



# Bridging Borders: Harmonizing Curricula For Equivalence In Transnational Education

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## Abstract

Transnational education is increasingly pivotal as universities expand programs offshore through partnerships and international campuses, particularly in Africa. While this approach offers significant potential, it faces challenges in harmonizing curricula across diverse educational contexts to ensure a seamless learning experience. This study explores these challenges and opportunities, focusing on curriculum alignment using Lancaster University Ghana as a case study. Drawing on Waterval et al.'s (2015) framework, the study examines strategies to achieve curriculum equivalence and engages with broader debates on educational globalization. The findings highlight the importance of equitable learning opportunities and provide actionable insights for enhancing curriculum harmonization in transnational education.

## Keywords

Transnational education; Ghana; Curricula; Equivalence; Teaching and Learning

## Introduction

The increasing global demand for higher education is driven by factors such as globalization, advancements in information technology, and the pursuit of high-quality education (Mok, 2021; Briguglio, 2000; Castle & Kelly, 2004; Waterval et al., 2015). Projections suggest that by 2025, around 7.2 million students will seek international degrees (Bohm et al., 2002). Many students prefer to remain in their home countries while accessing international education. Transnational education (TNE), defined by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, involves

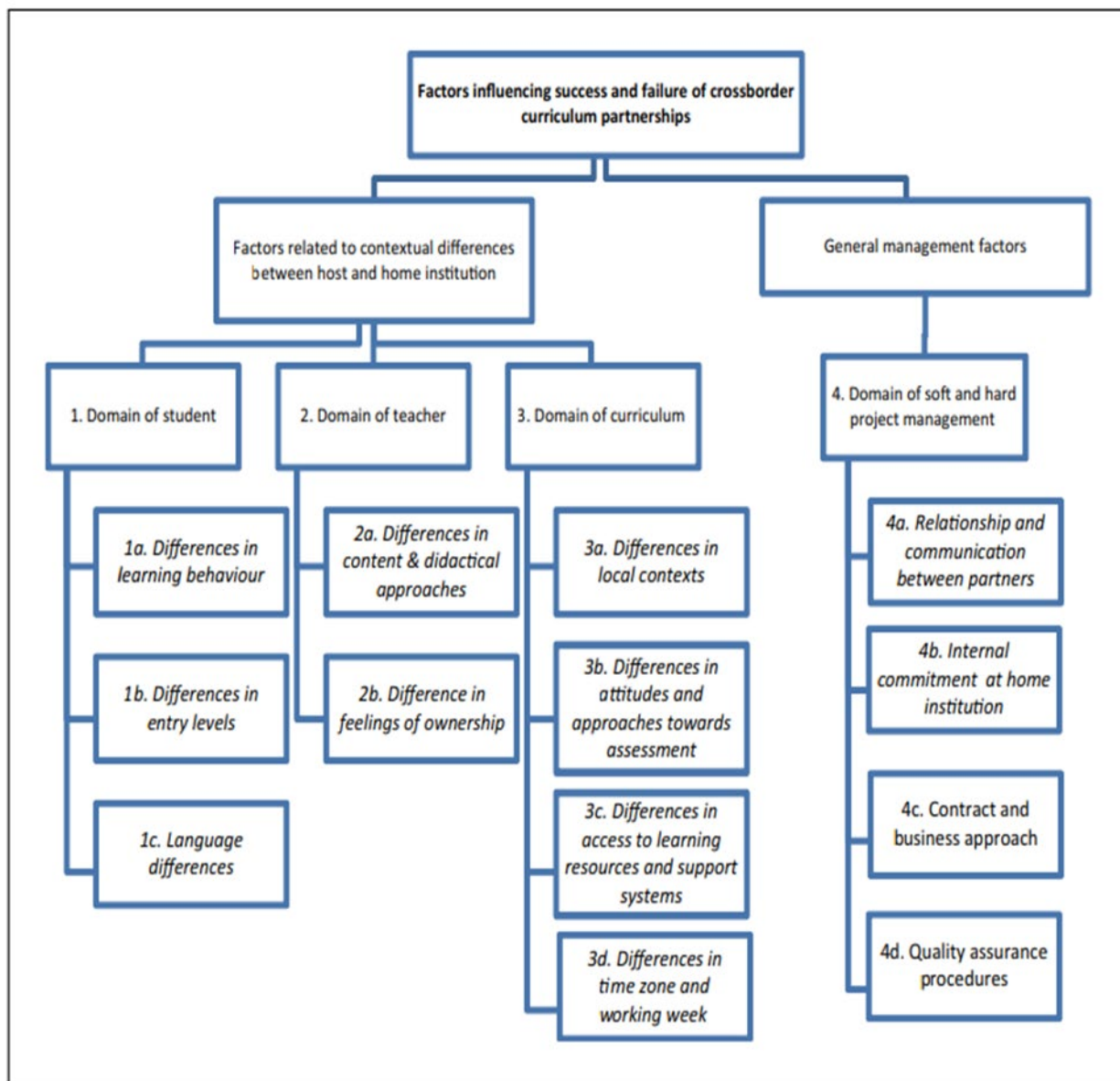


delivering higher education programs in a country different from the awarding institution's location (All Africa Global Media, 2019). This model promotes cross-border teaching and learning through partnerships and branch campuses, facilitated by cross-curriculum partnerships between awarding and partner institutions (Waterval et al., 2015).

In Africa, the rising demand for international education is fueled by limitations in local institutions, financial incentives, the need for a globally relevant workforce, and the commercialization of knowledge by international organizations (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). Concurrently, the UK's higher education sector has intensified its focus on commercialization, leading to strategic partnerships with African universities. For example, in the 2018/2019 academic year, 129,250 students pursued UK degrees through African universities (Bennell, 2019).

Cross-curriculum partnerships (CCPs) present significant opportunities for students seeking foreign qualifications while remaining in their home countries, considering financial and cultural factors. These partnerships enhance students' intercultural competencies and provide advantages to awarding institutions, such as an elevated international profile, reduced infrastructure costs, increased student numbers, and the development of strategic networks (Waterval et al., 2015). However, implementing curricula across borders poses challenges, including the need for adaptation to different educational contexts and faculty involvement (Waterval et al., 2015; Bovill et al., 2015; Dunworth, 2008; Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Briguglio, 2000). Achieving curriculum equivalence between host and home countries remains complex (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020; Waterval et al., 2015; Bovill et al., 2015).

Our motivation for this study is rooted in the growing importance of transnational education and the challenges associated with implementing curricula across diverse contexts. Waterval et al.'s (2015) framework was chosen due to its comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges. This framework identifies 13 critical success factors for managing cross-border educational partnerships and is categorized into four key domains as depicted in the figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Framework of factors influencing the success and failure of Cross border curriculum partnerships. Source: Waterval et al. 2015.**

The framework above represents the four key domains identified by Waterval et al. (2015), each of which is crucial for successfully managing and harmonizing curricula in transnational education contexts. Thus,

1. Students: Focuses on understanding student needs and expectations in diverse educational contexts.
2. Teachers: Emphasizes the role of faculty in adapting and delivering curriculum across borders.
3. Curriculum: Addresses the challenges of aligning and harmonizing curricula to meet local and international standards.



4. **Soft and Hard Project Management:** Covers the project management aspects necessary for successful partnership implementation, including logistical and administrative considerations.

Using Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) as a case study, an institution established in 2013 that collaborates with Lancaster University UK as a transnational partner to offer Foundation, Undergraduate, and Executive MBA programs, this research investigates the complexities of implementing curricula developed in one country within a different cultural and educational context. Drawing from the experiences at LUG, the study aims to offer recommendations for harmonizing curricula in transnational education settings, with the goal of achieving educational quality that is equivalent to that provided in the home country.

The paper critically reviews the literature on Waterval et al.'s third domain, thus, curriculum-related challenges specific to the Ghanaian context, focusing on practical strategies for achieving curriculum harmony and equivalence. It addresses issues such as local context adaptation, assessment practices, resource access, time zone differences, and language barriers. By drawing on established research and our experiences as educators at LUG, the paper aims to offer actionable insights for improving transnational education practices and ensuring a consistent, high-quality educational experience across international partnerships.

## **Challenges and Strategic Approaches for TNE Curriculum Harmonization**

### **Differences in Local Context**

Transnational education often encounters challenges stemming from diverse cultural landscapes, which can complicate the alignment of curricula across borders. For example, in our own experience at Lancaster University Ghana (LUG), we have observed how the emphasis on student-led learning typical in Western educational models sometimes conflicts with the collaborative, communal learning styles prevalent in Ghanaian culture. This friction can be perceived as a form of educational imperialism, which has prompted us to explore alternative educational philosophies, such as the African Philosophy of Education. This philosophy aims to address these contextual challenges by integrating local perspectives into the curriculum (Horsthemke & Enslin, 2009). To bridge these cultural divides and ensure educational relevance, it is crucial to adapt content to reflect local educational goals while maintaining learning outcomes' equivalence. Research by Naicker et al. (2022) and Poole



(2020) supports this approach, highlighting the need for educators to understand local educational needs deeply and adjust pedagogical strategies accordingly.

## **Differences in Attitude and Approach Towards Assessment**

Assessment practices can vary significantly between home and host institutions, presenting another challenge in transnational education. During our work with curriculum harmonization at LUG, we faced discrepancies in assessment methods that threatened to undermine educational consistency. We addressed these challenges by assigning assessment responsibilities to the host institution while fostering collaboration with the home institution. This approach aligns with Shams and Huisman (2012), who suggest that close collaboration and professional development are essential for harmonizing assessment practices. By equipping educators with the skills needed to adapt assessment strategies to local contexts, we can ensure fair and consistent evaluations that uphold international standards (McBurnie, 2000; Olcott, 2009; Vinen & Selvarajah, 2008).

## **Differences in Access to Learning Resources and Support Systems**

Ensuring equitable access to learning resources and support systems is vital but often challenging in transnational education. At LUG, we have encountered significant disparities in resource access, which affected students' learning experiences. To address these issues, we have collaborated with our partners to enhance infrastructure and develop support systems tailored to the unique needs of students in transnational settings. This aligns with Naicker et al. (2022) and Gregory and Wohlmuth (2002), who argue for investing in culturally responsive support mechanisms. By improving infrastructure and support systems, institutions can promote educational equity and ensure that all students have the resources necessary for academic success.

## **Differences in Time Zones and Working Weeks**

Logistical challenges due to time zone differences and varying working weeks can complicate curriculum integration. At LUG, we have faced difficulties in scheduling and communication due to these temporal discrepancies. To mitigate these challenges, we have adopted flexible scheduling practices and incorporated asynchronous elements into our modules. Research by Lane et al. (2004), Lim (2010), and Goh and Sigala (2020) supports this approach, suggesting that enhancing communication channels and offering flexible learning options can reduce the negative impacts of time zone differences. By accommodating diverse schedules and promoting effective communication, we aim to improve the learning experience and maintain educational consistency across different time zones.



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## Language Differences

Language barriers are a significant challenge in transnational education, affecting students' ability to engage with the curriculum effectively. At LUG, we have implemented robust language support services to address these barriers, including tailored language development programs. Gregory and Wohlmuth (2002) and Heffernan et al. (2010) advocate for integrating language support into the curriculum to enhance students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. By providing dedicated language support, we ensure that students from diverse linguistic backgrounds can fully engage with the curriculum and succeed in their academic pursuits, thereby achieving educational equivalence.

## Conclusion

Harmonizing curricula in a transnational setting entail addressing a range of complex challenges, including cultural differences, assessment practices, resource accessibility, time zone disparities, and language barriers. To overcome these obstacles and achieve curriculum equivalence, it is crucial for educational institutions to implement targeted strategies. This involves adapting educational content to fit diverse cultural contexts, aligning assessments to maintain consistency, improving infrastructure to support cross-border learning, and providing robust language support. By undertaking these initiatives, institutions can ensure that students receive a high-quality and consistent education, regardless of their location.

Looking forward, Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) can leverage these insights to refine its approach to curriculum harmonization. The university's focus over the next few years could involve enhancing its partnerships with international institutions to better align curricula, investing in technology and infrastructure to support seamless cross-border education, and implementing comprehensive training programs for faculty to address cultural and



pedagogical differences. By prioritizing these areas, LUG can improve the educational experience for its students, foster greater intercultural understanding, and contribute to a more equitable global education landscape.

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