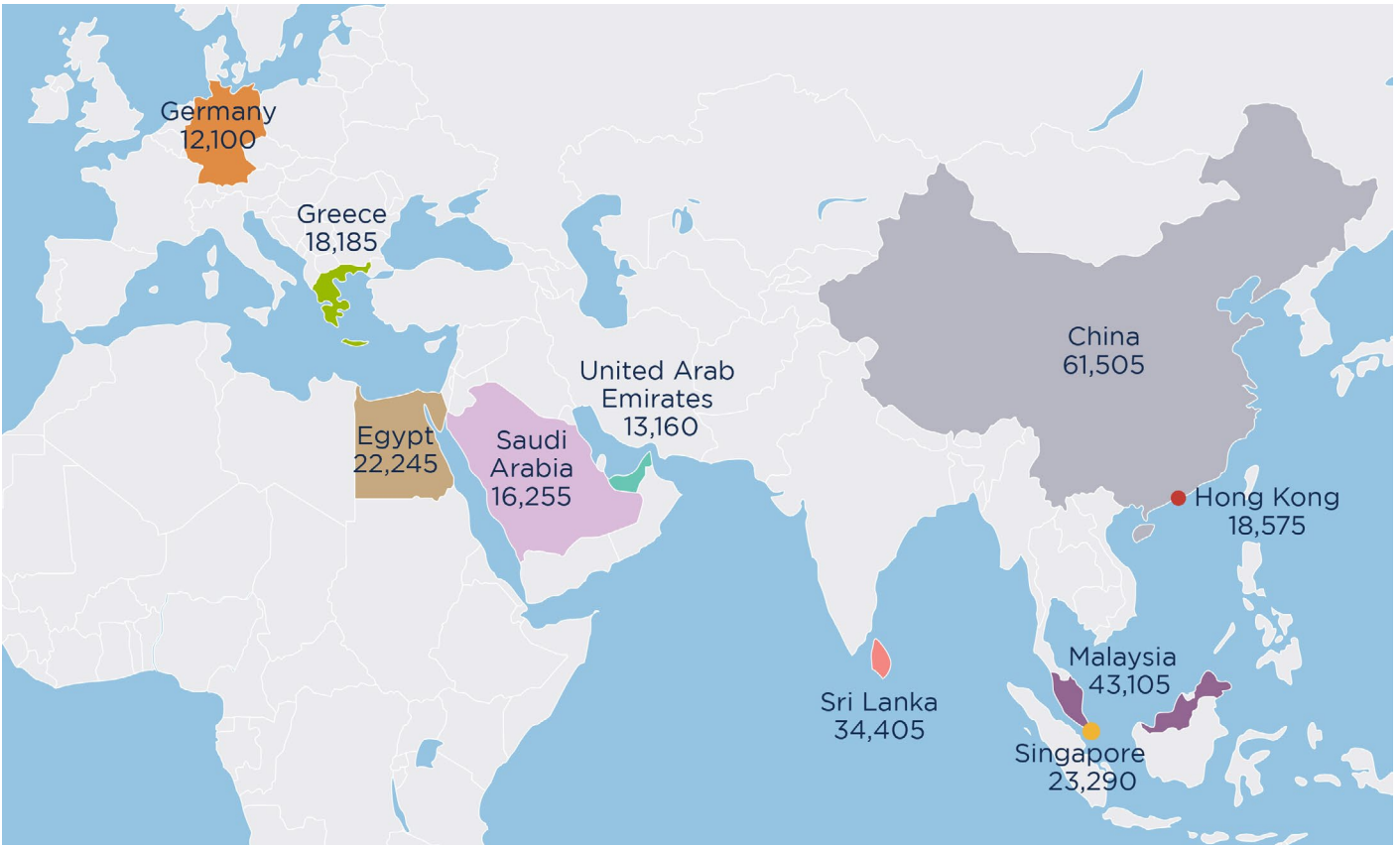
doubled over the same period. The corresponding numbers in Greece, the United Arab Emirates and Germany also show significant growth.¹⁰

In 2020, it was estimated that TNE contributed £2.3 billion to the UK's total revenue from education exports of £25.6 billion.¹¹ The government's International Education Strategy aims to increase the latter figure to £35 billion by 2030.¹² The diversity of models for TNE, including the financial arrangements involved, makes it difficult from the data we currently collect to identify individual registered providers' income from this source, its cost to them, or its contribution to their overall financial sustainability. On the whole, partnership arrangements are likely to involve less outlay than wholly university-owned overseas operations, but will also be less financially beneficial.

Studies for the British Council suggest that the value of TNE goes considerably beyond the educational and financial. TNE partnerships are thought to play a significant global role in furthering the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to end deprivation, improve health, spur economic growth, reduce inequality and combat climate change across the world. In the host countries it is suggested that they improve teaching and research capacity of overseas institutions, enhance the student experience and graduate employability, grow the economy and develop sustainable communities. From the point of view of the English registered providers, they can increase research and improve the knowledge base, enhance international reputation and recruitment, and allow for diversification of revenue.¹³

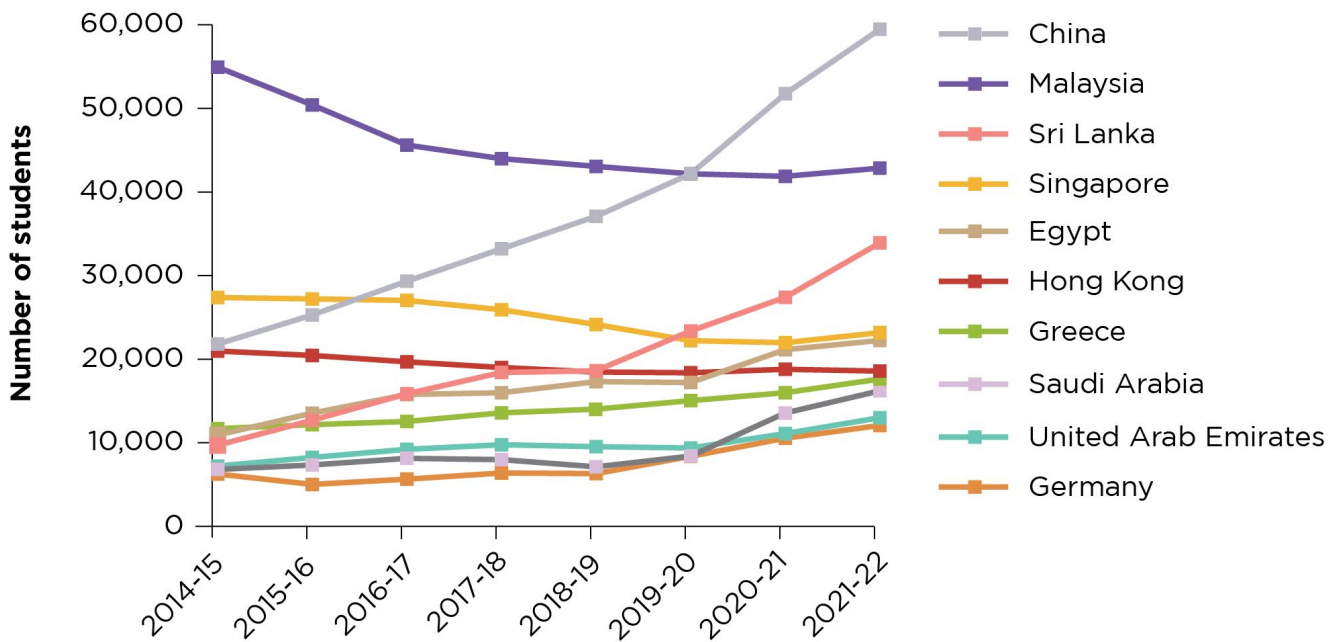
In July 2022, the OfS

Figure 3: The ten largest English TNE populations as of 2021-22



Source: OfS internal analysis of the HESA AOR.

Figure 4: Changes in numbers in the largest English TNE populations as of 2021-22



Source: OfS internal analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency aggregate offshore record (HESA AOR). Populations exclude Oxford Brookes University.¹⁴

engaged with seven English universities to learn more about their delivery of TNE. Although this is a small sample of the universities involved in TNE, these participants identified what in their view were four elements of effective practice: a rigorous selection process for overseas partner institutions, based among other things on an awareness of the OfS's requirements; robust quality assurance and management of partnerships, drawing on the expertise of the British Council, Universities UK and government departments; enabling student engagement in the quality of courses, including using their feedback to inform decision-making; and improving the delivery of online, distance and blended learning.

Challenges identified by the same universities included: a preference on the part of some overseas partner institutions to prioritise student numbers over quality; subcontracting by overseas partner institutions making it more difficult to oversee all aspects of the teaching; and different understandings of consumer rights masking TNE students' concerns from the English registered provider.

The OfS's regulation of TNE

The universities and colleges that register with the OfS are based in England, but our remit to regulate them is not geographically defined. Rather, we regulate 'the quality of higher education provided in any manner or form by, or on behalf of' a registered provider.¹⁵

Education is a global business, and even if some student populations are small, the number of TNE students these universities collectively register is very large, and likely to grow further. TNE is therefore an increasingly important element of many universities' income portfolios, and the success of such ventures helps to bolster the financial sustainability of the registered provider. This means that a loss of TNE income has

Common types of transnational education

In addition to branch campuses and distance delivery, common arrangements found within TNE include the following.

Course-to-course credit transfer: An arrangement where a registered provider recognises parts of an overseas partner institution's course as contributing towards one of its own qualifications.

Joint degree: A single qualification awarded jointly by two universities in partnership.

Dual degree: An arrangement whereby two universities each award a qualification to students completing a particular course.

Validated course: A module or programme which a degree awarding body approves to contribute, or lead, to one of its awards. The validated course is delivered by the provider that designed it and students on the course normally have a direct contractual relationship with that provider and not the validating provider. The validating provider remains responsible for the quality and standards of the course.

Franchising or subcontractual arrangement: A relationship, based on a formal contract, in which a body with degree awarding powers (the lead provider) allows another provider (the delivery provider) to deliver all, or part, of a course which has been designed, approved and owned by the degree awarding body. The lead provider or subcontracting provider retains overall control of the course's content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance arrangements.

Progression agreements or sequential degrees: An arrangement whereby successful completion of an overseas partner institution's course guarantees entry onto one of the registered provider's courses.

the potential to affect all of a university's students, in England as well as abroad.

The courses TNE students follow represent a substantial English export activity, and we consider it important that students and other stakeholders, whether in England or elsewhere, can have confidence in the quality and standards of those courses in the same way as for courses delivered within the UK.

The courses TNE students follow are subject to the minimum regulatory requirements relating to quality set out in the OfS's conditions B1, B2, B3, B4 and B5. Universities and colleges must satisfy these conditions to remain registered with the OfS. They require, respectively, a high quality academic experience; resources, support

and engagement for students; positive outcomes for students; reliable assessment leading to credible awards; and sector-recognised standards for degrees and other awards.¹⁶

For example, condition B1 stipulates that students on a higher education course must receive a high quality academic experience. The associated guidance specifies that this:

'includes courses provided face-to-face, by distance learning, or a combination of delivery approaches [...] UK-based and non-UK-based students, and courses delivered through partnership arrangements both within the UK and internationally.'¹⁷

In the case of condition B3, we will be consulting in due course on the definitions and indicators we should use to measure positive outcomes for TNE students.

It is not only the students – prospective as well as current – who benefit from this level of regulatory protection. TNE makes an important contribution to the reputation of English higher education, but this remains the case only if its quality is reliably high. If the education or student experience offered on a particular course is seen as substandard, this potentially affects perceptions of all English TNE courses. Leaving poor quality courses unchallenged is ultimately bad for business.

The OfS's approach to TNE

Our approach to regulating higher education courses in our universities and colleges is risk-based. This means that we monitor a range of information about the institutions registered with us, and we may intervene where that intelligence suggests there may be concerns about compliance with our conditions of registration for an individual provider. We do this in the interests of students and other stakeholders.

Our intention is to ensure that our regulation of TNE courses provided by registered providers takes the context for those courses into account, and minimises the regulatory burden for those that pose no significant regulatory risk, to allow them to flourish. However, where appropriate we can investigate and, where we find that there are problems with the quality or standards of courses, we can use our regulatory powers to act in the interests of students.

This risk-based approach to regulation may be less familiar than one that uses regular cycles of regulation for all universities regardless of risk, but it has strengths. For example, we can ensure that our attention and the additional work for universities created by direct engagement with the regulator can be

How the OfS gets information about TNE

There are three main routes by which we receive information about TNE courses:

- Information submitted to us by the registered providers themselves in 'reportable events', such as a shortfall in student recruitment to a course leading to financial consequences, or the withdrawal of professional accreditation for a course.
- Notifications submitted to us directly by students, staff and members of the public who believe that a course may be failing to meet our requirements.
- The aggregate offshore record data collected since 2007-08 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (now part of Jisc), on which the student numbers given in this brief are based. All registered higher education providers must submit data on the outcomes and locations of all TNE students, including their rates of continuation, completion and withdrawal.¹⁸ The dataset is currently limited compared with the individualised records held on students based in England, but we are working with Jisc on expanding and improving future data.

In addition, universities and colleges may include information about TNE in their submissions to the Teaching Excellence Framework.

targeted where we consider the risk to be greatest.

We are continuing to implement our approach to the regulation of the quality and standards of courses, and this includes monitoring and potentially investigating areas of potential concern, whether these relate to courses delivered in the UK or overseas. We already work in partnership with overseas regulatory agencies, and we are seeking to build these relationships further.¹⁹ In some cases these agencies may be best placed to carry out investigations into higher education courses that are delivered in their own countries, and our approach in such situations would take that regulatory activity into account.

We are working to increase understanding of the OfS's regulation, including for TNE, among stakeholders within and outside England. This includes targeted engagement with government and regulatory bodies and sector representative groups, to help them understand how we regulate TNE and how it fits in our wider approach. This engagement with other organisations also builds up

our understanding of TNE in its global and regional contexts, which will supplement our current understanding of the TNE activities of the universities and colleges we regulate.

We plan to publish data and case studies to explore the size and shape of English TNE in more depth, and to publish further information focusing on specific territories, types of courses or approaches to delivery in due course. We have also indicated that we intend to consult further on the introduction of measures relating to students in TNE as part of our approach to regulating student outcomes.²⁰

As we continue to implement our strengthened approach to regulating quality and standards, the OfS remains committed to helping foster a diverse and innovative higher education sector with international reach and appeal. Transnational education is clearly a vital and thriving aspect of this work, and by helping to ensure its high quality we intend to maintain and enhance the reputation of English higher education at home and across the world.

Notes

¹ In this brief, for the sake of readability, we have used 'universities and colleges', or sometimes simply 'universities' or 'institutions', to refer to what our regulatory framework and other more formal documents call 'higher education providers'.

² Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21; OfS analysis of the 2021-22 aggregate offshore record return. This count of students excludes those returned as dormant; counts of countries and universities require that enough students are reported to round to at least five. Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh universities accounted for a further 75,000 such students.

³ Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21.

⁴ Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21. The figure for the University of London includes the 'institutes and activities' listed under 'Notes' at Jisc, '[Student 2021-22](#)', but excludes such larger member institutions as University College London and SOAS.

⁵ Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21; Jisc, 'Where do HE students come from?', Chart 5.

⁶ Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21.

⁷ Jisc, January 2023, [Where do HE students come from? Transnational education](#), Table 21.

⁸ In 2019-20, Oxford Brookes University changed how it recorded students studying on its validated Association of Chartered Certified Accountants programme for the purposes of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's annual offshore record. Because of the very large numbers involved (44 per cent of transnational students registered at English universities in 2018-19), this change in data reporting practice has a misleading effect on the total figures. It is therefore customary to exclude this university's students when considering these numbers as a time series.

⁹ OfS internal analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency aggregate offshore record (HESA AOR).

¹⁰ OfS internal analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency aggregate offshore record (HESA AOR).

¹¹ Gov.UK, December 2022, [UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity](#).

The income listed is a total, including various education products and services that do not constitute TNE.

¹² Gov.UK, March 2019, '[International Education Strategy: Global potential, global growth](#)'.

¹³ British Council, October 2022, '[The value of transnational education partnerships](#)'. For the Sustainable Development Goals, see United Nations, [The 17 goals](#).

¹⁴ See Note 8.

¹⁵ OfS, November 2022, '[Regulatory framework](#)', p90.

¹⁶ See OfS, [Conditions of registration](#), and OfS, November 2022, '[Regulatory framework](#)'.

¹⁷ OfS, November 2022, '[Regulatory framework](#)', p92.

¹⁸ This data on specific outcomes has only been collected as part of the aggregate offshore record since 2019-20, and no analysis of it has yet been published.

¹⁹ OfS, [Transnational education: Information for overseas regulatory agencies](#).

²⁰ OfS, '[A new approach to regulating student outcomes: Analysis of responses to consultation and decisions](#)', p69.