Bringing forth an action plan

The recent Regional Symposium on Transnational Education highlighted the need for strategies and institutional motivation for providing it. KOH SOO LING reports.

TRANSNATIONAL education or TNE is the natural evolution of the internationalisation of education. It is anything that promotes educational knowledge flow across borders, ranging from student exchange to collaborations in research. Besides that, there are also local institutions offering joint degrees. This encompasses cross recognition of courses, foreign players coming in with their actual presence as well as the setting up of fully comprehensive universities offering a full range of courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Malaysia is not new to TNE. Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation executive director Dr Parmjit Singh says TNE started in the 1930s when students who could not enter local public universities went overseas to take up courses such as bookkeeping or typewriting. In the post-1969 era, the importance of TNE emerged again when students went overseas because of the university quota system. In the 1980s, transferring of credits (for local diploma and higher diploma courses) to overseas programmes started. Then twinning programmes followed suit and in the mid-90s, 3 + 0 programmes appeared because of the economic downturn.

Dr Parmjit says "what is new are foreign students arriving" which was the domain of developed countries previously. "Now people are beginning to trust our strength, strategic marketing policies and Government support. We have Africans coming to Malaysia to do British degrees. Strategies and institutional motivation for providing TNE must be in place."

These strategies were discussed at the recent Regional Symposium on Transnational Education. The event was part of a series in the East Asia region organised by the British Council to develop an action plan for education strategy including collaborations and partnerships between participating countries and the United Kingdom. More than 35 education policymakers and senior education practitioners from Asia, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, Australia and the UK participated in the strategic dialogue.

Given the viability of TNE, what then are the challenges of setting up and delivering TNE partnerships? One challenge is the question of profit-making by the provider or the host country. Traditionally, the provider country would be the foreign country (for example the UK) and the host country would be the recipient country (for example, Malaysia). However, over time the boundary that separates the two has become blurred.

Professor Reg Jordan, dean of International Medical Education, Newcastle University, says no country is just a provider or a host country. TNE is based on mutual self-interest. Every mainstream provider goes into TNE not just for the profits. "If you’re a provider, you have to understand what the host wants. The aim is to have a long-term robust relationship. The concept of the winner taking it all does not apply."

The 180-year-old medical school at Newcastle University has set its sights on setting up a medical branch in Malaysia. Jordan sees it as reputation gained when quality medical studies can be offered at local shores for less than half the cost. Jordan adds that the demand for education opportunities is going to come from Asia and Southeast Asia. "We are looking at a model of sustainability. We want to partner with a public university especially in niche areas. For example, we can provide expertise in medicine and healthcare while a local public university can provide expertise in engineering; medical scientists can work with engineers to produce wheelchairs. "We are in the core business to open opportunities for a whole range of collaborations."

Singapore Management University’s Associate Director (Office of Strategic Planning) Michael Fung Jin Ling agrees. "Sure, the economic benefits are there. The 1990s have seen a rise in competitive giants like China and India so the need to move into a knowledge-centred economy is timely: So what is crucial is that we need to upgrade our capabilities quickly. The presence of foreign students augments local counterparts," says Fung.

Singapore aims to attract 150,000 foreign students to its shores. For the last two decades Singapore has been actively involved in TNE and recently there have been intensified activities to attract leading foreign universities or specialised institutes to set up branches in Singapore. Another challenge is quality control. The host country’s main concern is to ensure that partnership is established. The provider country, on the other hand, has to ensure that branch campuses offer the same level of quality as that of the main campus abroad. While countries may aspire to move on in TNE, there may be bureaucratic zones of discomfort. "How do we as a university get together to benchmark one another so that our customers are better informed?"

There is a need for long-term solutions in the areas of regional and global quality assurance frameworks. Unregulated private providers give genuine providers a bad name,” says Fung. He adds that differentials in cost are real. Does the host or provider country provide any student subsidies? The host country may find it difficult to justify offering subsidies to foreign students. In Singapore, the Government provides subsidies for international students.

One institution that has developed an interesting partnership with a host country is Lancaster University. Lancaster University deputy vice-chancellor Professor R. D. McKinlay says: "We have quite intensively validated a number of degree programmes at Sunway University College. There are two levels of validation: validation of Sunway the institution and validation of each degree programme offered at Sunway. "We bring in external assessors. Quite a large number of colleagues have come from Lancaster to work here and vice versa."

McKinlay says that there should be no compromise in standards. A Lancaster degree is a Lancaster degree, whether done in Malaysia or in the UK. "The complicated validation process ensures a happy marriage."

TNE is here to stay. As talents become more mobile, countries should embrace this trend. "Unless the Government continues to ensure that we stay on a par with the rest of the world, we will have a problem," Parmjit says.

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