

# Transnational education and total quality management: A stakeholder-centred model

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## Abstract

### *Purpose*

Quality assurance is a key concern in higher education, which is more complex in offshore transnational education (TNE), compared to onshore provision of education service. However, higher education quality assurance is an established research domain; there is very limited work on the efficacy of industry-based total quality management (TQM) considerations to uphold quality in higher education, particularly in TNE. From this context, this study aims to develop new insights in this under-researched area.

### *Design/methodology/approach*

An inductive constructivist approach is followed to analyse extant scholarly views in relevant disciplinary areas to develop new insights, in relation to the significance of industry-based TQM in TNEs' quality assurance.

### *Findings*

Stakeholder orientation is recognised, as a stepping stone to uphold quality in TNE. Different stakeholders are identified, who would have significant influence on TNEs' TQM, and how these stakeholders could influence the TQM process is clarified.

### *Practical implications*

These insights will be useful for education administrators to better align their stakeholder relationships to underpin TQM. Academics will be able to use these insights as a basis for future research towards the significance of industry-based TQM in higher education.

### *Originality/value*

Based on a stakeholder-focussed TNE TQM model, the findings represent an innovative strategic direction towards a better understanding of the significance of stakeholder relationships, pertaining to TQM in the contemporary higher education system.

**Keywords** transnational education, total quality management, stakeholder relationships, stakeholder engagement, stakeholder orientation, quality assurance.

**Article classification** conceptual paper

## Introduction

Quality assurance is a key concern in academic service. In offshore or transnational education (TNE), where higher education institutions provide academic service in another country,

under a different learning setting, compared to their main onshore campus; generally, the quality assurance process becomes more complex, because of such different learning environments. A 2008 study demonstrates that by 2030, the expected demand of the international higher education industry will be 414 million, compared to 99 million in 2008 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2013). As a result, higher education institutions has been devoting their efforts to adapt with the diversified issues of international education, “integrating an international dimension into the (overall) purpose, goals, functions and delivery of higher education” (Knight 2007, 134; as cited in Hou, 2014, p. 135). Because of increasing demand of TNE (Healey, 2013), and such a growth in the global higher education industry, ensuring quality in higher education across different country, education system and learning environment becomes crucial in the contemporary higher education management. However, “ensuring that the quality of cross-border education meets both local and international standards has become a challenge in many nations” (Hou, 2014, p. 136).

Ensuring quality in TNE has favourable impact on the success of TNE, in order to win the cross-border market. In fact, researchers argue that “quality assurance also as a mechanism for creating more trust in cross-national higher education activities” (Stensaker and Maassen, 2015, p. 30). However, there are numerous studies in TNE quality assurance (e.g. Harvey and Green, 1993; Green, 1994; Carroll, 1997; Dill, 2000; Cheng, 2003; Gynnild, 2007; Boey Lim, 2009; Edwards et al., 2010; Cheng, 2011; Gibbs, 2011; Kettunen, 2012; Cardoso et al., 2015), there is very little attention given to integrate industry-based total quality management models into higher education system, particularly to ensure TNE quality. “Much has been written about total quality management (TQM) in manufacturing; however, less attention has been paid to the education sector” (Mehta et al., 2014, p. 124). From this context, this study aims to contribute to this research gap by analysing industry-based perspectives in TQM and synthesising its implications for managing higher education quality, focussing on TNE. To pursue this aim, this study follows an inductive constructivist explanatory methodology to authenticate arguments, in order to logically develop findings from the reviewed literature and industry information (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994; Smart et al., 2012; Osman et al., 2014). As a consequence, this paper presents the relevant literature and industry information through the progress of the discussions, as an inductive approach, to explain findings, in respect to the aim of the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hallier and Forbes, 2004; Randall and Mello, 2012; Naidoo and Wu, 2014).

## **Transnational education (TNE) and significance of quality management in TNE**

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2007) defined TNE as:

all types of higher education study programs, sets of study courses, 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. Such programs may belong to the educational system of a state, different from the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system. (McBrayer, 2011, p. 43)

Because of reduced and restricted onshore government funding in higher education in the recent decade (Eckel, 2008; Shah and Jarzabkowski, 2013; Douglas et al., 2015), universities are engaging in marketisation of their scholarly services, and are increasingly competing for students (Ashwin et al., 2015). Such a competition is centred on local and international students in onshore markets and transnational students in offshore markets to offset the financial deficit from the reduced onshore government funding. Here, international students are referred to the students, who come from country 'A' to country 'B' to study in a country B's onshore/inland education institution's campus. The transnational students are referred to the students, who are from country 'A'; however study in an education institution of country 'B', without leaving the country 'A' and/or without physically living in country 'A' through various forms of TNE services of country B's education institutions. For example, the most popular forms of TNEs are direct international branch campus, franchisee, distance learning, articulation, double-degree, joint degree and validation of degrees (British Council, 2013; Healey, 2015). Through TNE, universities' "off-shore capability increases the size of their markets, by making their products accessible to a wider population who cannot afford (or are not inclined) to study on the home campus" (Healy 2008, p. 344).

Transnational students should receive quality education, at least equivalent to the reputation of the TNE exporting institution, as well as the TNE importing countries need to be assured that their TNE students will become skilled human resources to contribute to their economy (McBurnie, 2008). Accordingly, to uphold the reputation of Australian higher education in their transnational markets, and to better exploit the TNE opportunities, the Provision of Education to International Students – Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities, which is developed by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, recommend that "the Australian University should endeavour to provide services and facilities at a local level equivalent to a counterpart university/learning environment in the

host country” (Smith, 2010, p. 800). However, because of the physical distance between the TNEs’ exporting institutions and their transnational students, there are concerns in academic and commercial issues, which could lead to negatively impact on TNE qualities (McBurnie, 2008; Edwards et al., 2010).

In general, it is harder for students and other stakeholders to immediately understand and measure the quality of education and its outcome, in comparison to other commodities and services, as the value of most commodities and services, generally could be apparent, as soon as they are purchased. But for education, the stakeholders could be benefited through a particular education provider and their intrinsic and extrinsic qualities only several years after purchasing the education service (Nix, 2009). Such a distinguishing feature of education as a service engenders more complexities to manage qualities in TNE. In general, if a TNE provides quality services, it can mutually be valuable for all involved stakeholders. However, the concern is the TNE services could enrich, as well as damage the reputation of the exporting institution in the global market (Edwards et al., 2010), where managing and ensuring the quality of TNEs would be the steering phenomenon to either reinforce or damage the TNE exporting institution’s reputation.

### **Transnational education and total quality management**

In the previous section, it is recognised that managing the quality of education service is harder and more complex in particular for TNEs. In general, TNE programs lack accountability, compared to onshore programs, which justifies the need to structure an overall total quality management (TQM) framework for TNEs, despite several quality control agreements and regulations (Nix, 2009). In response to such a problem, some scholars, from time to time attempted to adjust different industry-based TQM concepts and diverse models to manage quality in higher education (e.g. Ho and Wearn, 1995; Houston, 2007; Sayeda et al., 2010; Baraki and Van Kemenade, 2013; Sahu et al., 2013); however, there is very limited work on the integration of industry-based TQM models into education service, in order to uphold quality assurance in education (Mehta et al., 2014). For this study, a simple ‘stakeholder-focussed’ TQM model is adapted from Miguel and Santiago’s (2010) study on the ‘Mercadona’ as the leading Spanish supermarket chain, in order to understand whether there is any influence of stakeholder cooperation, communication and engagement on TNEs’ TQM design and implementation. Since, stakeholder cooperation, communication and

engagement are acknowledged as a ‘quality assurance driving factor’ in higher education (O’Mahony and Garavan; 2012; Houston and Paewai, 2013; Stalmeijer et al., 2014).

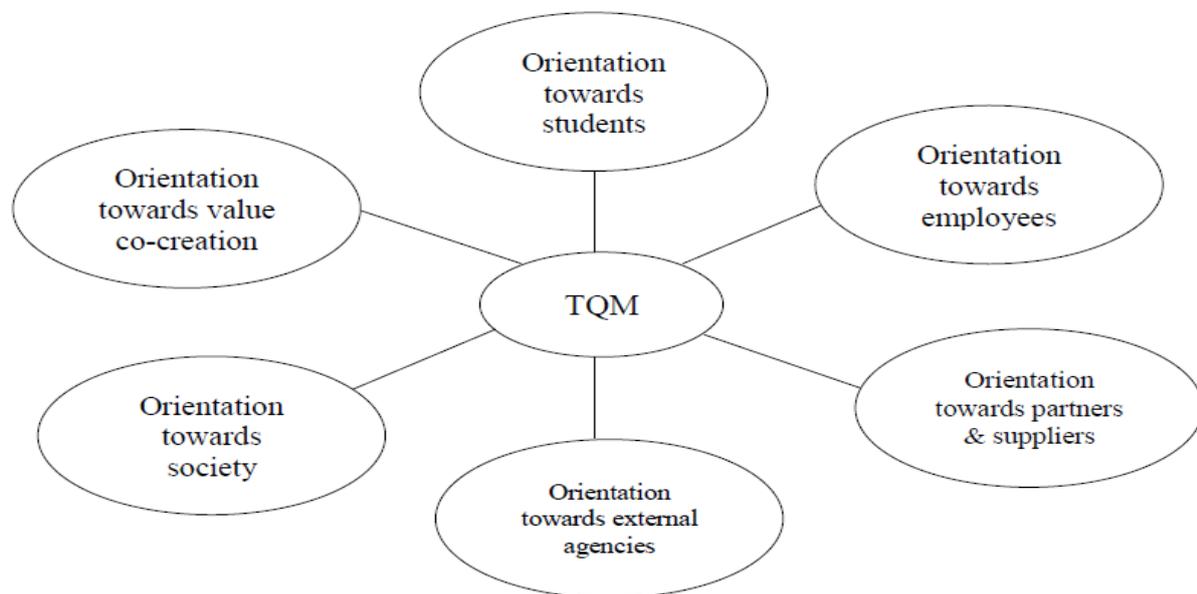


Figure 1: Influence of stakeholder orientation on total quality management in TNE (adapted from Miguel and Santiago, 2010).

“Student engagement includes both the academic and non-academic activities (Krause and Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2010), (which) is...an important indicator of quality of higher education” (Clarke et al., 2013, p. 3). Similarly, students also participate in various institutional committees to uphold internal quality assurance issues (Stalmeijer et al., 2014). Therefore, Figure 1 emphasises on understanding students’ current and future needs through communication, cooperation and engagement as an opportunity to uphold the overall quality of an education service. For example, integrating local business norms, values, culture, relevant examples and so forth of the TNE host country in the business course materials would be useful for TNE students to better understand the underlying course principles through their local examples. Likewise, understanding or orientation towards employees’ needs and expectations, considering transcultural issues, beliefs, ideas, impressions, expressions and similar other views would be vital for transnational employees’ training and performance management in TNEs’ overall TQM.

Partnerships are involved in all kinds of TNEs (British Council, 2013). Based on the organisational development literature on partnership theory, Healey (2015) prescribes a

structure of TNEs' partnership to recognise the sources of reputational risk. This structure includes various partnership dimensions, such as 'partnership and TNE composition', 'partnership and TNE structure', 'partnership and TNE scope', 'partnership and TNE function', 'partnership and TNE process' and 'partnership and TNE outcome' as the key strategic considerations to form TNEs' partnership, in a way that consider the business risk elements, which could be originated from TNEs' partnerships. These partnership key strategic considerations are however studied in diverse organisational setting outside the education industry, but appear as applicable to consider the strategic issues to form a TNE (Healey, 2015). Since, such partnership dimensions are recognised as instrumental to identify the sources of reputational risk of TNE exporting institution; developing orientation towards TNE's partners (e.g. franchisee), and understanding their value anticipation, in order to provide TNE services in a manner that offers mutually valuable win-win outcomes for TNEs and their partners, would be significant to minimise the reputational risk, and thus to contribute and enhance the overall TQM of TNEs.

Another key concern, as depicted in Figure 1 to uphold TQM in TNE operation is orientation towards external agencies. In Singapore, the private education providers, including TNEs have an association, named as Singapore Association for Private Education (SAPE, 2013), which is an external agency for TNEs in Singapore to support TNE services. Many local private education institutions and TNEs have SAPE membership (Members List, 2013). The Singaporean Government has a higher education quality assurance scheme, titled as EduTrust Certification Scheme (2009), which includes 1000 clauses and sub-clauses and is a complex quality assurance framework for all private education intuitions (PEIs) in Singapore, including TNEs. Based on the PEIs compliance to the EduTrust clauses and subclauses, the Government classifies the status of the PEIs, and develops awareness among the higher education stakeholders, including the future students about the PEIs' status in terms of their quality (EduTrust Certification Status of PEIs, 2015). SAPE organises a seminar for their members to understand this complex EduTrust scheme from the local contexts, as well as organises other educational events for their members (SAPE, 2013; Media News, 2013), which would be instrumental for foreign TNEs in Singapore to thoroughly understand the EduTrust scheme and other relevant issues, based on local perspectives and examples, in order to uphold their TQM process. Similarly, there are other government and non-government external quality assurance agencies in many countries and regions, such as International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (2015), European

Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2013), Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (2012), EU-Asia Higher Education Platform (2010) and so forth. As implicit from the SAPE example, TNEs' orientation towards such external agencies would be instrumental to uphold their TQM.

Curtin University (nd), Australia's Malaysian campus contributes to the local Malaysian society through their coordination with the local wildlife parks and develops capacity for crocodile management, as well as for their own ecological research. Capacity building is one of the recognised quality assurance driving factors in higher education (Fullan, 2009). Therefore, the enhanced capacity to improve the wildlife management performance and reinforcing Curtin's own ecological research excellence not only contributes to the enhanced quality of the local wildlife management and Curtin's ecological research, but also co-creates value for the wildlife parks in Malaysia and the Curtin itself through such coordination for value co-creation. As a consequence, orientation towards society and orientation towards stakeholder value co-creation, as illustrated in Figure 1 are appeared as significant for improving overall TQM of TNEs.

### **An example of orientation towards students and further research**

The previous section of 'transnational education and total quality management' conceptualises a stakeholder-focussed TQM model to uphold TNEs' quality assurance processes, as well as it develops some empirical insights and arguments from extant literature, in support of all six elements of this model. Now, this current section attempts to develop further insights, based on a prospective practical, however speculative example of student orientation to uphold TNE quality, along with discussions on future research.

Stakeholder relationships and engagements evolve opportunities and innovation in management (Shams, 2013a; 2013b; 2015). Similarly, students' active engagements in the learning process, as a key stakeholder of TNE would be instrumental to enhance their learning. Student learning is one of the most common activities in TNE's operation. Again, the quality of learning methods and mechanisms would have a vital role to enhance the quality of students' learning. Just as an example, a supposition is that a TNE academic would like to introduce a brief case study competition for an undergraduate course, where students will be guided to upload their brief case studies onto a blogging website that is dedicated for reinforcing students' learning experience. As a course facilitator, the academic will read all submitted case studies.

Therefore, there will be no opportunity for students to plagiarise. During a semester, once the key principles of the course are already discussed with the students in the traditional classroom sessions, such a brief case study competition, utilising the blogging technology would be facilitated through a one day seminar mode of learning, as part of the flipped classroom method. For instance, following the number of students in a class, ten to twelve groups of students will develop their ten to twelve brief case studies based on real life business or socio-economic management issues, examples and best practices, and will upload the case studies on to the blog. Students will study these blogs and will come to their class to discuss and debate on each other's case studies through a one day-long seminar mode of learning. If there is any time constraint, in order to engage all students in the discussions; the students could be nominated on a random basis to present their views, so that all students have to be prepared to contribute to the discussion and the debate. However, the seminar mode of learning is not uncommon for postgraduate and honours students, generally, the undergraduate students are not offered such a learning environment. Therefore, it would be a new value-added experience for undergraduate students. Also, the brief case studies, in relation to particular business and social issues would be archived in the blog. As a consequence, in the long-run, such an initiative would lead to develop an additional resource for future students, and perhaps for researchers in some instances.

The process would also be helpful to engender collaborative interactive learning spirit in classroom, leading to greater interests. Since, students develop their own case studies, share ideas, and know the contemporary issues and debates from different perspectives. Students will find each other as resources, as they realise how their classmates have approached differently, with their own examples and issues against the same problem. The end result of the process would be students will be able to learn lesson directly by studying their co-students' case studies, as they will be able to compare their understandings with the co-students' understandings against a same problem or issue. They will know how the fellows of their class design their case studies, where they emphasise and so forth. In brief, such a learning process would be invaluable for students to understand and retain the course materials better through an interesting, fun and engaging learning experience. The students' interactive engagements will provide a stimulating, yet competitive learning environment, where the students' critical thinking, interactive learning and applications of ideas will be nurtured through their collaborative understanding of the course materials, as a set of tools to navigate to the real life socio-economic issues, rather than the course materials as an absolute

knowledge only. The success of such an approach to enhance students' learning experience would be subject to peer review of the approach, the academic's capability to stimulate and engage the students, and the students' willingness to contribute to their co-students' learning experience, while they enhance their own learning from their co-students' contribution.

From the discussion thus far, it can be concluded that the 'faculty autonomy' as a 'quality assurance driving factor' influences here to uphold the learning quality of students. Since, here, the faculty is permitted to apply a non-traditional method for undergraduate students to enhance their learning quality. Now, if most of the students of a class achieve higher grades for the course, where they participated in such a collaborative mode of learning, in comparison to other courses, where students did not have such an opportunity, it can be concluded that 'meeting a certain standard' as a 'quality assurance mediating factor' can be used here to evaluate the learning quality. Again, if most of the students of this class express their satisfaction for such an approach of collaborative learning, then 'stakeholder satisfaction' as a 'quality assurance mediating factor' can be used to evaluate the learning quality.

However, this example focussing on student orientation represents the blended learning method for undergraduate students, in order to exemplify how student orientation and their greater engagements could enrich students' learning experience. Such a speculative, however prospective practical propositions need to be supported by future conceptual and empirical research. Especially, empirical research, with greater insights on all six components of Figure 1 from diverse perspectives of TNEs' operations in different countries will be instrumental to uphold this initial stakeholder-focussed and industry-based TQM model for TNEs, and perhaps other forms of higher education management. Alongside these six components of Figure 1, recognising other emergent areas of stakeholder orientation and engagements in TQM would be another area of further research. Future studies in different countries, across various educational system and level will also develop insights on this initial proposition of this study. Equipped with an industry-based TQM concept, this study contributes to transnational higher educations' overall TQM process, where further academic research will explicitly satisfy the needs to close the research and practice translation gap for education managers and administrators.

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