

Is transnational education (TNE) bringing more opportunities or risks in ensuring **balanced mobility** of people and knowledge?

*A narrative report on the ARC10 Debate Webinar on Recognition & Balanced Mobility
held on 05 December 2024*

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About the 10th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC10)

The [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#) is an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to fostering bi-regional dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration among its 51 partner countries, along with ASEAN and the European Union. As the only permanent institution within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Process, ASEF plays a pivotal role in addressing pressing global challenges through multi-sectoral initiatives in various thematic areas.

A key component of ASEF's work in Education is the [ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC\) Programme](#). Conducted on a biennial cycle, ARC serves as the Official Dialogue Partner of the [ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting \(ASEMME\)](#), making it the only bi-regional, multi-stakeholder dialogue platform that brings together university and student leaders, policymakers, and ministers to shape the higher education landscape in Asia and Europe.

The [tenth edition of ARC \(ARC10\)](#), running from 2024 to 2025, focuses on the future of higher education in response to global trends. Climate change, geopolitical disruptions, social inequalities, rapid digital transformation, and the urgent need to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the necessity for innovative and adaptive higher education strategies. Business-as-usual approaches are no longer viable.

As a launching point for ARC10, ASEF organised the [ARC10 Debate Webinar Series](#) from October to December 2024, structured around three key themes: Digital Transformation, Access & Equity, and Recognition & Balanced Mobility.

Each webinar featured a thought-provoking debate, framed by a compelling prompt and explored by distinguished experts from across Asia and Europe, who engaged in an assigned or chosen stance. Do note that with this, their position during the debates may not reflect their personal or professional opinions on the topic.

This Narrative Report provides a comprehensive summary of the diverse perspectives shared during the [ARC10 Debate Webinar on Recognition & Balanced Mobility](#), held virtually on 05 December 2024.

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Overview

This report brings together discussion points and key learnings from the Debate Webinar on Recognition & Balanced Mobility held as part of the ARC10 Debate Webinar Series on 05 December 2024. The session focused on the question:

“Is transnational education (TNE) bringing more opportunities or risks in ensuring balanced mobility of people and knowledge?”

To examine and assess key trends in TNE, ASEF brought together experts and stakeholders to discuss whether TNE programmes offer more opportunities or risks for the mobility of people and knowledge. The discussion featured four speakers and a moderator, addressing pressing issues on TNE’s role in fostering balanced mobility and sustainable development across Asia and Europe. There were two speakers in favour of the proposition that TNE provides more opportunities for balanced mobility:

- **Prof Rozilini FERNANDEZ-CHUNG**, Associate Professor & Executive Director at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nottingham, Malaysia; and
- **Atty Ron SALO**, Representative for KABAYAN Partylist at the House of Representatives, Philippines.

There were also two speakers in favour of the proposition that TNE brings more risks:

- **Dr Luca LANTERO**, President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and Director General at the Academic Equivalence Mobility Information Centre (CIMEA), Italy; and
- **Ms Elana WONG**, Coordinator of the Civil Society Action Committee & GFMD Civil Society Mechanism at the International Catholic Migration Commission.

The session was moderated by **Dr Wesley TETER**, Research Fellow, Centre for Advanced School Education and Evidence-based Research (CASEER) at The University of Tokyo, Japan.

Context

“We need to co-create more open, inclusive, equitable and collaborative higher education systems that democratise access and knowledge.”

– Stefania Giannini, UNESCO

Transnational Education: Scope and Significance

Transnational education (TNE)—the delivery of education across borders—operates largely in the shadows of higher education, faced with underlying challenges related to recognition, regulation,

and equity. Access to quality education and fair recognition of qualifications are central to achieving the SDGs, particularly the right to higher education. In a fast-changing job market driven by digitalisation and increasing demand for relevant skills, internationally recognised qualifications have never been more critical.

Defining Transnational Education

All types of higher education study programs, or sets of courses of study, or educational services in which the **learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based**. The terms cross-border education and transnational education are often used interchangeably.

Examples:

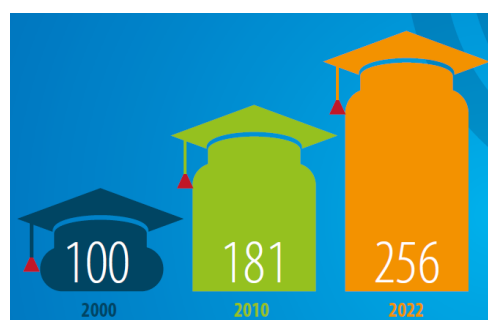
- Branch campuses
- Franchise/partnership programmes
- Articulation programmes
- Joint/double degree programmes
- Distance/virtual education (e.g. EdTech)

Source: UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (Riga, 6 June 2001)

Given a lack of authoritative data on TNE, the impacts of TNE raise complex questions. *Does TNE support balanced mobility and exchange of knowledge, or exacerbate inequities between and within countries?* From industry micro-credentials to online learning providers, critical debate on how to transform higher education is key, especially due to the rise of generative AI creating new content and courses.

The expansion of TNE has been driven by lower-cost cross-border education options, such as distance learning and virtual academic mobility, creating new challenges in monitoring quality assurance and access to recognised higher education institutions. While global tertiary enrolments grew from 100 million in 2000 to over 250 million by 2022 (UNESCO, 2024), only 2.6% of students move across borders for their studies each year. However, this statistic does not fully capture all forms of cross-border education, including TNE. Accurate measurement and data on TNE activities remain limited.

Figure 1. Global enrolment in tertiary education more than doubled in the last two decades



Reliable information on the range of TNE programs is needed, including improved transparency around cost-benefits, assessment practices, international recognition, and agreed metrics for learners and regulators to monitor near-term and lifelong impacts of TNE and training.

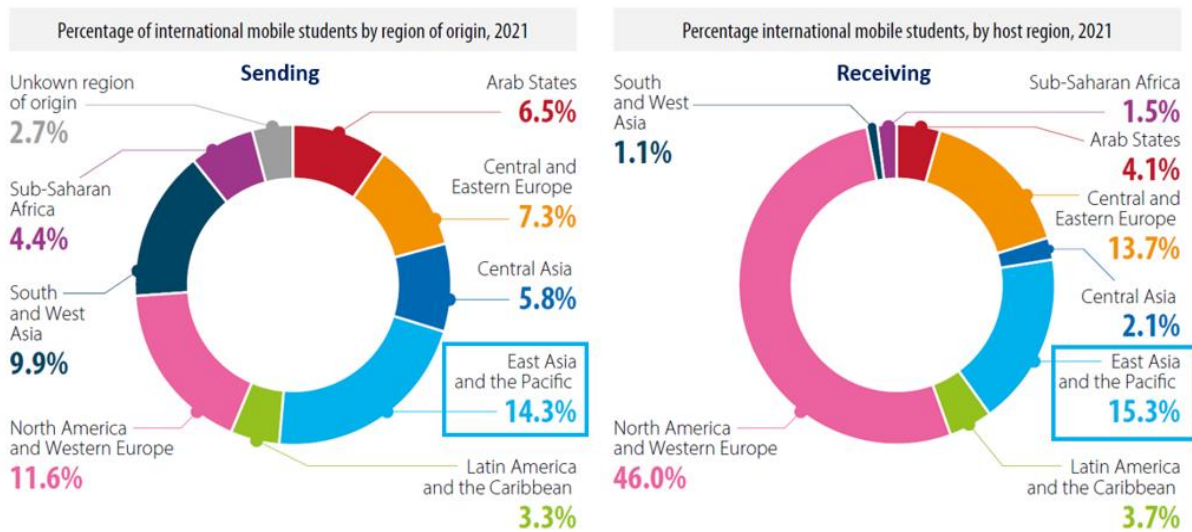
Balanced Mobility of People and Knowledge: Ideal or Illusion?

International students help to strengthen cultural ties, promote mutual understanding, and build peace through public diplomacy and economic development; however, mobility among sending and receiving countries remains unbalanced. The number of internationally mobile students tripled between 2000 and 2021, rising from 2.1 million to 6.4 million worldwide. However, North America and Western Europe together hosted nearly half (46%) of these students while sending only 11.6% (UNESCO, 2024).

Major host countries like the UK advocate for the value of international partnership, including TNE as a means to reduce brain drain. At the same time, education related exports and TNE activities have grown rapidly in the past decade, contributing an estimated £25.6 billion to the UK economy in 2020, including £2.3 billion from TNE activities alone (British Council, 2023). The social and economic benefits of international partnerships remain complex and long-term focused, particularly for emerging markets.

In contrast, East Asia and the Pacific, now sends and hosts equal proportions of internationally mobile students (i.e. 14.3% and 15.3% respectively). In this regard, Asia is poised to be a world leader in balanced cross-border mobility.

Figure 2. International student mobility is unbalanced according to origin and host regions



Source: UNESCO, 2024

Nevertheless, advocating for balanced mobility as an aspiration has significant near-term drawbacks. While mobile learners gain knowledge and host countries benefit from potentially retaining talent, restricting talent migration to achieve balance would stifle international cooperation, particularly in advanced research fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, where international programs are in high demand.

TNE has positioned itself as a lower-cost and protective alternative compared to study abroad, yet the digital divide and access to recognised credentials remain persistent challenges. For Afghan

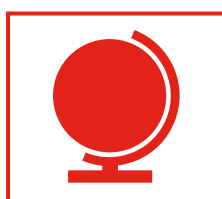
women in particular, accessing higher education presents unique obstacles. Restrictions on local educational access, socio-political constraints, and linguistic barriers mean that TNE offerings often fall short of providing recognised learning opportunities for skills development. Ensuring balanced mobility through TNE (e.g. open and distance learning) must also address systemic inequities and create learning pathways that are accessible for marginalised learners.

Recognition of Skills and Qualifications: The Current Landscape

The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education entered into force in 2023 and has been ratified by 37 countries, with more in the final stages. As the only UN treaty on higher education, the Global Convention represents a major commitment to facilitating academic staff and student mobility, expanding study opportunities for refugees and displaced persons, and promoting inter-institutional cooperation and knowledge circulation (UNESCO, 2022).

The Global Convention sets international standards for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition. In the context of the UNESCO conventions, recognition is a formal acknowledgment by a competent recognition authority for the purpose of providing an applicant with outcomes including the right to apply for admission to higher education, and the possibility to seek employment opportunities. The Global Convention lists TNE as one of many modes of cross-border delivery. Together with the Lisbon Convention in Europe and the Tokyo Convention in Asia-Pacific, these policy tools are part of the internationally agreed foundation to facilitate mobility and fair recognition practices within regions and globally.

Building on these trends and concerns for sustainable development, invited experts debated the value of TNE in terms of opportunities and risks to facilitate balanced mobility and access to knowledge.



The Debate

“Is TNE bringing more opportunities or risks in ensuring balanced mobility of people and knowledge?”

During the ASEF debate, experts identified a range of complex trends and issues that must be addressed to better understand the benefits and risks of TNE (Table 1). To advance sustainability and profitability, higher education systems are drawing on TNE to offer more inclusive and flexible pathways. Quality information on the range of TNE offerings is underdeveloped, including a lack of transparency about cost-benefits for learners and countries, assessment practices, and international recognition.

Table 1. Opportunities vs. Risks of Transnational Education

Opportunities	Risks
Democratising Access: TNE makes world-class education accessible to students in developing countries without requiring them to study abroad.	Exacerbating Inequalities: Socioeconomic and digital divides prevent marginalised groups from benefiting from TNE.
Economic Growth: International students and local TNE initiatives contribute to local economies, retaining funds that would have been spent abroad.	Unbalanced Mobility: TNE often favours the Global North, with most students moving to developed nations, reinforcing inequalities.
Enhances Accessibility with EdTech: Increased access through virtual classrooms, AI-driven learning tools, and personalised education pathways.	Exacerbates Digital Divide: Risk of over-reliance on unregulated AI tools compromising quality and equity.
Mitigating Brain Drain: By offering quality education locally, TNE encourages skilled professionals to stay and contribute to their home countries.	Resource Extraction: TNE providers may prioritise profits over sustainable reinvestment in host countries, draining local resources.
Knowledge Exchange: TNE fosters collaborative research, innovation, and capacity building through partnerships between institutions.	Gaps in Quality Assurance: Lack of robust regulatory frameworks can lead to inconsistencies in educational quality and recognition of qualifications.
Cultural Exchange: TNE promotes intercultural dialogue, preparing students with global competencies for competitive international markets.	Exploitation Risks: Weak oversight creates vulnerabilities for scams, exploitation, and substandard educational practices.
Building Global Networks: TNE strengthens international relationships and collaborations, fostering global resilience and understanding.	Profit-Driven Models: Some TNE programs prioritise financial gain over educational quality, undermining their purpose.
Achieving Sustainability Goals: TNE aligns with the SDGs, fostering inclusive and equitable education systems.	Lack of Data and Transparency: Opaque agreements between TNE providers and host countries leave students and communities uninformed about program validity and outcomes.

Opportunities

During the debate, advocates highlighted TNE’s potential to democratise access to education, foster economic growth, mitigate brain drain, and promote global collaboration, as emphasised by

Atty Salo and Prof Fernandez-Chung. Building on these themes experts explore examples (e.g. Malaysia and the Philippines) to understand the systemic and policy-related challenges, including digital and socioeconomic divides, ensuring equitable partnerships and ethical practices, and strengthening governance and quality assurance mechanisms.

Related highlights include:

- Democratising access to education
- Promoting global knowledge exchange and cultural understanding
- Enhancing potential to diversify local economies
- Preparing for and mitigating the impacts of brain drain

During the debate, experts illustrated how TNE provides accessible, high-quality education and facilitates cultural exchange and long-term capacity building, particularly in developing countries.

Risks

Conversely, the risks identified by experts Dr Lantero and Ms Wong raised concerns about TNE deepening inequalities, prioritising profits over quality, and lacking adequate governance. They also warned about the risks of resource extraction, unbalanced mobility, and exploitation, urging reforms to ensure equitable partnerships and robust quality assurance.

Related risks include:

- Exacerbating inequalities and unbalanced mobility
- Lack of robust quality assurance and transparency
- Resource extraction without reinvestment in local economies
- Reduced linguistic and cultural diversity of education systems

Those living under the most severe poverty conditions will also struggle to access necessary prerequisites such as stable internet connections, devices capable of supporting an online programme, quiet spaces, available time to learn, and potentially even consistent electricity.

Conclusion

Drawing on exchanges within the panel and with the audience, the debate surfaced timely issues about the future of TNE and need for improved information and stakeholder engagement. During live polling before and after the debate, a significant number of participants shifted their views, which shows a more informed and critical understanding of TNE and its implications (Table 2).

Table 2. Results from the Pre- and Post-Debate Polls

Pre-Debate Poll

- **Opportunities:** 84% of participants believed TNE brings more opportunities
- **Risks:** 16% of participants believed TNE poses greater risks

Post-Debate Poll

- **Opportunities:** 70% of participants continued to believe TNE brings more opportunities
- **Risks:** 30% of participants shifted their view, citing the risks discussed during the debate

Stakeholder engagement, including youth leaders through ASEF have a critically important voice to shape online learning, demand for quality, and use of credentials for lifelong learning and employment opportunities. These experiences can inform planning, including their potential to accelerate (or worsen) progress towards SDG4. The global regulatory context is particularly important given the worldwide reach of TNE. UNESCO’s Global Convention on Higher Education is a platform for dialogue. Going forward, TNE providers and regulators should ensure inclusive internationalisation practices and evidence-based policy dialogue.

In closing, the ASEF debate explored the balance between local and global benefits, addressing digital divides, and the importance of transparent policies. Prof Fernandez-Chung argued that three critical components shape TNE: enhancing access and equity, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring adherence to quality assurance and regulatory frameworks. Table 3 includes an overview of subthemes and recommendations, including harmonising TNE policies and practices.

Table 3. Key Issues and Recommended Actions

Key Issues	Opportunities	Risks	Recommendations
<i>Economic Impact</i>	Retains economic value in host countries (e.g., Philippines).	Risk of commodification; profit-driven models undermine quality.	Enforce transparent policies and invest in local capacity.
<i>Equity and Access</i>	Democratises access to world-class education (e.g., online learning).	Exacerbates digital divide; marginalised groups face barriers (e.g., socioeconomic status).	Prioritise investments in digital infrastructure and inclusion.
<i>Emerging Technologies</i>	Enhances accessibility through virtual classrooms, AI-driven learning tools, and personalised education pathways.	Exacerbates digital divide; risk of over-reliance on unregulated AI tools compromising quality and equity.	Develop robust guidelines for integrating emerging technologies, ensuring accessibility, equity, and quality assurance.

<i>Quality and Recognition</i>	Promotes global collaboration and capacity-building.	Lack of robust quality assurance; inconsistencies in recognition.	Harmonise international standards (e.g., drawing on UNESCO recognition conventions).
<i>Balanced Mobility</i>	Supports access to knowledge and reduces brain drain.	Favours Global North; unbalanced student mobility persists.	Develop equitable partnerships and reinvest in local education ecosystems.

Key takeaways:

- The debate successfully encouraged critical reflection, with approximately 14% of participants revising their stance to recognise the risks associated with TNE.
- The dialogue underscored the need for balanced, inclusive, and evidence-based approaches to ensure TNE contributes to global equity and development.

The debate concluded with a call for stakeholders to collaborate on policies that enhance the benefits of TNE while addressing the inherent risks of globalised education systems.



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