

Developing Thai-UK Double Degree Programmes: An Exploratory Study Identifying Challenges, Competing Interests and Risks

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Abstract : In Thailand, a 4.0 policy has been initiated that is designed to prepare and train an appropriate workforce to support the move to a value-based economy. One aspect of support for this policy is a project to encourage the creation of double degree programmes, specifically between Thai and UK universities. This research into the project, conducted with its key players, explores the factors that can either enable or hinder the development of such programmes. It is an area that has received little research attention to date. Key findings focus on differences in quality assurance requirements, attitudes to benefits, risks, and committed levels of institutional support, thus providing valuable input into future policy making. The Transnational Education (TNE) Development Project was initiated in 2015 by the British Council, in conjunction with the Office for Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Thailand. The purpose of the project was to facilitate opportunities for Thai Universities to partner with UK Universities so as to develop double degree programme models. In this arrangement, the student gains both a UK and a Thai qualification, spending time studying in both countries. Twenty-two partnerships were initiated via the project. Utilizing a qualitative approach, data sources included participation in TNE project workshops, peer reviews, and over 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants within the participating UK and Thai universities. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for key themes. The research has revealed that the strength of the relationship between the two partner institutions is critical. Successful partnerships are often built on previous personal contact, have senior-level involvement and are strengthened by partnership on different levels, such as research, student exchange, and other forms of mobility. The support of the British Council was regarded as a key enabler in developing these types of projects for those universities that had not been involved in TNE previously. The involvement of industry is apparent in programmes that have high scientific content but not well developed in other subject areas. Factors that hinder the development of partnership programmes include the approval processes and quality requirements of each institution. Significant differences in fee levels between Thai and UK universities provide a challenge and attempts to bridge them require goodwill on the part of the latter that may be difficult to realise. This research indicates the key factors to which attention needs to be given when developing a TNE programme. Early attention to these factors can reduce the likelihood that the partnership will fail to develop. Representatives in both partner universities need to understand their respective processes of development and approval. The research has important practical implications for policy-makers and planners involved with TNE, not only in relation to the specific TNE project but also more widely in relation to the development of TNE programmes in other countries and other subject areas. Future research will focus on assessing the success of the double degree programmes generated by the TNE Development Project from the perspective of universities, policy makers, and industry partners.

Keywords : double-degree, internationalization, partnerships, Thai-UK

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