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# Transnational education in Sri Lanka: Operational and quality assurance landscape

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# Executive summary



Sri Lanka has one of the highest literacy rates in South Asia, with 92 per cent of the population aged 15 and above being literate in 2021. This can be attributed to the country's Free Education Policy, which has been practised since 1945. The policy has entitled children to free and basic education, demonstrating the government's commitment to education.

With regards to higher education, the number of students enrolling into universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) to pursue both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments have risen steadily over the last few years. As of 2022, there were over 490,000 students studying in state universities and HEIs approved by the University Grants Commission. Enrolments into other private HEIs remain undocumented, and hence the actual proportion of higher education participation in Sri Lanka may be indeed higher.

A longstanding issue surrounding the higher education landscape is that there is a lack of higher education opportunities due to limited capacity in state universities. In 2022, 171,532 students qualified for university education. However, state universities had a limited capacity of 44,000 spots available for new students. Students qualifying for university education have turned to other means of attaining them through private higher education and transnational education (TNE). As Sri Lanka



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embarks on its economic resurgence today, the government has reiterated their priority to bring in more reputable foreign degree programmes through the form of international branch campuses and partnerships between foreign universities and local HEI providers.

In this light, this report aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the operational and quality assurance landscape of the robust TNE within Sri Lanka. In 2022-2023, Sri Lanka was the second largest country for UK TNE, accounting for 10 per cent of all UK TNE enrolments globally. It was also the fastest growing country in the top ten host countries for UK TNE. From 2020-2021 to 2022-2023, the number of Sri Lankan enrolments increased significantly by 50 per cent. With 53,915 TNE enrolments in 2022-23, Sri Lanka therefore represents one of the most significant markets for UK universities.

Despite the size and significance of Sri Lanka as a UK TNE partner, there is surprisingly little research done on the partnership development, quality assurance framework, operations, and administration of TNE in Sri Lanka. A thorough understanding of this environment will allow TNE stakeholders to make informed decisions when they engage in the construction, revision, and maintenance of TNE in Sri Lanka, particularly in anticipation of further growth. Overall, the report will contribute to the future development of UK TNE in the country. The key findings of the research can be summarised as follows:

### **1. TNE is becoming an important avenue for higher education in Sri Lanka, as it addresses longstanding issues that the higher education sector has faced and has the capacity to contribute to gender parity.**

The Sri Lankan higher education sector has its unique challenges. Graduates and employers have cited how fresh graduates did not possess certain soft skills required for the workforce. Teaching quality of higher education has also been criticised for excluding innovative pedagogy and assessments, and research quality has been reported to have low relevance to society. On the accessibility of higher education, it is known that there are limited vacancies in state universities, which cannot entirely cater to many students who are qualified for higher education.

Research in this paper demonstrated that TNE is well-positioned to address these challenges. TNE programmes were found to offer students international exposure. Students develop cross-cultural collaboration skills through interactions with international faculty and classmates and are equipped with the relevant soft skills for employability. TNE programmes were also found to leverage digital platforms for teaching and learning purposes. This provides more flexible learning options and encourages innovative pedagogy, which can enhance a student's quality of education. Online learning also allows students from the different regions in Sri Lanka have equal access to higher education.

The TNE mapping exercise also revealed how TNE programmes covered a wide range of disciplines, ranging from mature fields like business and engineering, to the emerging fields of digital marketing and filmmaking. This allows students to choose from beyond the traditional options of higher education programmes. These options are also sensitive to the market's needs and can boost students' employability.

TNE-related institutions were also reported to have the ability to tap into their parent campus's research resources, facilities, and manpower to conduct research- thereby improving the volume of research output and quality in Sri Lanka.

With regards to gender parity, TNE-related institutions demonstrated how they prioritised the equal representation of the genders in their student recruitment processes. Some TNE-related institutions even implemented policies to foster an environment of equality and inclusion.

### **2. Further growth of TNE activity can be anticipated, given the authorities' ambition to incentivise and provide for a more robust TNE sector.**

The government has demonstrated a commitment to establish more international branch campuses (IBCs) and partnerships between foreign universities and local TNE providers. This was evinced by formal engagement with key ministers and university officials from the countries of foreign universities involved in TNE. Most recently, key Australian officials from reputable Australian universities were invited to Sri Lanka, to discuss the provision of Australian TNE in Sri Lanka.

Support for more IBCs have been robust, given the government's intention to attract reputable foreign universities to set up branch campuses in Sri Lanka. This has been reported to be by means of financial provision and facilities. For example, the Port City in Colombo has been earmarked for the establishment of international branch campuses of foreign universities. It seeks to attract significant foreign investments and endeavours toward becoming an international education hub. Similarly, there has been discussion to provide facilities for these branch campuses, with a particular focus on subject areas that the government has deemed to be of priority to the nation's growth.

There is also now an emphasis on formalising TNE through definitive regulation and monitoring. A legal framework is now in the works for the private higher education sector, to support private higher education institutes (both foreign and local) through incentives and guidelines for establishment. This will affect both international branch campuses and TNE delivered by local partners.

Overall, the research suggested that the government is supportive of an entrepreneurial local private higher education sector to pursue relations with foreign universities.



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### **3. Current government intervention to unify the higher education sector has the potential to simplify the higher education management system.**

Research also highlighted that the government is inclined to unify both the state and non-state sector. This is most prominently observed through the proposal of a National Higher Education Commission, to replace the University Grants Commission- the current main coordinating body for higher education in Sri Lanka. With one body responsible for the management of both sectors, there will be clearer co-ordination of higher education and maintenance of consistent academic standards. This will give TNE providers more clarity on the operational and policy environment surrounding higher education in Sri Lanka. When TNE providers are fed with contextual information, they will be better positioned to make well-informed decisions surrounding TNE operations. However, it was also noted that while this ambition could be positive to TNE providers, it runs the risk of over-regulating a sector that is otherwise successful, in detriment of sustainable TNE growth.

### **4. Quality of TNE programmes can be further improved on to secure public confidence in TNE as a viable alternative to higher education in Sri Lanka.**

Research highlighted that some sections of the public- academics and students, expressed scepticism over the quality of TNE programmes. This was mainly attributed to the assessment criteria of certain courses, where final year degrees were awarded based on written assessments. Reportedly, firms and individuals have monetised on this requirement by offering assignment writing services to students. This led to the impression that such degrees were easy to obtain, resulting in scepticism over such programmes.

Moreover, the quality of TNE programmes do not have to adhere to a local quality assurance framework. This has led to the general perception that there are no clear standards for TNE programmes, which runs the risk of generating inconsistency in the quality of all TNE programmes. The lack of inclusion within the local

qualification's framework has also undermined the credibility of TNE programmes, as suggested by some students interviewed.

### **5. Quality assurance mechanisms require further revisions and formalisation. More discussion with TNE-focused organisations could be taken into consideration.**

Previously, the quality assurance of Sri Lankan higher education had not been centralised across the state, non-state, private and vocational training sector.

At present, there is the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF), which is a national-level framework that consolidates the different accreditations awarded by institutions under the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Ministry of Higher Education, and vocational training institutes. Some of these institutions host TNE programmes, and hence, these programmes are liable to the SLQF as well. While the SLQF can indeed establish consistency in the quality of higher education, this is only the case at the concerned institutions under the government's purview. TNE providers that do not fall within the scope of concerned institutions are not obliged to implement it in their programmes. As alluded to above, it is not necessary for TNE to conform to local quality assurance standards.

While there has been acknowledged agility for foreign institutions to establish TNE operations in Sri Lanka, the quality assurance mechanisms and overall regulations governing the operations of foreign universities in Sri Lanka was deemed as untransparent and not fully understood by stakeholders. This might be attributed to how there are no local mechanisms to affirm and benchmark the quality of TNE programmes to that of the local higher education standards. There is a sense of flexibility in forging TNE partnerships though the absence of regulations, which may over time negatively impact public perceptions of TNE's quality.

At present, there is now a willingness to extend a formal and transparent regulatory environment to the TNE and private higher education sector. Developing a



national system of programme approval, regular reporting and monitoring of student outcomes, programme delivery and teaching quality are all aspects that require urgent improvement and formalisation, in light of the government's plans to attract more foreign universities to Sri Lanka. Such initiatives are welcomed, with TNE-related agencies indicating a willingness to help out in this aspect. To further contribute to a transparent quality assurance landscape, TNE providers can focus on evidencing their internal quality assurance processes, to the benefit of both the government and society.

**6. There are concerns of inter-institutional quality and partnership management that require addressing.**

A related issue is the robustness of inter-institutional quality assurance and partnership management. The high UK TNE enrolment numbers can mask a dissatisfaction in the quality assurance and programme approval processes, uncertainty over expectations regarding teaching and learning, and overall culture of business dealings.

Where Sri Lankan institutions have developed longstanding relationships with UK universities, there is evidence of greater attention paid to quality assurance. However, there are concerns that for newer partnerships, there were weaker quality assurance processes and less transparency from both the UK and Sri Lankan sides. It was noted that UK universities can sometimes act in a transactional manner, with a 'hands-off' approach that does little to cultivate a longer-term sense of partnership and improvement.

It was felt that national-level quality assurance and regulatory guidance would support changes in behaviours, attitudes, and operations, and encourage a greater sense of shared ambitions and mutual benefit.

**7. Documenting current TNE activity would be useful for Sri Lankan and UK stakeholders seeking to enhance TNE provision in Sri Lanka.**

The overall process of collecting and recording TNE activity in Sri Lanka is minimal, with little co-ordinated understanding of the overall levels of activity, partnerships and programmes. Data on the accurate number of TNE enrolments in Section 4 were unavailable over the course of this research, whilst data on the overall number of universities engaging in active/inactive TNE activities were also unavailable- obscuring a comprehensive picture of TNE activity in Sri Lanka.

Addressing this would support better decision-making for both Sri Lankan and UK stakeholders seeking to enhance TNE provision in Sri Lanka. It will provide baseline insights for conceiving future strategic directions.

Furthermore, encouraging a stronger culture of data collection for TNE would ensure that as one of the UK's

largest partners, quality of UK TNE in Sri Lanka will become more consistent and robust.

**8. While the UK dominates TNE in Sri Lanka, Australian universities feature prominently in terms of visibility and reputation.**

Statistical analysis showed that the UK is the largest provider of TNE in Sri Lanka in terms of enrolment numbers, with partnerships with local private institutions being the most common form of delivery. UK TNE presence has also grown rapidly, indicating that UK universities are the preferred partners for the Sri Lankan sector.

Whilst overall enrolment numbers are lower, Australian university presence has also been growing steadily over time in terms of enrolments. Unlike UK TNE, Australian TNE featured prominently through two high profile branch campus-type operations. Australian universities were noted for conducting rigorous quality assurance processes and enjoy a growing reputation amongst students and prospective Sri Lankan higher education partners.

**9. While the UK dominates TNE in Sri Lanka, Australian universities feature prominently in terms of visibility and reputation.**

There has been a shift in the disciplinary areas covered in Sri Lanka, indicating new directions of interest for Sri Lanka students and a diversifying economy. Whilst business and IT remain the dominant study interest areas, there is an increased focus on subjects with the potential to stimulate the creative sector, such as digital marketing and film. Furthermore, future economy skills such as artificial intelligence and data science are becoming more in demand.

The shift towards these subjects reflects the future direction of the Sri Lankan economy. Universities that offer interdisciplinary programmes targeted at Sri Lanka's future economic development may be able to attract students by embedding employability and critical skills into their courses- with work-readiness and industry placement becoming increasingly tied to student choice.

**10. There can be an improvement in the non-academic provision of TNE degrees, enhancing students' welfare and gender equity.**

A related point is how TNE degrees can move beyond the provision of academic knowledge, and support other aspects of university education such as student welfare. Research suggested that it was important for TNE to demonstrate sensitivity for students' welfare. TNE environments could provide more assurance on the safety of female students through inclusive campuses, working spaces and accessible transportation. Whilst some of these features may go beyond the traditional features of TNE, it was highlighted that some Australian universities have implemented positive changes in response to students

and parental feedback. Ensuring safety and comfort of students on campus has become an increasingly important determinant in student choice.

Similarly, TNE programmes were also noted to enable more women to be relevantly skilled and positioned to join the formal economy. Whilst TNE (and higher

education more broadly in Sri Lanka) has relatively high rates of female enrolment, it is felt that more could be done to empower progression into higher paid jobs.

## Recommendations

The study identified six main areas for further policy considerations, to allow TNE stakeholders such as Sri Lankan policymakers, TNE local providers and UK universities to make informed decisions in anticipation of TNE development. There are three public policy recommendations addressing areas of scaling TNE activity, improving operational processes and quality assurance, and three recommendations for the UK TNE sector regarding capacity and resource building.

### **Recommendation 1: Public repository to document TNE activity in Sri Lanka**

As highlighted in the key findings, the scale of TNE activity remains largely undocumented. The database can include features such as: an understanding of the enrolment numbers; course-level data of all TNE courses; a measurable mechanism to evaluate the success rate of TNE in employability, etc. All these features will serve to provide the public with a transparent picture of TNE opportunities in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, this database will also give foreign universities interested in TNE guidance on introducing and designing TNE programmes that are aligned with the current landscape of TNE in Sri Lanka.

Building this repository is relatively feasible. The establishment of new TNE providers can be retrieved from the currently proposed scheme to record the applications of potential TNE providers. Similarly, the collection of course-level data can also build upon the data reflected in the TNE mapping exercises attached here in the Annex.

### **Recommendation 2: Developing a unified, nationwide system of quality assurance for all higher education programmes in Sri Lanka**

To ensure that TNE programmes are equally comparable with the local higher education standards, it is important to consider a local mechanism for evaluating the quality of TNE programmes nationwide. This is so that TNE providers are mandated to provide a quality of higher education in consistent with the general standard of Sri Lankan higher education.

This suggestion can also contribute to current discussions to unify the higher education sector in Sri

Lanka. The government can consider integrating a TNE-specific qualification framework into the national qualifications framework. The implementation of such a consideration will require that the government is aware of all TNE programmes available in Sri Lanka, which will build upon the database as suggested in Recommendation 1.

### **Recommendation 3: Encouraging public-private partnerships for TNE operations and expanding TNE-related services**

Section 6 reveals that support for the TNE sector falls predominantly on government intervention. While this is a reasonable strategy, a stronger support system for the higher education sector can also be derived from public-private partnerships within Sri Lanka- which have been proven to be realistic. Example of such instances can be found in Section 8.1.

To further streamline the processes of establishing IBCs and TNE programmes, the government can also optimise support from the private sector. This can manifest by way of conceiving a justification report for



the private sector to invest in higher education. The report should highlight the benefits of investing in the higher education sector, with the intention of incentivising the private sector to invest in it. Notably, this was a way in which the Malaysian government spearheaded the development of internationally known branch campuses within Malaysia. This example is disclosed in Section 8.1.

**Recommendation 4: Expand geographical reach of UK TNE in Sri Lanka**

The next few recommendations are for parties engaged in UK TNE. UK TNE should expand its offering of TNE services. Current TNE students highlighted during the interviews that most of UK TNE was in Colombo. UK TNE can also learn from Australian TNE, which is also prevalent in less urban areas (see Section 4.4). Moreover, UK TNE can consider establishing more branch campuses within Sri Lanka, to increase the variety of TNE delivery models for students. Currently, this TNE type is only made available to students by Australian universities.

**Recommendation 5: Improving both the academic and non-academic features of TNE provision**

UK TNE should also address the negative perception that some students have regarding the certain TNE programmes. One possible way is to diversify the assessment scheme to include in-person examinations. This means that students are assessed holistically, and their grades are not solely determined by written assessments. This can hence counter the scepticism that some TNE degrees are not attained by students' own merit.

In improving the quality of TNE, an equal consideration should also be paid to the non-academic features of students' university experience. Notably, when asked to share ways for TNE providers to improve the quality of TNE in Sri Lanka, students expressed satisfaction with the academic experience, but asked for more non-academic features such as complimentary career counselling by the university. There were other similar suggestions raised during the stakeholders interview. These can be found in Section 8.2.

**Recommendation 6: Exploring the relevance of interdisciplinary programmes through TNE**

As the key findings have highlighted, the idea of interdisciplinary programmes should not be neglected. This is because interdisciplinary programmes offer many benefits. For one, it equips students with diverse skills and position them well to address today's pressing challenges- which are multi-faceted. Furthermore, this may open more employability opportunities for students as they are not restricted to a single field. Hence, it is worth conducting a study to explore the feasibility of providing interdisciplinary programmes through TNE and its relevance to the Sri Lankan economy.



