

Collaborative Governance in Transnational Higher Education: Reimagining Leadership Through UK-UAE Partnerships

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Abstract

Transnational education partnerships between UK and UAE institutions reveal how cultural differences shape shared leadership and decision-making in practice. Through interviews with 32 stakeholders across regulatory bodies, universities, and educational agencies, this research examines how British risk-based governance approaches negotiate with Emirati centralised quality assurance systems. The study demonstrates that effective cross-border partnerships require navigating distinct cultural expectations: British emphasis on institutional autonomy and peer review contrasts with UAE preferences for clear hierarchical structures and ministerial oversight. Key findings show that successful partnerships employ cultural translators who mediate between regulatory frameworks, implement joint governance boards balancing representation with efficiency, and develop trust through regular face-to-face engagement rather than relying solely on contractual mechanisms. Power asymmetries manifest practically in curriculum validation, where UK institutions retain final approval whilst UAE partners seek meaningful input on local contextual adaptation. The research identifies three practical strategies for culturally responsive shared leadership: bilateral quality agreements that acknowledge both regulatory systems, stakeholder engagement mechanisms incorporating voices traditionally marginalised in governance, and outcomes-based monitoring combining data-driven accountability with relational trust-building. These findings offer actionable guidance for developing equitable international education partnerships that respect cultural diversity whilst maintaining quality standards.

Keywords: transnational education, collaborative governance, quality assurance, stakeholder participation, power dynamics

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Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNE) has evolved from a niche export activity to a central pillar of internationalisation strategies worldwide. Global TNE enrolment expanded from 0.9 million learners in 2000 to an estimated 4.3 million in 2024, representing 17% of all internationally mobile education and generating US\$44 billion in annual revenue (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Garrett & Verbik, 2024). This rapid expansion has surfaced critical questions about academic quality, legitimacy, and stakeholder voice in cross-border educational provision that require systematic investigation and theoretical development.

The commercial imperative driving TNE growth cannot be divorced from questions of educational quality and equity. Universities face mounting financial pressures from reduced public funding, increasing operational costs, and intensifying global competition for students. TNE partnerships offer diversified revenue streams whilst expanding institutional reach and reputation across international markets. However, this commercialisation raises fundamental questions about whose interests are prioritised in governance structures, how quality standards are negotiated across different regulatory contexts, and whether the voice of all stakeholders—particularly students, local faculty, and host country partners—is adequately represented in decision-making processes.

This research examines TNE partnerships between the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates, offering an instructive contrast in quality assurance approaches shaped by distinct cultural and governance traditions. The UK operates a risk-based, peer-review regime that privileges institutional autonomy through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), reflecting British cultural values of academic freedom, collegial decision-making, and trust in professional judgement. The UAE, by contrast, enforces a highly centralised model through the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), linking quality tightly to national development goals in alignment with Emirati cultural preferences for clear hierarchical authority, government oversight, and structured compliance systems.

More than sixty UK universities deliver programmes in the UAE, most located in Dubai's education free zones, creating a natural laboratory for examining how divergent regulatory logics and cultural expectations negotiate mutual recognition. These partnerships require ongoing cultural translation as British and Emirati stakeholders navigate different assumptions about authority, transparency, consultation processes, and the appropriate balance between standardisation and local adaptation. Understanding how shared leadership functions in practice across these cultural boundaries offers insights applicable to transnational partnerships more broadly.

The overarching research question addresses: How do collaborative governance, stakeholder participation, and the relationship between home and host institutions affect quality assurance in UK TNE programmes offered in the UAE, across different delivery modes and cultural settings? This question is explored through three specific research objectives. First, examining how governance structures and institutional adaptability influence quality assurance across different TNE delivery modes. Second, analysing how power dynamics and stakeholder participation shape decision-making processes in TNE partnerships. Third, investigating the role of trust mechanisms, contractual arrangements, and principal-agent relationships in maintaining programme quality and institutional reputation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Current scholarship on TNE governance falls into two broad categories. The first, dominated by higher-education management journals, documents institutional practices through single-case studies focusing on partnership contracts, credit-transfer protocols, and resource allocation (Healey, 2016; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006). The second, rooted in comparative-policy literature, analyses national quality assurance regimes but rarely links them to the lived experience of cross-border delivery (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Johnson et al., 2021). Few studies attempt an integrated, multi-level account that examines both policy frameworks and operational realities whilst attending to how cultural differences shape governance practices.

Three theoretical lenses inform this research. Collaborative Governance Theory provides a framework for understanding how different actors with conflicting interests engage in consensus-driven decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Applied to TNE contexts, this perspective suggests that effective quality assurance depends less on imposing uniform standards than on creating spaces for genuine dialogue between home and host institutions, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders. However, the theory's optimistic assumptions about consensus-building may underestimate how deeply entrenched power asymmetries and cultural differences constrain genuine collaboration.

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) identifies the needs and power dynamics of key players in transnational partnerships, including students, faculty, regulators, ministries, employers, and professional bodies. In TNE contexts, this theory reveals tensions as home institutions typically prioritise reputation protection and financial returns, host partners emphasise local market access and capacity building, students expect affordable access and internationally recognised qualifications, and regulatory bodies seek to ensure quality standards whilst advancing national strategic objectives. These divergent interests create contestation over whose voice is heard in governance structures.

Agency Theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) views TNE partnerships as principal-agent relationships characterised by control issues, varying incentives, and information asymmetry. Applied to TNE, home institutions function as principals who retain degree-awarding authority but delegate delivery to host partners serving as agents. This relationship creates risks that hosts may prioritise revenue over academic standards or misrepresent their capabilities. Effective TNE governance likely requires combining the structural clarity that agency theory emphasises with the trust-building processes highlighted by collaborative governance approaches.

Methodology

This research adopts an interpretivist worldview, recognising that quality assurance in higher education is perceived differently by various stakeholders across cultural boundaries. Interpretivism acknowledges that what constitutes “quality” is not a fixed, universally agreed standard but rather a socially constructed concept negotiated through interactions between institutions, regulators, students, and other stakeholders. Understanding these negotiated meanings, particularly across UK and UAE cultural contexts, requires engaging deeply with participant perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with 32 participants across UK and UAE TNE institutions during September and October 2025. Interview duration ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, generating approximately 480,000 words of transcript data. Participants included

senior academic leaders such as pro-vice-chancellors and deans responsible for international partnerships, quality assurance professionals including internal auditors and compliance officers, regulatory experts from the QAA and CAA, educational consultants who facilitate TNE partnerships, agents who recruit students for TNE programmes, and institutional managers responsible for day-to-day partnership operations. Participants had between 5 and 35 years of experience in transnational education, providing rich historical perspective on how TNE governance has evolved.

Purposive sampling identified individuals with direct experience in UK-UAE TNE programmes and knowledge of governance, partnership models, and quality assurance practices. Snowball sampling supplemented this approach where initial participants referred others meeting the study criteria. The sample achieved breadth across institutional types, including Russell Group research-intensive universities, post-1992 universities with substantial TNE portfolios, specialist institutions, and private providers operating in UAE free zones.

Data analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2008), integrated with the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) to systematically develop first-order codes from participant narratives, second-order themes through interpretive clustering, and aggregate dimensions representing overarching theoretical constructs. This rigorous analytical approach ensures findings remain grounded in participant experiences whilst connecting to broader theoretical insights.

Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institution. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality. The study maintains trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Findings

Cultural Dimensions of Governance and Institutional Adaptability

Participants revealed how cultural differences fundamentally shape governance approaches in UK-UAE partnerships. British stakeholders emphasised institutional autonomy and bottom-up quality enhancement, reflecting UK higher education traditions of collegial governance and academic freedom. One UK quality director explained: “We trust our academic staff to maintain standards through peer review and professional judgement. Quality assurance is about creating an environment where excellence can flourish, not imposing rigid compliance systems.” This approach aligns with broader British cultural values privileging individual professional judgement within loosely coupled organisational structures.

Emirati stakeholders, by contrast, described quality assurance in terms of clear standards, structured processes, and governmental oversight. A UAE regulatory official noted: “Quality requires explicit criteria that everyone understands and systematic monitoring to ensure compliance. Our role is to protect students and national interests through rigorous oversight.” This perspective reflects cultural preferences for hierarchical decision-making structures and clearly defined authority relationships common in Gulf societies. These divergent cultural expectations created ongoing tensions requiring active negotiation in partnership governance.

Several participants described the emergence of “cultural translators”—individuals with deep experience in both UK and UAE contexts who mediate between different governance

expectations. These translators help UK partners understand Emirati preferences for formal documentation and explicit approval processes, whilst helping UAE stakeholders appreciate British emphasis on evidence-based quality enhancement and professional autonomy. One consultant explained: “Successful partnerships require people who can speak both languages, not just linguistically but culturally. You need to understand why UK universities resist what they see as bureaucratic compliance and why UAE regulators insist on detailed documentation.”

The role of these cultural translators proved particularly critical during regulatory audits and quality reviews. British institutions approaching UAE regulatory reviews with their typical peer-review documentation found it insufficient for Emirati expectations. One UK quality manager described:

We submitted what we considered comprehensive programme documentation—external examiner reports, student feedback analysis, enhancement action plans. The CAA reviewers wanted much more explicit detail: specific learning outcomes mapped to assessment tasks, documented approval at multiple committee levels, formal evidence of regulatory compliance checks. We initially saw this as bureaucratic, but our UAE partners helped us understand it reflects different accountability expectations.

Conversely, UAE partners initially struggled with British quality assurance emphasis on reflective practice, enhancement culture, and professional judgement. One host institution manager explained:

QAA audits focus on how institutions learn and improve, asking about our quality culture and enhancement mechanisms. This felt vague compared to CAA's specific compliance criteria. We needed to develop different capabilities—not just demonstrating standards compliance but articulating our quality philosophy and enhancement approach.

These contrasting regulatory expectations required partnerships to develop dual capability satisfying both frameworks.

Curriculum validation emerged as a key site where cultural differences manifest practically. UK validation processes typically involve extensive collegial debate, iterative refinement based on external examiner feedback, and significant academic discretion in programme design. Emirati stakeholders, however, expressed frustration with what they perceived as vague processes lacking clear timelines and explicit approval criteria. One UAE partner described: “The UK validation process feels opaque to us. We prepare extensive documentation but then face additional questions and requests for clarification without clear standards about what's required. We need more structure and transparency.”

These tensions played out concretely in curriculum localisation debates. UK institutions emphasised maintaining curriculum parity—offshore programmes matching home campus content exactly—to protect academic standards and degree equivalence. One UK academic explained: “Our degree must mean the same thing whether studied in London or Dubai. We can't compromise academic standards for local preferences.” However, UAE partners argued that rigid curriculum standardisation ignored legitimate local context. An Emirati programme director noted: “Business education needs local case studies, regional economic contexts, and

examples students recognise. Teaching UK retail case studies to Dubai students who've never been to Tesco makes no pedagogical sense.”

Successful partnerships navigated this tension through distinguishing core curriculum requirements from contextual application. One partnership manager described:

We identified non-negotiable learning outcomes and theoretical foundations that must be identical. But we allow flexibility in examples, case studies, and application contexts. A module on retail strategy teaches the same analytical frameworks but uses regional examples relevant to students' future careers. This preserves academic standards whilst respecting local relevance.

This approach required extensive dialogue to define which curriculum elements were essential for degree integrity versus where contextual adaptation enhanced rather than compromised quality.

Assessment practices revealed similar cultural negotiations. British universities typically privilege diverse assessment methods emphasising critical analysis, independent thinking, and original argument development. However, participants noted that students educated in Gulf education systems often initially struggled with open-ended assessments lacking clear answer criteria. One UK programme director explained:

We had to develop more structured rubrics and exemplars than we'd use in the UK, not because standards were lower but because cultural learning expectations differ. Emirati students excel when they understand exactly what's expected, but British-style 'develop your own argument' assignments initially felt unclear to them.

Stakeholder Power Dynamics and Shared Decision-Making

Analysis revealed how cultural norms around authority and participation shape shared leadership practices. British stakeholders generally expected inclusive consultation processes where multiple voices contribute to decisions, reflecting UK higher education traditions of committee-based governance and democratic deliberation. However, this consultation model sometimes frustrated Emirati partners accustomed to clearer hierarchical decision-making where senior leadership provides definitive direction after appropriate consultation with relevant authorities.

One host partner described this cultural difference: “UK universities hold endless meetings where everyone has input but decisions remain ambiguous. In our context, we value consultation but expect leaders to make clear decisions and provide direction. The British preference for consensus-building can feel indecisive to us.” Conversely, British stakeholders sometimes perceived Emirati decision-making as top-down, with limited genuine consultation. One UK academic noted: “We're told the ministry has decided something, and there's little opportunity to discuss alternatives or understand the rationale. It feels directive rather than collaborative.”

Successful partnerships developed hybrid governance models accommodating both cultural preferences. Several participants described joint academic boards with equal representation from UK and UAE institutions but structured with clear terms of reference, decision-making protocols, and escalation procedures. These boards balanced British preferences for collegial

deliberation with Emirati expectations for structured processes and clear authority. One partnership director explained: “We've learned to be explicit about how decisions get made, who has authority over what, and how disagreements get resolved. This clarity helps both sides feel comfortable with shared governance.”

Student voice revealed particularly interesting cultural dynamics. British stakeholders described extensive student feedback mechanisms, student representation on committees, and partnership approaches positioning students as active participants. However, several noted that Emirati students sometimes felt uncomfortable with this expectation, preferring more structured guidance and clearer authority relationships with faculty. One UK programme director observed: “We encourage students to challenge ideas and participate actively, but some UAE students initially find this unfamiliar. They've been educated in systems with more hierarchical teacher-student relationships.”

Trust Mechanisms and Cultural Approaches to Partnership

Trust-building emerged as fundamentally cultural, with British and Emirati stakeholders emphasising different pathways to establishing partnership confidence. British participants described trust developing through demonstrated professional competence, peer recognition, and track record of delivery. One UK pro-vice-chancellor explained: “We build trust by showing we can deliver quality education, by our external examiner reports, by our graduates' success. Trust comes from proven capability and professional reputation.”

Emirati stakeholders, whilst valuing professional competence, placed greater emphasis on personal relationships, face-to-face interaction, and social connection. Several described trust as emerging through regular visits, shared meals, and relationship-building beyond formal business meetings. One UAE partner noted:

Trust requires knowing people personally, not just professionally. We invite UK partners to our homes, we share hospitality, we build relationships through personal connection. The British sometimes seem too focused on contracts and formal agreements without investing in relationship building.

These different cultural approaches to trust created initial friction but ultimately enriched partnerships when acknowledged and accommodated. Successful partnerships combined British emphasis on contractual clarity and documented processes with Emirati investment in personal relationships and social connection. One consultant described: “The best partnerships have solid legal agreements that satisfy British institutional risk management but also invest heavily in face-to-face relationship building that Emirati partners value. You need both the contract and the relationship.”

Practical manifestations of these different trust-building approaches emerged in partnership communication patterns. British stakeholders typically relied heavily on email communication, virtual meetings, and formal documentation exchanges. One UK partnership director noted: “We're efficient with technology—emails, video calls, shared documents. We can manage partnerships remotely quite effectively.” However, UAE partners consistently emphasised the importance of physical presence and face-to-face interaction. An Emirati senior leader explained: “Email is for logistics. Real partnership requires sitting together, sharing meals, understanding each other as people. Virtual meetings are cold—they don't build the personal connection we need for trust.”

This cultural difference had significant practical implications during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions prevented face-to-face meetings. Several partnerships reported strain as British partners felt they could maintain relationships virtually whilst Emirati partners experienced this as relationship deterioration. One UAE quality director described:

The pandemic showed us how much we rely on personal connection. Virtual meetings felt transactional. We lost the informal conversations, the relationship building, the trust that comes from spending time together. British partners seemed comfortable with virtual-only interaction, but for us it damaged partnership.

Post-pandemic, successful partnerships deliberately rebuilt relationship dimensions through regular planned visits, social activities integrated into business meetings, and senior leadership engagement demonstrating partnership commitment. One partnership coordinator explained:

We now build relationship time into every interaction. Business meetings include lunch together, social conversation, opportunities for informal connection. British colleagues initially saw this as inefficient, but they've learned it's essential for Emirati partners. The relationship investment pays dividends when challenges arise—we can resolve issues through established trust rather than reverting to contractual enforcement.

Conflict resolution revealed similar cultural patterns. British stakeholders described preference for direct discussion, explicit negotiation, and written clarification of disagreements and resolutions. Emirati partners sometimes found this approach uncomfortably confrontational, preferring to address conflicts through intermediaries, maintain social harmony, and resolve issues through relationship-based negotiation. One experienced partnership manager explained: “You need to understand that direct challenge can feel disrespectful in Emirati culture. Issues get resolved, but through different processes that preserve relationship and status. British directness can damage partnerships if not culturally calibrated.”

Practical examples illustrated these cultural differences concretely. When quality concerns arose about teaching standards, British partners typically wanted direct conversations with involved faculty, explicit feedback on performance gaps, and documented improvement plans. One UK quality director described: “We're trained to have difficult conversations professionally. You identify issues, provide specific feedback, agree improvement actions, document everything. It's transparent and fair.” However, UAE partners sometimes experienced this approach as face-threatening. An Emirati academic manager explained: “Public criticism damages relationships and reputation. We address performance issues privately, through trusted intermediaries, preserving dignity whilst achieving improvement. British directness can feel harsh and disrespectful.”

Successful partnerships developed hybrid conflict resolution approaches accommodating both cultural preferences. These typically involved initial private discussion identifying issues and exploring solutions, followed by formal documentation of agreed actions satisfying British requirements for transparency and accountability. One partnership director described:

We've learned to separate the social relationship maintenance from the professional accountability. Issues get discussed privately first, preserving dignity and relationship. Once we've agreed the solution, we document it formally. Both cultural needs are met—relationship preservation and professional accountability.

Language differences added another layer of complexity. Whilst business conducted in English, British stakeholders sometimes misinterpreted Emirati communication styles emphasising politeness and indirectness. One UK programme director reflected:

Emirati colleagues would say ‘this might be challenging’ when they meant ‘this is completely unacceptable.’ We learned to read between the lines—indirect communication isn't unclear, it's culturally appropriate. British directness that we see as honest can feel rude to Emirati partners who value more nuanced communication preserving relationship harmony.

Successful partnerships invested in cultural training helping team members understand different communication conventions and adapt their approaches accordingly.

Discussion

Towards Culturally Responsive Collaborative Governance

The findings demonstrate that effective TNE governance requires moving beyond assuming universal governance models toward culturally responsive approaches recognising legitimate diversity in how quality assurance operates. Collaborative Governance Theory, when applied to cross-cultural contexts, must account for fundamental differences in cultural assumptions about authority, participation, transparency, and decision-making that shape how stakeholders engage with governance processes.

The research reveals three practical strategies for culturally responsive governance. First, bilateral quality assurance compacts that explicitly acknowledge both regulatory systems rather than attempting to impose one framework. Such compacts specify core quality standards all partnerships must meet whilst allowing flexibility in how standards are achieved, assessed, and documented in ways culturally appropriate to each context. Second, hybrid governance structures combining elements valued by different cultural traditions—such as joint boards balancing collegial deliberation with clear authority and structured processes. Third, investment in cultural translation through individuals who understand both governance traditions and can mediate between different expectations.

Implementation of these strategies requires concrete organisational changes. One successful partnership established a “cultural interface team” comprising staff with extensive experience in both UK and UAE higher education contexts. This team reviewed all partnership documentation, quality procedures, and communication protocols to identify potential cultural misunderstandings before they created conflict. Team members participated in validation panels, regulatory reviews, and partnership meetings, actively mediating cultural differences. One team member explained:

We translate not just language but cultural expectations. When UK colleagues propose a new assessment approach, we help them understand how it needs to be presented to satisfy UAE regulatory requirements. When UAE partners raise concerns, we help UK teams understand the underlying cultural values rather than just the surface complaint.

Another partnership developed parallel governance documentation satisfying both cultural preferences. They maintained detailed procedural manuals with explicit approval hierarchies and compliance checklists for UAE regulatory purposes, alongside reflective quality

enhancement reports emphasising professional dialogue and development for UK requirements. One quality manager noted:

Initially this felt like duplication, but we realised we were serving different cultural accountability logics. UAE regulators need to see systematic compliance evidence. UK reviewers want to understand our quality culture and enhancement approach. Rather than choose one approach, we developed capability in both, and this actually strengthened our overall quality assurance.

Rebalancing Power Through Culturally Aware Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder Theory reveals that power asymmetries in TNE partnerships are not merely structural but culturally mediated. British institutional dominance reflects not only legal realities around degree ownership but also cultural assumptions about whose governance approaches are “normal” or “rigorous.” Moving toward genuinely equitable partnerships requires UK institutions to recognise that Emirati preferences for clear hierarchies, structured processes, and governmental oversight reflect legitimate cultural values rather than deficient governance maturity.

Effective stakeholder engagement across cultural boundaries requires explicit attention to how consultation processes may privilege certain cultural communication styles. British-style open debate and challenge may silence stakeholders from cultures valuing hierarchical respect and social harmony. Successful partnerships develop multiple engagement mechanisms—formal committees for those comfortable with British consultation styles, relationship-based informal dialogue for those preferring Emirati approaches, and clear escalation processes satisfying both cultural preferences for different decision-making structures.

Trust and Accountability Across Cultural Boundaries

Agency Theory illuminates how different cultural orientations toward trust create challenges in TNE partnerships. British reliance on contractual mechanisms and monitoring systems reflects cultural assumptions that trust emerges through demonstrated professional competence and institutional reputation. Emirati emphasis on personal relationships and social connection reflects different cultural logics where trust develops through interpersonal familiarity and relationship investment.

Effective principal-agent relationships in cross-cultural TNE contexts require combining both trust-building approaches. Contracts provide necessary clarity and legal protection valued in British institutional contexts, whilst regular face-to-face engagement and personal relationship investment builds trust in ways meaningful to Emirati partners. The shift toward outcomes-based quality assurance offers potential for culturally neutral accountability focusing on student success rather than prescribing governance processes aligned with particular cultural traditions.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that effective transnational education governance requires reimagining leadership as culturally situated collaborative practice. The UK-UAE corridor reveals how divergent regulatory systems shaped by distinct cultural traditions can be reconciled through frameworks that integrate regulatory alignment, stakeholder engagement respecting cultural diversity, and trust-building combining multiple cultural approaches.

The proposed framework moves beyond assuming universal governance models toward culturally responsive shared leadership. Key elements include bilateral quality assurance compacts acknowledging legitimate diversity in governance approaches whilst ensuring core quality standards; hybrid governance structures combining elements valued by different cultural traditions such as collegial deliberation with clear hierarchical authority; investment in cultural translation through individuals who understand both governance traditions; multiple stakeholder engagement mechanisms accommodating different cultural communication preferences; and outcomes-based monitoring focusing on student success rather than prescribing culturally specific governance processes.

Theoretical contributions include extending Collaborative Governance Theory to explicitly address cultural dimensions of consensus-building, demonstrating how power asymmetries in Stakeholder Theory are culturally mediated rather than merely structural, and showing how Agency Theory's trust mechanisms operate differently across cultural contexts. Together, these perspectives provide a culturally aware framework connecting policy, institutional practice, and stakeholder experience.

Practical implications for policy include developing bilateral quality assurance frameworks that explicitly accommodate different cultural governance traditions rather than assuming universal standards; establishing cultural competence requirements for TNE approval ensuring institutions demonstrate understanding of host country cultural contexts; and creating international coordination mechanisms that facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and mutual learning rather than imposing particular governance models.

For institutions, the findings emphasise investing in staff cultural competence development including understanding different governance traditions and communication styles; recruiting cultural translators with deep experience in both partnership contexts; developing hybrid governance structures combining elements valued by different cultural traditions; implementing multiple stakeholder engagement mechanisms accommodating diverse cultural communication preferences; and balancing contractual clarity with relationship investment in ways meaningful across cultural boundaries.

Limitations include the qualitative design's focus on depth over breadth, constraining generalisability across all TNE contexts. The research examines one bilateral corridor which, whilst significant, may not capture dynamics present in other regional partnerships with different cultural traditions and power asymmetries. The study engaged policy-level stakeholders but not students or parents, representing a significant gap requiring future research.

Future research should examine student and parent perspectives on culturally responsive governance, investigating whether partnerships' cultural adaptations actually serve diverse learner needs. Comparative studies extending beyond UK-UAE to other cultural dyads—including UK-China, Australia-Southeast Asia, or intra-regional partnerships—would test the framework's applicability across diverse cultural contexts. Longitudinal research tracking how cultural understanding evolves in partnerships over time would illuminate learning processes and cultural adaptation trajectories.

In an increasingly globalised educational landscape, transnational education partnerships offer significant opportunities for intercultural learning and knowledge exchange. Realising this potential requires governance models that move beyond assuming universal standards toward

genuinely collaborative approaches respecting cultural diversity in how quality assurance operates. The framework developed through this research provides both theoretical foundation and practical guidance for institutions, regulators, and policymakers committed to developing culturally responsive, equitable transnational education partnerships.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Generative AI tools were used to assist with literature review organisation, structural refinement, and language editing during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, Claude AI was employed to help synthesise theoretical frameworks, improve clarity and coherence in presentation, and ensure consistency in formatting and referencing. All substantive research design decisions, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and argument development were conducted by the author. The use of AI tools was limited to enhancing the presentation and organisation of original research findings and did not involve generation of research data, fabrication of citations, or substitution of authorial analysis and interpretation.

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