

The Invisible Architecture of Academic Cooperation: Governance and Quality Between Internationalisation and Accountability

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| Abstract

This contribution analyses Transnational Education (TNE) as a structural dimension of the internationalisation of higher education (HE), with particular attention to governance and quality assurance profiles. After a conceptual and comparative framing of the phenomenon and of the main international and European instruments, the analysis focuses on the Italian case, highlighting its regulatory specificities, systemic critical issues, and recent developments. The comparison with selected national models, including Italy–United Kingdom cooperation, makes it possible to identify the limits and opportunities of TNE in the European context. The contribution concludes with some reflections on the future scenarios of TNE and on Italy's strategic positioning.

Keywords: Transnational Education (TNE), Internationalisation of Higher Education, Academic governance, Quality Assurance, Regulation of TNE, Transnational accreditation.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Transnational Education (TNE) has established itself as one of the most significant modalities through which higher education (HE) systems respond to globalisation processes and the need to strengthen international cooperation in the academic sphere. The international debate continues to address the elements that define TNE, which is articulated and defined in various ways¹. For the purposes of this contribution, reference is made to the definition proposed by the Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, which considers TNE as a subset of cross-border education comprising study programmes, courses or educational services in which elements of a HE system are transferred or shared across borders, through a plurality of organisational and delivery modes, including digital and hybrid forms. This definition captures the intrinsically heterogeneous nature of TNE, moving beyond reductive interpretations based exclusively on the physical mobility of students or on the export of educational provision².

The growth of TNE is situated within a global context characterised by the expansion of the international student population, increasingly intense competition among university systems, and a progressive interconnection between HE, economic development, and cultural diplomacy³. In this framework, TNE has been interpreted both as a tool for widening access to HE and for capacity building in host countries, and as a strategic lever for the international projection of institutions and individual national systems⁴.

At the same time, the expansion of TNE activities has brought to light several structural critical issues:

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¹ For some authors, it encompasses all forms of higher education provision in which students are in a country different from that of the institution awarding the qualification, including models such as branch campuses, franchising, joint programmes and double or multiple qualifications, as well as other structured forms of collaboration between institutions from different countries. Alam, F., Alam, Q., Chowdhury, H., et al., *Transnational education: benefits, threats and challenges*, "Procedia Engineering", Vol. 56, Elsevier, 2013, pp. 870-874; Knight, J., *Transnational education remodeled: toward a common TNE framework and definitions*, "Journal of Studies in International Education", Vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, pp. 34-47. Bannier, B. J., *Global trends in Transnational Education*, "International Journal of Information and Education Technology", Vol. 6, no. 1, January 2016, p. 81. Francois, E. J., Avoseh, M. B.M., Griswold, W., *Perspectives in Transnational Higher Education*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam (Holland), 2016. Healey, N. M., *Transnational education and domestic higher education in Asian-Pacific host countries*, "Pacific-Asian education: A journal about education in the Pacific circle countries", Vol. 29, 2017. Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education: a classification framework and data collection guidelines for international program and provider mobility (IPPM)*, British Council, 2017; Mediterranean Automatic Recognition Network Project (MAREn), *Transnational education in the Adriatic and Mediterranean regions*, CIMEA, 2024. <https://automaticrecognitionnetworks.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Pubblicazione-Maren-TNE.pdf> [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. Cirlan, E., Tsigikiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE governance challenges, students are key*, University World News, 2025. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250617155942227>. [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. other authors identify it as «... form of education that borrows or transfers elements of one country's higher education system, as well as that country's culture and values, to another country...»: Cf. Wilkins, S., Huisman, J., *Transnational Education Redefined*, "International Higher Education", Vol. 121, 2024, pp.16-17.

² In the current version adopted in Paris on 22 October 2025, according to which TNE is: «A subset of cross-border education where study programmes, or sets of courses, or educational services borrow or transfer elements of one country's higher education system (or non-country specific education systems) from or to another country. It may involve the movement of faculty, learners, knowledge, programmes, providers and curricula across jurisdictional borders. It may encompass a wide range of mode of delivery (including distance and blended learning) and may or may not require learners mobility. The programme(s) and qualification(s) awarded may belong to the domestic education system of reference of the providing institution, to the education system of a State different from the State in which the providing institution operates, or may be independent of any national education system». See UNESCO/Council of Europe, *Code of Good Practice in the provision of Transnational Education*, <https://rm.coe.int/code-of-good-practice-in-tne-adopted-on-22-october-2025/4880291d8e> [last accessed 30 January 2026].

³ Alam, F., Alam Q., Chowdhury, H., et al., *Transnational education...* cit. Francois, E. J., Avoseh, M. B.M., Griswold, W., *Perspectives in Transnational Higher Education*, cit. Bosire, J., Amimo, C., *Emerging issues and future prospects in the management of Transnational education*, "International Journal of Higher Education", Vol. 6, no. 5, 2017, pp. 143-154. Healey, N., M., *The end of transnational education? The view from the UK*, "Perspectives: Policy and practice in Higher Education", Vol. 24, no. 3, 2020, pp. 102-112. Cirlan, E., Tsigikiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

⁴ Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit., p. 50. Bosire, J., Amimo, C., *Emerging issues and future prospects...*, cit.

questions have arisen regarding the quality of educational provision⁵, student protection, deficiencies in support services or difficulties in the recognition of awarded qualifications⁶ and the distribution of responsibilities between sending and host countries⁷. These critical issues have encouraged the development of reference instruments at international and regional level⁸, aimed at ensuring greater coherence and reliability of transnational HE systems.

In this scenario, TNE emerges as a structural dimension of the internationalisation of HE, with significant implications in terms of governance, quality, and qualification recognition⁹. This evolution is particularly evident in the European framework, where initiatives such as the European Universities Alliances, the European Degree Label and European Degree project outline advanced forms of transnational cooperation based on joint programmes (JPs)¹⁰, integrated mobility and shared Quality Assurance systems¹¹.

Italy occupies a distinctive position within this framework. While national strategies¹², and the National Recovery Plan (PNRR) investments signal growing political recognition of TNE¹³, the regulatory framework appears fragmented and outdated¹⁴. This makes a systematic analysis particularly relevant,

⁵ Particularly with reference to curriculum coherence, the qualifications of teaching staff and the effective equivalence of academic standards compared to programmes delivered in the country of origin.

⁶ Especially within more complex cooperation models, where the boundary between academic and administrative responsibilities may be unclear.

⁷ Both in terms of Quality Assurance and regulatory supervision, thus requiring precise and effective coordination among different national systems and competent authorities.

⁸ At international level, reference may be made, for example, to: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000143349> [last accessed 30 January 2026]. International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), *International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (ISG)*, <https://www.inqaahe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/INQAAHE-International-Standards-and-Guidelines-ISG.pdf> [last accessed 30 January 2026]. By contrast, at European level, instruments of this kind are situated within the broader framework of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), founded on principles of mutual trust, qualification recognition and structured cooperation. Particular reference may be made to the Key considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/key-considerations-for-cross-border-quality-assurance-in-the-ehea.pdf> [last accessed 30 January 2026], to the mentioned Code of Good Practice and, to a lesser extent given their more explicitly regional scope, to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), https://ehea.info/media/ehea.info/file/ESG/00/2/ESG_2015_616002.pdf [last accessed 30 January 2026] and to the The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), *European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (EA)*, <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/> [last accessed 30 January 2026].

⁹ Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit. Cirlan, E., Tsiligiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

¹⁰ For further information on the European Universities Alliances, the European Commission database may be consulted: *European Universities alliances and their partners* <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/map> [last accessed 30 January 2026]; also see: Ieva Grumbinaite, Flavia Colus, Hugo Buitrago Carvajal, *Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative*, Publications Office of the European Union, Lussemburgo, 2025.

¹¹ See the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union, C/2025/3006, on a European system for Quality Assurance and recognition in higher education; moreover, with regard to the path undertaken by the European Commission concerning European degrees, reference should be made to the Blueprint for a European Degree and to the ongoing work for the establishment and introduction of a joint European label <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/joint-european-degree/working-towards-a-joint-european-degree> [last accessed 30 January 2026].

¹² As evidenced by the Strategy for the Internationalisation of the Italian University System 2024–2026 <https://www.mur.gov.it/sites/default/files/2024-09/Strategia%20Internazionalizzazione%20MUR%202024-2026.pdf> [last accessed 30 January 2026] and by Ministerial Decree No. 773 of 10 June 2024, which closely links the achievement of university objectives to the resources allocated under the National Recovery Plan (PNRR).

¹³ TNE is explicitly recognised as a strategic area within Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 3.4, which allocates specific resources to the development of transnational educational initiatives promoted by Italian universities. In this regard, reference should be made to Directorate Decree No. 167 of 3 October 2023 of the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) which, by defining objectives, areas of intervention and selection criteria, allocated approximately €50 million to the funding of TNE projects, with the aim of supporting the creation and strengthening of international academic partnerships, the activation of joint educational programmes, including in digital or hybrid modes, and the development of TNE initiatives in geographical areas considered priorities for Italian international cooperation.

¹⁴ Especially when compared with other European countries. Lantero, L., Finocchietti, C., Gitto, E., et al., *Foreign schools in Italy and Italian schools abroad legislation, characteristics and recognition of qualifications*, CIMEA, 2021. https://www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/5278_Foreign%20schools%20in%20Italy_DEF_22.07.21.pdf, [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. Trifirò, F., *Academic co-operation between the United Kingdom and Italy: Research a study on opportunities and challenges*, British Council, 2025, pp. 21–24. <https://www.britishcouncil.it/sites/default/files/uk-it-final-report-04292025-final-web.pdf> [last accessed 9 Jun 2026].

one that relates the Italian case to international models and to the available quality and recognition instruments.

1.1 Methodology

The article adopts a qualitative documentary and comparative methodology based on academic literature, international policy documents and Quality Assurance (QA) instruments. Particular attention is devoted to the distinction between sending and receiving systems and to the positioning of the Italian case within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

2. Transnational Education and International Cooperation: Definitions, Models and Open Issues

TNE differs from other internationalisation practices because it transforms international cooperation into stable educational provision delivered beyond national borders¹⁵. However, the field remains affected by terminological fragmentation, which hinders comparability and coherent governance: to cite a single example, it is well known that study programmes described as “international” or “joint” may in fact differ significantly regarding the nature of the qualification awarded, the legal value of the diploma and the possibilities for professional recognition¹⁶. The earliest forms of TNE were historically interpreted and classified within the conceptual framework offered by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), an international agreement adopted in 1995 within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to regulate trade in services at global level¹⁷. Based on this scheme, early TNE practices were associated with models such as franchising, branch campuses and institutional joint ventures (commercial presence), as well as the temporary mobility of teaching staff¹⁸.

Precisely in response to the limitations of this approach, more recent literature has progressively proposed alternative interpretative frameworks, more clearly oriented towards academic cooperation and the sharing of responsibilities. A more effective approach distinguishes between (i) collaborative models and (ii) non-collaborative models¹⁹.

¹⁵ Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit., p. 50. Knight, J., *Transnational education remodeled*, cit. Centro di Informazione sulla Mobilità e le Equivalenze Accademiche (CIMEA), *Automatic Recognition in the Adriatic Region Project (AdREN)*, *Transnational Education in 4 countries of the Adriatic region: Regulation, quality assurance and information provision*, CIMEA, 2022. Cirlan, E., Tsiligiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

¹⁶ Consider also the inconsistent and often interchangeable use of terms such as “cross-border education”, “offshore education” or “borderless education”. See: Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit., Healey, N., M., *Transnational education*, cit.

¹⁷ In this initial phase, cross-border educational activities were predominantly interpreted through a logic of trade in services, rather than as forms of structured academic cooperation.

¹⁸ Knight, J., *Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide to the Implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for Cross-border Education*, COL/UNESCO, Francia, 2006, pp. 30 ff. Philip, G. Altbach, Knight, J., *The Internationalization of Higher Education: motivations and realities*, “Journal of Studies in International Education”, Vol. 11, 2007, pp. 290-305. Francois, E. J., Avoseh, M. B.M., Griswold, W., *Perspectives in Transnational Higher Education*, cit., pp. 8 ss. Bosire, Amimo, *Emerging issues and future prospects...*, cit.

¹⁹ The former include joint Study programmes (leading to joint as well as double or multiple qualifications), based on institutional partnerships, shared responsibilities, and joint governance mechanisms. The latter include more unilateral forms of provision, such as branch campuses or franchising, in which the home institution retains primary control over curriculum, quality and the awarding of the qualification. This distinction is central to analysing the actual degree of international cooperation underlying different TNE initiatives. Alongside these more institutionalised forms, it is also possible to observe the emergence of specific territorial configurations, in which TNE intersects with strategies for economic and urban development, while at the same time raising questions about the role of public and private actors in the regulation of higher education. Also consider the transnational education zones and the education cities: See Kleibert J. M., Bobée, A., Rottlieb, T., et al., *Transnational education zones: Towards an urban political economy of ‘education cities’*, “Urban Studies”, Vol. 58, no. 14, 2021, pp. 2845-2862.

In the European context, the relationship between TNE and international cooperation has undergone significant evolution, as demonstrated by the experience of the European Universities Alliances. Within these initiatives, TNE is increasingly configured not as the export of educational provision, but as the construction of integrated transnational educational spaces, characterised by flexible curricula, blended mobility, and shared governance. However, regulatory and administrative obstacles persist, particularly – though not exclusively – in the fields of accreditation and qualification recognition, reflecting a structural tension between transnational ambitions and national frameworks²⁰. Among the many open issues, the governance of transnational partnerships and student protection emerge as particularly critical dimensions, especially in collaborative models, where the distribution of responsibilities among institutions, national authorities and QA agencies may be ambiguous²¹. An equally delicate issue concerns the recognition of qualifications awarded in TNE contexts, which may prove complex due to the plurality of legal systems involved and the difficulty of identifying the competent reference system, particularly in multilateral collaborative models. With specific regard to the Italian case, these issues take on distinctive characteristics. The cautious approach historically adopted by the national regulatory framework has limited the diffusion of incoming TNE models²², while at the same time ensuring strong integration with the national system of quality and qualification recognition²³. In parallel, more recent policies indicate a growing interest in outgoing TNE as a tool for international cooperation and science diplomacy. Overall, the distinction between incoming and outgoing TNE highlights the difficulty of reconciling the increasing complexity of transnational practices with adequate governance arrangements and quality mechanisms, thus laying the groundwork for the analysis of Quality Assurance instruments addressed in the following sections²⁴.

2.1 TNE and Cross-Border Quality Assurance: Convergences, Differences and Conceptual Issues

In the international debate, the notions of TNE and Cross-Border Quality Assurance (CBQA) are frequently referred to jointly and, at times, used in an almost overlapping manner. For the purposes of this contribution, it is essential to underline from the outset that the two terms are not fully coincident, although they are closely interdependent. TNE primarily designates a set of practices and models of transnational educational provision, whereas CBQA refers to the mechanisms through which the quality of such practices is evaluated, assured, or recognised across national borders. From this perspective,

²⁰ These critical issues are also explicitly acknowledged at European institutional level: the aforementioned Blueprint for a European Degree (see supra note 11), developed on the basis of evidence emerging from pilot projects and experimental activities carried out within the European Universities Alliances, identifies differences among national legislations, accreditation procedures and qualification recognition mechanisms as some of the main obstacles to the development of advanced forms of transnational cooperation, highlighting the need for progressive and coordinated solutions at European level.

²¹ Hopbach, A., UNESCO-OECD *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. Analysis and recommendations to move forward*, 2022. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389910>, [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. Carvalho, N., Rosa, M. J., Amaral, A., *Cross-Border Higher Education and Quality Assurance. Results from a Systematic Literature Review*, "Journal of Studies in International Education", Vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 695-718; Cirlan, E., Tsiligiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

²² See below §4.

²³ See Trifirò, *Academic co-operation between the United Kingdom and Italy...*, cit. For a specific focus on the Italian case, see below §4.

²⁴ See below §3.

CBQA performs an essential function in supporting the legitimacy and sustainability of TNE, without exhausting its strategic and institutional scope²⁵.

The growing diffusion of TNE has progressively rendered insufficient an approach to quality based exclusively on national frameworks. In this context, CBQA emerges as a functional response to the need to build mutual trust among HE systems, public authorities, and stakeholders, especially where programme delivery, student enrolment and the awarding of qualifications involve multiple legal systems. However, an excessive conceptual overlap between TNE and CBQA risks reducing TNE to a predominantly technical or procedural issue. Indeed, TNE also entails strategic and institutional choices affecting governance and sustainability²⁶.

In the Italian context²⁷, CBQA still tends to take the form of a fragmented response to specific needs, rather than constituting an integral part of a systemic TNE strategy. The EHEA offers the possibility of overcoming such fragmentation by promoting convergence and mutual trust through shared instruments²⁸. The most recent developments (particularly the European Universities Alliances initiative) demonstrate how TNE and CBQA may progressively converge within long-term structural cooperation models, in which quality is not merely verified across borders, but co-produced through shared governance and integrated processes²⁹.

3. TNE and Quality: International Instruments and Models Compared

The expansion of TNE has made quality one of the central issues in academic debate and international cooperation policies. The cross-border nature of TNE challenges the territorial assumptions on which national Quality Assurance (QA) systems are based, raising questions regarding the distribution of responsibilities among institutions, agencies, and competent authorities in the countries of origin and host countries³⁰.

At global level, the most widely shared reference is probably represented by the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines³¹, which introduce the principle of shared responsibility and place student protection and

²⁵ See European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Students' Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA) et al., *Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, Bruxelles (Belgium), 2017 <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/cross-border-qa/key-considerations/> [last accessed 3 February 2026]. INQAAHE, *International Standards and Guidelines*, cit., p. 42. UNESCO, Council of Europe, *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education*, 2025 <https://rm.coe.int/code-of-good-practice-in-tne-adopted-on-22-october-2025/4880291d8e> [last accessed 3 February 2026]. See also Knight, J., *Transnational education remodeled*, cit.; Hopbach, A., *UNESCO-OECD Guidelines*, cit., pp. 16 ff. Carvalho, N., Rosa, M. J., Amaral, A., *Cross-Border Higher Education and Quality Assurance...*, cit.

²⁶ Knight, J., *Transnational education remodeled*, cit.; Kleibert, Bobée, Rottlieb et al., *Transnational education zones...*, cit.; Cirlan, E., Tsiligiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

²⁷ This will be discussed in greater detail below, § 4.

²⁸ Reference may be made to the repeatedly mentioned ESG, qualification frameworks, the European Approach, or mutual recognition mechanisms.

²⁹ Reference may also be made to the European Degree and European Degree Label. It should further be noted that the activities of the specific Working Groups of the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C on QA) of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), which, among numerous topics, also address Cross-Border Quality Assurance (CBQA). The European Higher Education Area, *Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), Cross-Border Quality Assurance (CBQA)* <https://ehea.info/page-peer-group-C-QA> [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁰ Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE: a comparative overview of national approaches to TNE*, "Higher Education Evaluation and Development", Vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 54-64.

³¹ OECD, *Guidelines for Quality Provision...*, cit.

transparency of educational provision at the centre. They take the form of a soft law instrument aimed at promoting general principles without introducing binding mechanisms or common evaluation procedures. This approach reflects the strong heterogeneity of HE systems worldwide and privileges flexibility over harmonisation.

In the European context, by contrast, the ESG constitute the shared framework for QA. Although not specifically designed for TNE, they provide principles that are also applicable to transnational provision, particularly regarding programme design, student involvement and transparency of information³². Another significant contribution is represented by the European Approach (EA)³³, a further step towards integration, which introduces a single evaluation procedure for JPs based on the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, while reducing duplication of evaluations and strengthening mutual trust³⁴. Alongside these instruments, project-based initiatives such as Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education (QACHE) and its direct continuation Robust Quality Assurance of Transnational Education (ROQA-TNE)³⁵, as well as attempts at regional alignment of the underlying principles of QA such as those between ENQA and SIACES (ESG-PBP) or ASEAN (ESG-AQAF)³⁶, highlight the importance of cooperation among agencies in the absence of a binding international framework.

Overall, the comparison between the European and global levels reveals a structural tension between two models of quality governance: on the one hand, a principle-based model, oriented towards flexibility and voluntary cooperation; on the other hand, a process-oriented model, aimed at building mutual trust through shared procedures and automatic recognition. In the case of TNE, this tension translates into the difficulty of ensuring comparability, respect for national diversity and administrative sustainability of quality processes at the same time³⁷.

3.1 Comparative Examples of National Quality Models in TNE

The comparative analysis of selected national Quality Assurance (QA) models applied to TNE highlights a plurality of approaches: in the United Kingdom the QA Agency for Higher Education (QAA) assigns full academic responsibility for TNE programmes to UK universities, regardless of the place of delivery, placing emphasis on the equivalence of standards and on the management of reputational risks³⁸;

³² ESG https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/ESG/00/2/ESG_2015_616002.pdf [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³³ EA <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/> [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁴ A cornerstone in both European and international integration processes. See Onița, H., Gvritshvili, A., Maruszczak, J., *Quality Assurance Fit for the Future - Students' perspective*, s.p., s.p., 2023. <https://esu-online.org/publications/quality-assurance-fit-for-the-future-studentsperspective/> [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁵ QACHE: <https://www.enqa.eu/publications/a-toolkit-for-quality-assurance-agencies/> [last accessed 3 February 2026]. ROQA-TNE: <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/robust-quality-assurance-of-transnational-education/> [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁶ ENQA/SIACES: <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/alignment-of-siaces-enqa-quality-guidelines-in-higher-education-for-strengthening-bi-regional-trust-esg-pbp-alignment/> [last accessed 3 February 2026]. The European Association for Quality Assurance In Higher Education, *ENQA/ASEAN*, https://euinasean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Comparability-Study-of-AQAF-_-ESG-Web.pdf [last accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁷ Bordogna, C. M., *Are Degree-awarding Institutions doing enough to Support the Implementation of Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education Partnerships?*, "Journal of Studies in International Education", Vol. 24, no. 3, 2019, pp. 371-386; Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit.

³⁸ See Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK Transnational Higher Education*, 2024, <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/international/transnational-education/quality-evaluation-and-enhancement-of-uk-tne> [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. see also: Bordogna, C. M., *Are Degree-awarding Institutions doing enough...*, cit. Lamers-Reeuwijk, A. M., Admiraal W. F., van der Rijst R. M., *Expatriate academics and transnational teaching: the need for quality assurance and quality enhancement to go hand in hand*, "Higher Education Research & Development", Vol. 398, no. 4, 2020, pp. 733-747; Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit.

Australia adopts a similar approach but with stronger regulatory intervention³⁹; Hong Kong and Malaysia adopt models typical of “receiving” countries, in which greater attention is devoted to regulating foreign provision delivered within the national territory⁴⁰.

Comparative evidence suggests that there is no single quality model applicable to TNE. In the absence of a binding international framework, the literature broadly agrees that strengthening cross-border cooperation among QA agencies represents the most effective strategy for ensuring high-quality, sustainable, and credible TNE in the long term⁴¹.

4. The Italian Case: Current Framework, Potential and Critical Issues

Although in Italy TNE is part of the strategy for the internationalisation of the HE system, the current regulatory framework appears outdated and incomplete. This limited observability represents, in the current context, a structural critical issue of the Italian system⁴². Important asymmetries persist in the availability and accessibility of information concerning different forms of TNE. While some institutional information is publicly available regarding incoming TNE initiatives operating within the Italian territory, including authorised foreign institutions and branch campuses, no equivalent and systematic framework currently exists for mapping and monitoring Italian TNE activities developed abroad. Consequently, outgoing TNE initiatives promoted by Italian HEIs often remain only partially observable, especially in relation to the typology of partnerships, geographical distribution, governance arrangements and Quality Assurance mechanisms adopted.

This informational fragmentation limits not only the comparability and transparency of the system, but also the possibility of developing evidence-based policies and coherent strategies for internationalisation. Moreover, it may affect the visibility and international positioning of Italian institutions engaged in transnational cooperation, while complicating the assessment of the long-term impact and sustainability of TNE initiatives. From a regulatory perspective, the Italian system distinguishes between incoming TNE and outgoing TNE⁴³: the former is regulated in a detailed manner, albeit based on dated legislation,

³⁹ In this case, TNE is regarded as a strategic sector of educational export, and quality is ensured through a centralised system of registration and supervision aimed at protecting students and safeguarding the reputation of the national system, particularly in offshore contexts. Here, TNE is subject to stringent oversight, reflecting the sector's high economic relevance. See Bordogna, C. M., *Are Degree-awarding Institutions doing enough...*, cit., pp. 5 ff. Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit., pp. 56-57; Hopbach, A., *UNESCO-OECD Guidelines*, cit., pp. 10 ff. Carvalho, N., Rosa, M. J., Amaral, A., *Cross-Border Higher Education and Quality Assurance...*, cit., pp. 702 ff.

⁴⁰ For an overview of receiving countries, See Gover, A., Blackstock, D., *Protecting the interests of students on transnational education programmes: the role of transparent quality assurance*, 2023. <https://www.enqa.eu/publications/protecting-the-interests-of-students-on-transnational-education-programmes-the-role-of-transparent-quality-assurance/> [last accessed 9 June 2026]. More specifically with regard to the contexts of the Asian region: Mok, K. H., Khai T. S., *Transnationalization of higher education in China and Asia: quality assurance and students' learning experiences*, “Asian Education and Development Studies”, Vol. 13, no. 3, 2024, pp. 208-226. Of particular interest are also the specific reports of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA, *Country report: Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China)*, Gloucester (UK), 2018. QAA, *UK Transnational Education in Malaysia*, Gloucester (UK), 2020 <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/international/transnational-education/country-reports> [last accessed 4 February 2026].

⁴¹ Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit. Hopbach, A., *UNESCO-OECD Guidelines*, cit., p. 26.

⁴² Lantero, Finocchietti, Gitto et al., *Foreign schools in Italy...*, cit.

⁴³ As will be discussed in greater detail shortly, in the first case these are mainly initiatives promoted by foreign universities within the national territory, whereas in the second case international programmes and partnerships developed by Italian universities abroad prevail.

while the latter is substantially lacking an organic framework⁴⁴.

Incoming TNE mainly takes the form of (i) “filiation” of foreign universities or (ii) accredited branch campuses of foreign universities. In the first case, foreign universities (legally recognised in their home country as non-profit HEIs) are authorised to decentralise part of their teaching or research programmes in Italy, for the exclusive purpose of allowing only students enrolled at those universities to obtain, through a period of study in Italy, additional competences compared to those they would acquire by studying exclusively in their home country⁴⁵. In this case, enrolled students are not included in the national student registry, and the final qualification awarded remains a foreign one, which must be formally recognised in Italy for any local use (e.g. for public competitions or further study). Initiatives of this type are subject to ministerial authorisation and can’t concern Study programmes with nationally regulated limited access, such as Medicine. The second case concerns foreign HEIs operating in Italy whose qualifications may be admitted to recognition under the framework established by Ministerial Decree MIUR No. 214 of 26 April 2004. In this context, foreign institutions may operate through organisational structures established in Italy, including branch campuses, while the Decree specifically regulates the criteria and procedures relevant to the recognition of the qualifications awarded. Students enrolled in these institutions may therefore obtain foreign qualifications capable of being recognised in Italy under the same conditions applicable to qualifications issued by the corresponding institution in the country of origin⁴⁶. Currently, the only operational example of a branch campus in Italy is ESCP Business School, based in Turin⁴⁷. It is also appropriate to mention a further and distinctive form of TNE within the Italian system, represented by the European University Institute (EUI) in Fiesole⁴⁸, established through an international convention in 1972. Although not fully comparable to ordinary TNE models, the EUI constitutes a significant example of advanced transnational integration in the field of postgraduate education and research, devoted to training in the social sciences, law and economics, mainly related to European issues.

Outgoing TNE currently encompasses a heterogeneous set of initiatives, including joint degree programmes and double qualifications, pathways delivered partially abroad and long-term academic cooperation projects. In this field, a significant impulse has derived from the investments under the PNRR – Mission 4, which explicitly recognise TNE as an instrument of science diplomacy, cultural promotion, and the strengthening of international partnerships⁴⁹.

Considering the foregoing, it can be affirmed that the Italian case is undergoing a phase of profound transition, in which the political and strategic recognition of TNE is not yet fully accompanied by regulatory and quality instruments adequate to the growing complexity of transnational practices. This tension constitutes one of the main critical issues of the system and represents a key element for reflection

⁴⁴ The main Italian regulatory references concerning incoming TNE, and the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications currently consist of Article 2 of Law No. 4 of 14 January 1999 (governing the so-called “branches of foreign universities in Italy”), the subsequent Ministerial Directive of 23 May 2000 and Ministerial Decree MIUR No. 214 of 26 April 2004 (adopted pursuant to Article 4 of Law No. 148 of 11 July 2002, ratifying the Lisbon Recognition Convention).

⁴⁵ Strictly linked to the specific features of the Italian territory, its culture and history.

⁴⁶ On the current regulatory framework, see *supra* note 43. See also: Lantero, Finocchietti, Gitto et al., *Foreign schools in Italy...*, cit.

⁴⁷ See: Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca, *Università straniere e filiazioni*, <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/universita-straniere-e-filiazioni> [last accessed 5 February 2026]. <https://escp.eu/turin> [last accessed 5 February 2026].

⁴⁸ European University Institute, <https://www.eui.eu/en/home> [last accessed 5 February 2026].

⁴⁹ On this point, see also the Strategy for the Internationalisation of the Italian University System 2024–2026, cited above.

on the future developments of Italian and European TNE, also considering a particularly relevant issue related to the QA of TNE. In the Italian system, QA mechanisms in HE are traditionally centred on the processes of initial and periodic accreditation of Study programmes and institutional sites, as well as on external evaluations conducted by ANVUR, in line with the ESG. However, these instruments only partially address the specific features of TNE, particularly in the case of complex JPs or outgoing transnational initiatives. The adoption of the EA by ANVUR represents a significant advancement, as it allows the evaluation of JPs through a single procedure based on mutual recognition. Nevertheless, the EA covers only a limited type of provision and does not constitute an organic framework for the Quality Assurance of TNE.

In the absence of dedicated instruments tailored to the different forms of TNE, the evaluation of transnational initiatives tends to be addressed, on a case-by-case basis, through existing national mechanisms or through informal cooperation arrangements among institutions and agencies, with the risk of persistent fragmentation of approaches and limited comparability of outcomes.

4.1 Cooperation with the United Kingdom in Transnational Education

Despite the limitations highlighted, Italy remains a highly active actor in international policies, proven by its extensive cooperation with the UK (notwithstanding the transformations following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union). The UK system has long been one of the leading global actors in TNE, characterised by a wide diffusion of offshore programmes, institutional partnerships, franchising arrangements and flexible collaboration models, supported by strong organisational capacity and a quality framework oriented towards the responsibility of the home institution⁵⁰. However, the British model also presents several structural complexities that have increasingly emerged in the debate on TNE governance and Quality Assurance. In the UK framework, degree-awarding institutions remain fully responsible for the academic standards and quality of programmes delivered abroad, regardless of the delivery arrangements adopted. This implies that transnational provision is expected to maintain standards equivalent to those of programmes offered within the home system, while simultaneously adapting to different local regulatory and institutional contexts. In practice, ensuring such equivalence may prove particularly challenging in large-scale partnerships or in highly diversified transnational arrangements. Particular attention has been devoted to validation arrangements, through which a UK institution authorises a partner organisation to deliver programmes leading to a qualification formally awarded by the validating institution. Although these models may facilitate international cooperation and widen educational opportunities, they also raise issues related to institutional oversight, reputational risks, transparency of responsibilities and the effective protection of students, especially where academic and administrative functions are distributed across multiple actors⁵¹. These tensions reflect broader challenges associated with the balance between institutional flexibility and the preservation of coherent academic standards in TNE contexts⁵².

⁵⁰ Healey, N., M., *The end of transnational education...*, cit. Manacorda, E., Gabaglio, L., Iannaccone, S., UK-IT Best + Shape Project: final report, Galileo servizi editoriali srl, 2023, https://www.galileonet.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/UK_libro_stampa_web.pdf, [last accessed 9 Jun 2026]. Trifirò, F., *Academic co-operation...*, cit.

⁵¹ QAA, *Quality Evaluation and Enhancement...*, cit.

⁵² Trifirò, F., *Academic co-operation...*, cit. Gover, A., Blackstock, D., *Protecting the interests...*, cit.

Additional complexities emerge in relation to certain validation arrangements involving foreign providers operating in Italy. In these cases, concerns have been raised regarding the variability of Quality Assurance mechanisms and the degree of effective academic oversight exercised by the degree-awarding institution. The Italian framework governing the recognition of foreign qualifications, particularly under Ministerial Decree No. 214/2004 and the broader principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, requires that recognised qualifications be awarded within systems and institutions possessing clear academic legitimacy and sufficiently transparent quality arrangements. In practice, this may create uncertainties in relation to some forms of transnational provision based on highly decentralised validation models. From this perspective, the Italian debate has increasingly distinguished between structured forms of inter-university cooperation involving officially recognised HEIs and more market-oriented forms of transnational provision centred on foreign providers operating through validation agreements.

However, UK–Italy cooperation in the field of TNE highlights critical issues attributable to differences in governance models, QA systems and institutional expectations. As suggested by comparative studies on the topic, such differences may result in additional administrative burdens, decision-making asymmetries, and difficulties in aligning national standards, particularly in post-Brexit contexts. Nevertheless, the bilateral relationship continues to be regarded as strategic, also considering the opportunities offered by new extra-EU cooperation instruments and by initiatives aimed at maintaining and strengthening academic ties between the two countries⁵³.

4.2 Systemic Obstacles and Opportunities to Be Seized in TNE

The analysis conducted thus far on TNE practices and policies highlights a series of systemic obstacles that affect the capacity of institutions to develop effective and sustainable transnational cooperation. Among these, particular attention should be paid to cultural and organisational barriers, power asymmetries among partners, differences in pedagogical models and persistent digital divides, which may compromise the quality of the educational experience and the reciprocity of partnerships⁵⁴. A central issue concerns the misalignment between principles and practices in the fields of QA and recognition. Differences in accreditation requirements, evaluation systems and qualification recognition procedures continue to represent a constraint on the development of TNE⁵⁵.

⁵³ Manacorda, E., Gabaglio, L., Iannaccone, S., *UK-IT Best ...*, cit., pp. 3 ff. Trifirò, F., *Academic co-operation...*, cit., p. 37.

⁵⁴ Francois, E. J., Avoseh, M. B.M., Griswold, W., *Perspectives in Transnational Higher Education*, cit. Caniglia, G., Luederitz, C., Groß, M., et al., *Transnational collaboration for sustainability in higher education: Lessons from a systematic review*, "Journal of Cleaner Production", Vol. 168, 2017, pp. 764-779.

⁵⁵ The experiences of receiving countries such as Ireland and Malaysia show that, in the absence of effective cooperation among agencies and clear coordination of responsibilities, the risk of fragmentation and over-regulation remains high. See QAA, *Country report: the Republic of Ireland*, n.p., Gloucester (UK), 2017. Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit. Hopbach, A., UNESCO-OECD Guidelines, cit. QAA, *UK Transnational Education in Malaysia...*, cit. as well as the mentioned Recommendation of the Council of the European Union, C/2025/3006, which states that: «6. Diverging national quality assurance arrangements still create complexity for transnational cooperation in higher education, hampering the development of joint educational programmes and limiting educational opportunities for higher education institutions and students. It is important that demonstrating compliance with formal requirements is balanced with ensuring an ongoing emphasis on and commitment to continuous improvement in education provision, which is central to quality assurance. 7. Existing instruments, such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach), are highly valued by the higher education community and Member States, but implementation remains scarce due to divergent national approaches.».

5. The Italian Case: Current Framework, Potential and Critical Issues

The evolution of TNE is currently situated in a phase of profound transformation and it is increasingly required to address complex challenges such as the growing demand for tertiary education, competition for talent and resources, the digital and green transitions, and the need to ensure the quality and sustainability of transnational partnerships. In this context, the future scenarios of TNE appear as the outcome of a dynamic balance between harmonisation and diversity, cooperation and competition, flexibility, and regulation.

In the European context, the EHEA continues to represent the main reference framework for the evolution of TNE. The instruments developed within the Bologna Process and the ESG, qualification frameworks and recognition mechanisms based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, provide a foundation of mutual trust that enables the development of increasingly advanced forms of transnational cooperation. However, significant gaps appear to persist between principles shared at European level and the practices adopted in different national contexts, particularly about the regulation and quality of TNE⁵⁶.

A significant acceleration in this direction appears to stem from the European Universities Alliances which – as noted – currently constitute one of the most advanced laboratories for experimenting with models of structural transnational cooperation, aiming to overcome purely project-based and fragmented approaches, and instead promoting long-term integration in areas such as governance, educational provision, mobility, research, and QA. From this perspective, TNE is no longer limited to individual programmes or initiatives, but is configured as a transnational institutional ecosystem, within which new forms of inter-university campuses, flexible curricula (e.g. Recognition of Prior Learning – RPL – or micro-credentials) and joint qualifications emerge⁵⁷.

At global level, future scenarios for TNE are characterised by increasing attention to quality as an infrastructure of trust. In the absence of a binding international framework, the UNESCO–OECD Guidelines, the global standards of INQAAHE and the UNESCO/Council of Europe “Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education” indicate convergence towards approaches based on cooperation between sending and host countries, the strengthening of institutional capacity and the protection of students.

For the Italian university system, these developments outline an ambivalent scenario, characterised by significant opportunities and persistent critical issues. On the one hand, the growing centrality attributed to TNE in national policies offers the opportunity to strengthen Italy’s role as a proactive actor in international academic cooperation. On the other hand, the lack of an organic regulatory and informational framework risks limiting the system’s capacity to fully capitalise on these opportunities and to ensure coherence among TNE initiatives, quality instruments and development objectives. In this respect, the development of more structured national information systems on outgoing TNE could contribute significantly to improving transparency, monitoring, and policy coordination. While

⁵⁶ Cirlan, E., Tsiligiris, V., Skjerven, S. A., et al., *In addressing TNE...*, cit.

⁵⁷ Including the perspective of the European Degree and the forthcoming introduction of the European Degree Label See *supra*, note 8.

information concerning incoming TNE initiatives in Italy is relatively accessible through institutional channels, comparable data, and system-level mapping of Italian TNE activities abroad remain limited. Strengthening information provision in this field would not only support evidence-based policymaking and QA processes, but also enhance the international visibility and strategic positioning of Italian HEIs engaged in transnational cooperation.

Experiences gained within JPs and, more recently, sustained participation in the European Universities Alliances may act as drivers for the evolution of outgoing Italian TNE, fostering the adoption of more integrated governance models and more mature transnational Quality Assurance practices. Overall, the future scenarios of Italian and international TNE will depend on the capacity of HE systems to integrate strategic vision, quality, and cooperation, moving beyond fragmented approaches focused exclusively on regulatory compliance. From this perspective, TNE is configured not only as an instrument of internationalisation, but as a structural lever for the transformation of university systems, which are called upon to operate in increasingly interconnected and interdependent contexts.

6. Conclusions

The analysis carried out highlights how TNE has progressively established itself as a structural dimension of contemporary HE, going well beyond the role traditionally attributed to the international mobility of students. It emerges as a complex space of interaction among academic cooperation, public policies, the quality of educational provision and institutional strategies, in which opportunities for innovation intertwine with persistent governance criticalities⁵⁸.

From both a conceptual and operational perspective, the plurality of TNE models (from collaborative forms, such as joint programmes and double qualifications, to more institutionalised modalities such as branches and branch campuses) reflects the diversity of national contexts and the strategic priorities of HE systems⁵⁹.

In this scenario, quality emerges as the pivotal element upon which the long-term sustainability of TNE depends. The analysis of international and European instruments shows a growing convergence towards approaches based on mutual trust, cooperation among agencies and shared responsibility between sending and host countries. Nevertheless, a significant gap remains between the principles enshrined in the main reference documents (from the ESG to the UNESCO–OECD Guidelines) and their effective implementation within national contexts, particularly in more complex and multi-level TNE cases.

The Italian case exemplifies these tensions. On the one hand, the increasing institutional attention devoted to TNE, as evidenced by national internationalisation strategies and the investments envisaged under the PNRR, signals a clear willingness to strengthen Italy's role in international academic

⁵⁸ Healey, N., M., The end of transnational education..., cit. Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit. Carvalho, N., Rosa, M. J., Amaral, A., *Cross-Border Higher Education and Quality Assurance...*, cit.

⁵⁹ Knight, J., McNamara, J., *Transnational education...*, cit. Trifirò, F., *The importance of cross-border cooperation...*, cit. Hopbach, A., *UNESCO-OECD Guidelines*, cit.

cooperation. On the other hand, the persistence of an outdated regulatory framework and a fragmented information system limits the capacity to fully enhance existing initiatives, monitor their outcomes, and coherently integrate TNE into the quality policies of the university system.

Looking ahead, the European Universities Alliances together with projects related to joint European qualifications represent an important step in the evolution of TNE, promoting more integrated forms of transnational cooperation and coordinated QA mechanisms. From the Italian perspective, this evolution builds upon a regulatory framework that already contains relevant references concerning international educational provision, quality, and cooperation, although these instruments remain only partially adequate to capture the complexity of emerging TNE practices.

Overall, TNE is confirmed as a strategic lever for the transformation of HE systems, but its future development will depend on the capacity to combine strategic ambition, quality, and sustainability. Specifically for the Italian context, this will entail not only strengthening coordination among institutional actors and updating regulatory and informational instruments, but also adopting approaches inspired by the principles of proportionality, simplification, and progressive harmonisation of national systems, in coherence with the framework of the European Higher Education Area and with the evolution of European Quality Assurance instruments.

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