

Transnational Academic Practices: Insights from UK Educators on Their Experiences in An International Development Initiative

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Abstract

There is growing emphasis on enhancing academic practices in higher education, driven by institutional, national, and international initiatives responding to rising expectations for high-quality educational experiences. A key development is the shift towards student-centred learning and addressing cultural diversity among learners, particularly in transnational education. One notable example is the Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE) project in Myanmar, where UK academics taught Myanmar university faculty about academic professional development, educational practices, and environmental topics. While existing studies primarily focus on the recipients of such training, little has been reported on the experiences of those who offered the training. This paper outlines the scope of the TIDE intervention and offers key reflections from the UK educators on their teaching and learning experiences in this transnational context.

Keywords: *Academic practice, transnational teaching, open and distance education, international development, transnational education*

Introduction

While professional development schemes for primary and secondary teachers, particularly for compulsory schooling, have a long history, the professional development of tertiary level teachers is much more recent and less well organised. Indeed, as noted by Buyl (2017) academic development in higher education is an emerging yet fragmented field, both in terms of theory and of practice. Buyl (2017) also argues that there were epistemic differences between higher education institutions within a country as well as between countries, and that there was not an internationally agreed body of knowledge for this nascent professional community. One element that might be contributing to this lack of agreement is the cultural expectations of teachers and/or students from different countries. Despite its criticisms, many believe that meaningful professional development and capacity-building for university teaching has a positive impact on students' experiences, can enable change and be an influential instrument to empower teachers to embrace and participate in change (Smyth, 2003; van der Rijst, Dean, & Bolander Laksov, 2022; Webb, 2003).

There are several approaches to the professional development of academics, including formal and informal programmes. Universities might choose to develop their own faculties through in-house programmes and activities while other universities might externally outsource these professionals and programmes. In addition, some programmes are developed and funded to build capacity of university teachers internationally, which is the case of the Transformation

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by Innovation in Distance Education or TIDE project. In this project academics from UK universities were teaching academics from Myanmar Universities about academic professional development, educational practices in general and educational practices for open and distance education more specifically, and environmental topics as examples of good teaching practice. This paper sets out the scope and scale of this teaching intervention, as an example of transnational education (TNE), and presents key reflections of the UK teachers on their experiences of both teaching and learning during this transnational project.

Most transnational education (TNE) is of formal programmes of study being ‘delivered’ by a higher education institution (HEI) in one country to students based in another country, the latter sometimes being based at another HEI (Knight, 2015). While the role and function of academic development, which includes teachers teaching other teachers, is growing (Buyl, 2017) there are few recorded accounts of how this has functioned between HEIs in different countries. One example is provided by Jordan et al. (2013) where HE teachers from Glasgow University in the United Kingdom, taught HE teachers in Hawler Medical University in Iraq the concept of student-centred learning (SCL). As they note:

The project evaluation findings demonstrate that as a result of the SCL project, most teachers at HMU demonstrated a slight increase in their level of confidence as a teacher, their level of understanding of SCL and confidence in their own skills to undertake SCL. There was a willingness from most participants to try to adapt their teaching practice towards an SCL approach. However, some participants did not fully understand the shift in conceptualisation necessary in adopting a student-centred approach and some were uncomfortable with the need for a shift of power from teacher to student implied within SCL (p13).

A second example of transnational academic development based on SCL is provided by Adiningrum et al (2023) where staff from a consortium of European universities acted as mentors and staff from Indonesian universities as mentees. They too found there to be variable responses in mentees’ conceptual and practical shifts from teacher centred to student centred methods but also found there to be little evidence of neo colonialist attitudes to this shift. However, there was also little account of the mentees relationships with their mentors to understand if assumed power and superiority did play a role or not. Equally, the focus in both studies seemed to be on one-way academic development and neither explicitly discuss the implications of the Western teachers/mentors’ own experiences in these projects on their own academic practices. Were they also being reflective practitioners and adequately prepared and supported to teach in an international context?

Hoare (2013), Djerassimovic (2014), Bovill et al. (2015), and Szkornik (2017) all relate the many issues there can be with cross cultural/transnational teaching such as differing views of learners and learning; the illusory nature of transformed practice; linguistic meanings and time constraints. Djerassimovic (2014) examines some of the most salient issues in transnational education (TNE), those of cultural imperialism, imposition and adoption of educational and cultural discourses and power relations between importer and exporter institutions while Jordan et al. (2013) questioned whether student centred learning is a western concept that may be seen as colonising the indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it is likely that, as Bell et al. (2010) claim: ‘effective self-reflection is a key component of excellent teaching’, in the same way that Schön (2017) promoted the notion of the reflective practitioner for any professional role. Similarly, Collie and Martin (2016) set out the role of adaptability in shaping teacher practices.



We start this paper by providing more context of the TIDE project, followed by the methods adopted and findings from reflections of the UK educators on their experiences of both teaching and learning during this transnational project.

The Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education or TIDE project

TIDE was an international development project working in Myanmar under the SPHEIR³ programme, funded by UK Aid through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. TIDE ran from February 2018 until May 2021 but was disrupted by Covid 19 from March 2020 and ended 4 months early due to the Military coup in February 2021. The TIDE consortium was led by The Open University but included Oxford University and the University of Manchester from the UK and Yangon University, Yangon University of Distance Education and Yadanabon University from Myanmar along with an international NGO, The Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (Gregson & Fawsett, 2020).

The project had three major strands of work that mutually supported a programme of transformation of Myanmar's distance education provision - developing the capacity of HE staff (the focus of this article), enhancing HE programmes and strengthening HE systems. This sector wide distance education provision accounted for around 60% of all HE students in Myanmar (over 600,000 students). TIDE's aims were supported by the Myanmar Ministry of Education, but they were also considering other reforms that ran parallel to TIDE based on a commissioned report (Gregson & Fawsett, 2020). For instance, at the start of the project students were registered with one of the two universities of distance education (Yangon and Mandalay) that were responsible for creating the teaching texts, broadcast lectures and examinations that students studied or took. Intensive but limited laboratory and field work sessions and classroom-based lectures and marking of examinations were provided by staff from 38 other HEIs throughout the constituent states of Myanmar. These 'Day Campus' universities and HE colleges also had full time students. At the end of 2018 this arrangement changed with new distance education students being registered with their local, newly coined, '1 Campus 2 Systems' HEI. Such a change in responsibilities put even more emphasis on academic development for these HEIs.

TIDE aimed to build capacity of 300 staff from 30 of these HEIs spread across 3 cohorts on modern pedagogical methods as particularly applied to open and distance education. In the end we provided academic development programmes for over 350 staff from all 40 HEIs. The majority (c. 75%) were academic staff, but ICT, Library and other support staff categories were also involved in the development programmes in order to model/replicate the team-based approach to developing open and distance educational resources that operates in most distance education universities. And more than just teaching about modern pedagogical methods the professional development of these staff was also focussed on Education for Environment and Sustainable Development (EfESD) subject disciplines as the catalyst for wider cross-disciplinary implementation (this focus was at the request of Myanmar stakeholders). Indeed, the academic staff from each of the participating HEIs were from different departments such as botany, zoology, geography, chemistry, and physics and for many of whom the environmental subject matter of the activities put on by the tutors from the UK universities was also novel. Consequently, the full set of cohorts were of mixed

³ Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform - <https://www.sphcir.org.uk/>

backgrounds and experiences with distance education. At the same time educational practices throughout all the HEIs were predominately of a didactic nature, focussing on knowledge and understanding rather than skills or behaviours, and with assessment predominantly through terminal unseen exams.

The professional development programme was originally centred on a set of four 5-day residential schools run twice a year over 2 years, with an accompanying set of webinars, in country seminars and open educational resource development activities after each residential school. The TIDE curriculum for the residential schools and other activities was designed and developed in collaboration with the Myanmar government and local colleagues involved in the project. Teaching and supporting materials were translated into the local language, Burmese. The teaching team was predominantly international—this aspect will be explored further in the following section. These efforts aimed to ensure that the TIDE project avoided what Jordan and colleagues (2013) identified as the imposition and adoption of Western-centric educational and cultural discourses. This consideration was especially important for the project leaders due to Myanmar's history as a former British colony.

The Covid-19 pandemic stopped all in country work from March 2020 and meant that only the first cohort of 100 staff from 10 HEIs completed the full programme, with the second cohort only completing half the programme. A cut down fully online programme of study was then devised and made available by October 2020 which the second and third cohorts were able to take. Unfortunately, the Military coup on 1 February 2021 halted all support from the UK partners leaving participants to carry on with self-study, if possible. FCDO closed the project on 31 May 2021.

By early December 2024, some 3.4 million people were displaced. The security environment remains fraught with frequent protection incidents and human rights violations severely affecting civilians' lives. The humanitarian situation is dire, with heightened needs in many parts of the country ([reliefweb, 2024](#)).

While some of the experiences of Myanmar HEI staff were captured by the evaluations of the professional development activities, a more detailed evaluation was disrupted by the coup. However, we were able to capture the experiences of the UK tutors through a specific online survey run just before the project closed.

Methods

A number of survey mechanisms were used where possible to evaluate the impact of the individual professional development activities and the wider professional development programme that Myanmar participants engaged with. For individual activities either a paper or online based short survey was administered immediately after the activity. For the wider programme a longer online survey was conducted. In addition, some participants were interviewed and/or wrote reflective case studies as part of the specific activity on academic professional development. As noted above some of these planned mechanisms were influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic or curtailed due to the military coup.

The tutors associated with the three UK Universities were asked to complete an additional section with open-ended questions to an online survey sent to all staff involved in TIDE from the UK partners. Twenty-six staff members completed the first section of the survey about the project as a whole and seventeen completed the second section. The second section of



the survey also asked open-ended questions providing an opportunity for participants to reflect on their teaching experiences in relation to the TIDE project. This section was optional and only relevant to colleagues who taught at residential schools, in workshops or in online sessions for Myanmar participants, and asked UK tutors to reflect on the impact and benefits of the program delivered to students, to what extent tutors were prepared for this specific teaching, what were the key rewarding moment of this teaching experience, what were the key challenges and lessons learned, amongst other things. The responses to these questions were then thematically analysed.

Thematic analysis is the search for, and extraction of general patterns found in the data through careful reading and re-reading across the qualitative dataset. Thematic Analysis is a flexible qualitative method that involves making several decisions regarding data collection and analysis before they are undertaken (Braun and Clarke 2006). After identifying the core themes deductively, we used an inductive, explicit, critical and realist approach, since this was in line with our desire for a data-driven, pragmatic analysis. The findings of this analysis are discussed next.

Findings

As mentioned previously, this study is different from other transnational education studies as it explores the experiences of the teachers (called tutors) and not the experiences of the students. The TIDE project involved a range of tutors, including some from Myanmar, but the majority from three universities in the UK. It is important to mention that the UK based tutors were not all UK nationals. In fact, 40% of them were from countries in South America, North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Also, most of these non-UK national tutors had English as their second language. This context coupled with tutors' previous involvement with international development projects, created a rich and supportive environment to TIDE students.

Based on the findings of this study, the majority of UK tutors involved in the project have had a positive experience teaching in the program. Most respondents also mentioned that they felt very prepared or well prepared for teaching in the programme. Only one respondent mentioned that they were not well prepared because of the breadth of participants' disciplinary interests, English level proficiency of students and having an interpreter with no subject knowledge. It is interesting to note that these issues were also recognised by participants as some of the challenges faced by the tutors. When asked what challenges they have faced while teaching in country, the most common answers were language barrier ($n=12$), wide range of knowledge and background of students ($n=2$) and working with an interpreter ($n=2$). Other challenges were related to issues with infrastructure such as power cuts, lack of internet connection and air conditioning facilities, as the weather in Myanmar is a lot hotter than the UK.

Despite these challenges, the findings revealed that the majority of respondents mentioned that working with Myanmar learners was a very rewarding process and found them enthusiastic and very interested to learn. According to participants, it was possible to see some of them implementing skills learnt in previous residential schools and providing honest feedback after getting used to this new way of working. Some respondents specifically mentioned hands-on activities as very engaging. It was not only professionally, but also personally rewarding for some respondents, as they were able to work in such a positive

environment where their contributions were valued. Some respondents related their rewarding moments as a teacher as an opportunity to improve their practice. This is evident in the quote below:

In general, the participants were very enthusiastic and proactive throughout the presentations and especially during the practical, which felt like an immediate reward. The feedback provided [by the students] at the end of each session helped me identify my weaknesses and strengths as a teacher, which allowed me to improve each day a little bit.

In response to the question of how well the intended learning outcomes of the programme were met, respondents indicated that this was not an easy question to answer. Although the majority answered that the students learned what tutors were trying to teach them ‘very well’ or ‘reasonably well’ (n=11), several were uncertain due to issues such as language barriers (n=4), participants different knowledge background and roles (n=2), gender differences as female students seemed to be more engaged than males ones (n=1), and students not working in distance learning institutions (n=1).

Respondents also reflected on how well Myanmar students would be able to apply the knowledge they have learnt in to practice. Even though many respondents were hopeful that learners would apply knowledge to practice (n=7), as shown by this quote:

...the knowledge gained related to learning design, use of open licensed content, and other material will be applied by many, and the cascading to colleagues will also widen the knowledge and skill base,

many others believed that this is dependent upon some other factors. One factor is the limited time with learners and the interruption of the project due to Covid19 and the coup, which could affect the practice of new skills and knowledge in many ways, as illustrated by this quote:

There has been some applied work, but the truncated nature of delivery because of Covid and the coup is likely to have undermined much progress.

Another factor is that the higher education system in Myanmar is highly centralised, preventing the implementation of new practices and approaches to teaching and learning. Lack of institutional support and heavy workloads of the learners (who were academics and professional colleagues at Myanmar institutions) could also be a barrier to apply knowledge to practice.

When asked about the lessons learned during their engagement with the TIDE project, respondents’ answers were divided into three main categories:

- Some tutors would have better designed their teaching: to focus more on practical activities and discussions, rather than theory; to further build their critical skills.
- They would have learned more about the students, including their background knowledge of certain topics, their English skills, expectations, higher education context.
- They would have learned more about teaching with the help of an interpreter.

The overall reflections of respondents revealed the uniqueness of the experience for themselves and their own learning resulting from working with welcoming, keen and hard-working Myanmar colleagues.



Discussion

This study presents a unique perspective on transnational education by focusing on the experiences of the tutors involved in the TIDE project, rather than the students. In part, it helps respond to this note on further research: ‘what has been missing in the lecturers’ narratives is their relationship with the mentor. Very few descriptions refer to the mentoring sessions or relationships’ Adiningrum et al. (2023, p.55). The diverse backgrounds of the tutors, particularly the significant proportion of non-UK nationals, enriched the learning environment. This highlights the increasingly global nature of education, especially in international contexts such as Myanmar. The implications of this diversity are significant, as they suggest that varied cultural perspectives and experiences can foster robust educational interactions. Indeed, in line with what Adiningrum et al. (2023, p.55) noted: ‘there were no negative descriptions or signs of neo-colonialist conflict as found in previous studies.’

While most UK tutors reported positive experiences and felt well-prepared for their roles, it is critical to acknowledge the challenges they faced. The language barrier emerged as a primary obstacle for many tutors. Given that a significant percentage of these tutors had English as their second language, it raises questions about communication dynamics within the classroom, a point not overtly noted in the studies quoted in the introduction. Additionally, the variability in students’ disciplinary backgrounds and English proficiency levels points to the complexities educators faced in designing and delivering curricula that are accessible and engaging for all. These insights indicate a pressing need for further professional development opportunities that focus on flexible and inclusive teaching practices as part of student-centred learning (Jayatilake & Rosunally, 2024).

It is interesting to note that despite these challenges, tutors found the experience rewarding. The positive attributes of the Myanmar learners—such as enthusiasm and eagerness to learn—played a crucial role in the tutors’ overall enjoyment and satisfaction with the program and highlights the significance of the mentor-mentee relationship noted above. This aspect underscores the importance of reciprocal learning environments, where both educators and learners contribute to an enriching and supportive educational experience. It also emphasises a deliberate shift away from viewing transnational engagement through neo-colonial lenses, while fostering collaboration between learners and tutors. The emphasis on hands-on activities as an effective teaching method indicates an opportunity for pedagogical practices to evolve beyond traditional approaches.

When evaluating how well the intended learning outcomes were achieved, it is essential to consider the various factors influencing this assessment. While the majority of tutors felt that students grasped the content well, uncertainties related to language barriers, differing educational backgrounds, and engagement levels highlight the inherent challenges in measuring learning success in diverse classroom settings. The concern regarding female student engagement compared to male students raises important questions about gender dynamics in educational environments and warrants further exploration. In this study the majority of students and tutors were female, but this aspect was not directly addressed in the evaluation.

Moreover, the respondents’ reflections on the applicability of the knowledge gained by Myanmar learners introduce significant considerations. Although many tutors remained optimistic about the potential for learners to implement their newly acquired skills, external

factors such as the impact of Covid-19 and political instability hindered the project's progression. This context illustrates the vulnerability of educational initiatives in settings with systemic challenges and emphasises the need for resiliency and adaptability in transnational educational projects.

Several lessons learned articulated by tutors further contribute to understanding the complexities of teaching in this context. Working in a politically unstable environment such as Myanmar can present unique challenges that can reshape educators' understanding of pedagogy and intercultural dynamics. This seems to be the case of the UK tutors, as some of their experiences led to a deeper awareness of the socio-political influences on education, prompting them to adopt their teaching strategies that consider local contexts and student needs. For example, the desire to design more engaging and practical lessons indicates a shift towards learner-centred teaching methodologies, which has been one of the aims of the TIDE project. Moreover, the recognition of the need for a deeper understanding of student backgrounds and the nuances of working with interpreters highlights gaps that could be addressed through targeted professional development activities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The approach that underpinned the TIDE project was inclusive and aimed to effectively meet the needs of all participants. Central to this methodology was a student-centred learning approach that prioritised learner engagement and active participation. Tutors were given flexibility and autonomy to adapt their teaching strategies based on the feedback received and the specific needs of their students, fostering a more responsive and supportive educational environment.

The reflections of the tutors involved in the TIDE project underscore the rich, albeit complex, nature of transnational education. Their experiences illustrate the importance of cultural sensitivity, the need for supportive infrastructures, and the potential for transformative learning environments. Future programmes can benefit from these insights by fostering an environment that prioritises practical engagement, intercultural communication, and adaptive teaching practices to meet the diverse needs of learners, thereby enhancing the impact of international education initiatives. Crucially, the study underscores the importance of reciprocal learning experiences and acknowledges the growing global and intercultural characteristics of higher education. This underscores a deliberate shift away from understanding transnational engagement through neo-colonial frameworks.

The impact of the TIDE project may never be fully realised as this experience could continue being transformational for both tutors and learners as it could challenge existing theories of teaching and professional development and intercultural learning by highlighting the necessity for flexibility in pedagogical approaches. Traditional teaching models may not adequately address the complexities of teaching and learning in a politically charged environment, prompting educators and learners to innovate and adapt their methods in real time.

Based on the findings and discussion above, we would like to make the following recommendations for similar transnational educational projects and programmes. First, it is important to develop and upskill those who will teach. The dynamic world of transnational education demands a well-equipped faculty. Transnational teachers navigate a unique landscape, bridging educational systems and cultures. Effective academic professional



development empowers them to thrive in this environment. It can bridge the gap between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment needed to support the diverse student backgrounds. It can also help with effective communication so that teachers understand cultural nuances in communication styles. Meaningful professional development for transnational teachers can also help them build partnerships with colleagues at partner institutions and to create a richer learning environment for students.

Second, professional development activities for transnational education programmes should include language training to develop targeted language skills in tutors, especially focusing on improving communication for those whose first language is not English. This would help bridge language barriers and enhance classroom interactions. These programmes should also include training on cultural competence through workshops that emphasize understanding diverse cultural perspectives and their implications for teaching, particularly in transnational education contexts.

Third, transnational education programmes should adopt inclusive teaching practices and have flexible curricula to accommodate varying disciplinary backgrounds and English proficiency levels among students. It should also incorporate multiple teaching methods, including hands-on activities, to engage all learners effectively. Other recommendations for TNE programmes include to implement regular feedback mechanisms that allow tutors to assess student engagement and understanding and to Encourage reflective practice among tutors through structured reflection sessions focusing on lessons learned and the applicability of newly acquired skills by students.

Lastly, those managing and leading TNE initiatives should be prepared to face and address external factors affecting educational initiatives, such as political instability and pandemics, which was the case of the TIDE project. This may include building resilience into program structures and establishing remote learning options when needed. Leaders should also encourage tutors to participate in action research projects that evaluate learning outcomes in their classrooms, drawing insights that can inform future practices and policies. It is also important to systematically document and evaluate the transition from traditional to learner-centred teaching methodologies, assessing their effectiveness in diverse contexts.

These initial recommendations aim to enhance the educational experience for both tutors and students within transnational education settings, ensuring that the diversity and challenges presented contribute positively to the overall learning environment. They need to be tested through further projects. Similarly, there needs to be testing of aspects touched on within the TIDE project but not captured by this limited study, such as the competence in using digital technologies in both students and tutors and the creation of repository of resources accessible online for tutors to support their teaching strategies and professional development.

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Appendix: Survey questions for tutors from UK Universities asking for their personal reflections on your TIDE teaching experiences

All questions were followed by a free text box

1. How well prepared were you for teaching your activity?
2. What challenges did you face while teaching in country?
3. Were there rewarding moments for you as a teacher?
4. How well do you think participants were able to learn what you were trying to teach them?
5. How well do you think participants will be able to use what you taught them?
6. What were the lessons learned and what changes would you make in your teaching approaches if you were to run this activity / these activities again?
7. Please use this space for any other reflections you would like to share with us about teaching on TIDE