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# Rethinking TNE Partnerships: Paradoxical Tensions Between Home and Host Contexts

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## Abstract

The internationalization of higher education has gained increasing global significance, often driven by quantitative targets that overlook the inherent tensions between the local and the global. Among the various modalities of internationalization, transnational education (TNE) represents one of the most prevalent approaches, typically implemented through the establishment of branch campuses in host countries. As TNE practices are expanding across the world, their contribution to society has recently gained importance. In this essay, tensions between the home and host context in TNE agreements are explored using paradox theory. A paradox refers to a persistent opposition and contradiction between interdependent elements. Paradox theory has long been used in the study of interorganizational tensions, but its use in the field of higher education is not widespread. This paper first identifies tensions between the home and host contexts arising from TNE partnerships, such as global integration and local responsiveness, balancing the curricula, control versus localization, staff employment, and student recruitment. Furthermore, it exemplifies the various paradox management tools that can be deployed when faced with such tensions.

Keywords: transnational education, higher education, paradox theory, home-host context, international education

# Introduction

With the rise of the globalization discourse, higher education institutions have actively embraced transnational education (TNE) agreements, where a foreign institution delivers programs through various models (e.g., branch campuses, distance learning, joint and dual degree programs, fly-in faculty, or blended learning) to students in a host country (Shepherd & Cader, 2024; Universities UK International, 2018). With its emphasis on the mobility of programs rather than students, TNE has become a defining feature of global higher education, garnering substantial scale and financial significance (Wang, 2026). The main reasons why home institutions engage in TNE are: 1) diversifying financial revenues while minimizing infrastructural investments, 2) recruiting students from geographies where political, social, or financial access barriers exist, and 3) enhancing reputation, visibility, differentiation, and internationalization goals (Hallett & O'Hara, 2024; Shepherd & Cader, 2024; Wang, 2026). For the host nation/institution, the benefits include: 1) higher quality teaching and research, 2) professional development and capacity building of staff, 3) diverse student choice, 4) increased institutional capacity, 5) lower access costs and wider opportunities while alleviating 'brain drain' (Lai & Jung, 2025), 6) boosted local labor market and research and development infrastructure, and 7) enhanced partnership skills (Hallett & O'Hara, 2024; Hickey & Davies, 2024; Shepherd & Cader, 2024; Wang, 2026).

As such, TNE collaborations are a key mechanism towards addressing societal challenges (Shepherd & Cader, 2024; Tsiligkiris & Ilieva, 2022), yet their complex and dynamic nature frequently hinders their ability to deliver successful outputs (Hallett & O'Hara, 2024; Messenger & Bloisi, 2020; Vangen, 2016). One reason is that TNE collaborations are susceptible to *paradoxes* across the home and host contexts. The *poles* of such paradoxes—opposing forces that push and pull in different directions—such as competition versus collaboration, localization versus globalization, or cost versus brand quality—can endure over time, as one pole cannot be addressed without affecting the other. Paradoxical tensions cause conflict, which may undermine interorganizational relationships, even leading to dissolution (Fortes et al., 2023). These undesired developments stress the importance of rethinking how TNE is governed and sustained (Wang, 2026).

With its focus on how organizations can manage competing demands simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011), we argue that paradox theory offers a novel approach to analyze and address the tensions inherent in TNE collaborations. While a small number of studies on TNE have incorporated the concept of paradox (e.g., de Matos & Cunha, 2022; Lai & Jung, 2025; Pan, 2021), they are largely descriptive and have not explicitly leveraged the foundations of the theory. Addressing this gap, the following section offers a detailed analysis of home-host context tensions in TNE through the lens of paradox theory.

# Home vs. Host Context Tensions in TNE Through the Lens of Paradox Theory

The term 'paradox' represents a family of concepts which include tensions, contradictions, and dialectics (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023, pp. 1-2). Persistent by nature, paradoxes do not disappear on their own over time or in a different space, nor can they be willed away (Clegg et al., 2002). Furthermore, *latent* paradoxes may become *salient* when there are incompatible expectations of various actors (*plurality*), when limited resources have to be allocated to conflicting needs (*scarcity*), and when radical change creates friction between short- and long-term needs (*change*) (Smith & Lewis, 2011) (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Summary of Conditions That Trigger Paradoxes**

| Condition | What It Means | How It Triggers a Paradox | TNE Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Plurality | Diverse stakeholders with incompatible expectations | Collaboration must satisfy conflicting demands from different groups, pulling it in multiple directions | Host government wants local workforce development, home university wants brand protection and revenue, local students want globally recognized degrees at affordable cost |
| Scarcity | Limited resources to be allocated to conflicting needs | Finite funds, staff, or time to simultaneously satisfy all demands | Fewer-than-expected students enrolled; home institution lacks faculty willing to teach abroad |
| Change | Strategic, political, or regulatory conditions shift over time | Partnership that worked under one set of conditions may fail when conditions evolve | Franchise arrangement could grow into a research collaboration, with resulting shift in power dynamics which becomes unacceptable to the home institution |

Note. Authors' conceptual synthesis based on the literature reviewed in this study

In the TNE context, *plurality* denotes the diversity of views from myriad stakeholders that can pull the collaboration in different directions (Niesten & Stefan, 2019), yet nevertheless need to be minimally satisfied. To survive, a TNE collaboration needs the active support of a wide range of stakeholders with complex power dynamics and conflicting motivations (Lai & Jung, 2025), such as the home university, host institution, host government, host country students, the government and regulatory bodies in both countries, and the staff, students, alumni, and employers in both contexts (Healey, 2023; Hickey & Davies, 2024). For example, matching the quality of a Western higher education program with the requisite faculty prestige and student experience is often cost prohibitive for the host institution, leaving it reliant on local government support or a significant pool of fee-paying students (Kent, 2020). The conflicting demands of the local government, students, and the home and host institutions denote plurality, which can trigger the emergence of a paradox.

*Scarcity* indicates the situation where limited resources must be deployed across a number of such conflicting demands. Consider where both home and host universities are principally involved in TNE aiming revenue maximization. If fewer than expected local students are ready to pay Western university fees (Healey, 2023), the shortage of operational funds can create friction between the home and host institutions (Kent, 2020; Wilkins, 2021),

resulting in poor business outcomes (Hickey & Davies, 2024). Likewise, an undersupply of experienced faculty in the home institution willing to teach abroad can result in insufficiently trained instructors to be sent to the host institution, causing quality concerns (Lo & Pan, 2016).

*Change* can bring about tensions, as in situations where stakeholder motivations may change over time, and an initially successful TNE partnership may be unable to evolve as needed (Healey, 2023). TNE partnerships frequently evolve as strategic, political, or regulatory conditions change (Wang, 2026). A franchise arrangement, for example, may have the potential to grow into a joint degree or research collaboration over time (Wang, 2026) in accordance with the host institution's goals; however, the change in power dynamics may prove unacceptable to the home institution (Healey, 2023).

## Approaches from Paradox Theory to Resolving Tensions

Collaboration success is related to not being stuck in dilemmas (Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024). Sticking to one option with an *either/or* response treats paradox as a problem to be solved, pitting oppositional poles as discrete, independent choices (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023) and favoring one pole over the other (Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024). Focusing on only one strategic option and neglecting the other might lead to a vicious cycle, which exacerbates the tension (Gaim et al., 2022; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Repeatedly prioritizing and opting for one pole over the other makes the excluded alternative invisible over time (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023; Hahn et al., 2015; Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024). Furthermore, *either-or* responses bypass the creative interplay of opposites, and forfeit synergies that might arise from simultaneously considering opposing demands (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023).

Paradoxical thinking offers an alternative approach to move to virtuous, instead of vicious, cycles. It challenges the presumption of the *either/or* response as the sole option and suggests embracing and balancing the paradoxical tensions rather than simply trying to eliminate them (Hahn et al., 2015); namely, a *both-and* approach. A *both-and* approach does not mean that conflicting goals have to be satisfied simultaneously all the time, or that there has to be a perfect balance. Rather, it entails keeping both poles open by oscillating between them and seeking synergies (Smith & Lewis, 2011). An example would be to localize the curriculum in a TNE agreement for content unique to the host country context, building on cross-cultural learning that leverages expertise from both home and host contexts (Bolton & Nie, 2010).

More recently, the emphasis has been on expanding the range of possible responses to paradox, deploying both *both-and* and *either/or* responses as seen fit (Lewis, 2000; Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024; Seidemann, 2024) to work *with* or *through* paradox (Beech et al., 2004). In their seminal article, Poole & van de Ven (1989) identified four approaches to managing paradoxes: *acceptance/opposition*, *spatial separation*, *temporal separation*, and *synthesis*. An *acceptance/opposition* strategy would involve accepting the two poles of a paradox and creatively devising ways to live with these tensions. The paradox is kept 'open', such that the poles are addressed in parallel, in an atmosphere of constructive debate, experimentation, and improvisation without seeking a compromise (Lattu & Cai, 2020). Presenting benchmark examples to show that change is possible, and enhancing

understanding of differences that bear tensions can be given as cases of the *acceptance* strategy (Bohunovsky et al., 2023). Another example could be to shift one's focus towards a minimal satisfaction of the poles and attempting to make incremental progress, rather than withdrawing from or abandoning the mission (Bin Khairuddin, 2025) (see Table 2).

*Spatial separation* resolves paradoxes by keeping the two poles in different levels or units in the organization (e.g., keeping them at different locations) (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). This avoids direct collision of the poles without necessarily reconciling them. Thus, organizations can pursue both poles, while avoiding conflicts that arise when they are brought into proximity (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Shrivastava and colleagues (2022) reported a case where involvement of different internal and external agencies created potential conflicts during joint curriculum development. This tension was overcome by clearly delineating each body's role, allowing each entity to contribute separately to quality education (Shrivastava et al., 2022).

A *temporal separation* strategy, on the other hand, favors one pole at one time period, and the other pole during another (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). A British Council (2024a) report noted that home institutions prioritize recruitment and revenue generation, whereas host institutions tend to emphasize capacity building in teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and quality assurance. The same report suggests that TNE partnerships may first start with a basic franchise model, satisfying the home pole of the paradox. As the academic relationship takes hold, over time the focus can shift to the host pole, by integrating academics from both sides into research collaborations (British Council, 2024a).

The fourth strategy, *synthesis*, introduces a fresh perspective to transcend the paradox by questioning (and eventually eliminating) the constraints and assumptions that create it (Beech et al., 2004; Poole & van de Ven, 1989). A university may redefine its goals for a TNE agreement or change its assessment criteria in order to overcome limiting constraints and reframe organizational visions (Bohunovsky et al., 2023). In this way, competing demands can be pursued through new overarching or mediating logic (Hahn et al., 2015). Indeed, TNE by nature is an example of the *synthesis* approach. Students may be motivated towards international study to experience a different educational life, but may not have the means to travel overseas, or may be faced with cultural or religious obstacles to studying abroad (Healey, 2023). Allowing students to receive a novel education experience at an international branch campus locally, for example, represents a *synthesis* of opposing demands.

The choice of which management approach to adopt in response to a tension is in part a function of what triggered it. When faced with *plurality* (i.e., numerous and incompatible stakeholder expectations), approaches that do not explicitly and precipitately favor one side of the paradox to the other (such as *acceptance/opposition* or *spatial separation*) could be deemed appropriate (Bohunovsky et al., 2023; Shrivastava et al., 2022). Under resource *scarcity*, alternating priorities over time may be considered via *temporal separation* (British Council, 2024a); however, severe resource shortages may dictate an *either/or* solution (Hickey & Davies, 2024). *Change* resulting from strategic or regulatory conditions may pave the way for *synthesis* through a redefinition of the partnership mission (Wang, 2026), or *temporal separation* to adopt different solutions over time (British Council, 2024a).

**Table 2: Summary of Approaches to Managing Paradoxes**

| Approach | Description | TNE Example | Equity and Power Dynamics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Either/Or | Favoring one pole of the paradox to the other | Maintaining a close replication of the home curriculum, even when host institutions may prefer greater adaptation | Views tensions as unavoidable, which may discourage challenging the status quo, thus reinforcing home institution dominance and marginalizing local knowledge if one institutional logic consistently prevails. |
| Both-And | Oscillating between two conflicting poles, seeking balance and synergies | Balanced governance model between the host and home context representatives for joint curriculum design | Promotes reciprocal governance and shared knowledge production, and hence empowerment of the host context, if both partners have equitable decision-making power. |
| Acceptance/ Opposition | Accept the paradox of the poles and live with the tensions | Focus towards minimal satisfaction of the poles, attempting to make incremental progress, keep paradox "open" for improvisation | Allows host voices to be articulated and encourages ongoing dialogue around inequalities instead of masking them through premature consensus. |
| Spatial Separation | Situate conflicting poles in different structural units | Opening specific departments or courses designed around the host context solely for the host organization | Supports local responsiveness in culturally sensitive situations; may create dependency if host units have limited allocation of "strategic" (as opposed to "operational") decisions. |
| Temporal Separation | Situate conflicting poles in different time periods | Home and host context experiences occur during different time periods; e.g., through study tours, internships | Provides host context the pathway to build capacity and influence, yet timelines may be dictated by home context. |
| Synthesis | Find new perspective to transcend the opposition of poles | "Education hubs" where home universities cluster their TNE activities, both providing program variety and allowing for sharing infrastructural costs | Facilitates co-created models that integrate diverse epistemic traditions and challenge one-way knowledge transfer, given it is not utilized as a means to repackage home priorities. |

Note. Authors' conceptual synthesis based on the literature reviewed in this study

To avoid presenting paradox management as a politically neutral exercise, Table 2 also identifies the equity and power implications associated with each approach. This reveals that the paradox management strategies can carry different consequences regarding who governs and who gains from the partnership. Such outcomes are particularly consequential when Global North-Global South asymmetries shape TNE partnerships.

## Managing the Home vs. Host Context Paradoxes in TNE

We now demonstrate how these approaches could be applied to some salient TNE paradoxes. One classic paradox is balancing curricula and pedagogies with local cultures and values of the home university. This is challenging, as students and employers expect demonstrated equivalence of degrees, whereas the host context also requires modifications to serve the local job market and economic and social climate (Hickey & Davies, 2024; Lawton & Tsiligiris, 2018). This tension could be approached in various ways. Hickey and Davies (2024) report on some international branch campuses choosing to focus on more profitable, inexpensive-to-teach programs needing less infrastructure, even though these programs may not be the immediate need of the host country. Faced with the cost versus localization paradox, these institutions have adopted an *either/or* strategy, demanding a close replication of the home curriculum, even when the host institution may prefer greater adaptation (Wang, 2026). A *synthesis* approach to this 'cost vs. program variety' tension could be 'education hubs', where host countries encourage home universities to cluster their TNE activities (Healey, 2023). This allows local students the flexibility to choose from a larger variety of programs, while enabling resource sharing across multiple home institutions, thus reducing cost tradeoffs. A *both-and* approach would involve joint control over a shared curriculum designed around current and future employment needs, overseen by a balanced governance model between the host and home context representatives (Hickey & Davies, 2024). A *spatial separation* approach would open specific departments or courses designed around the host context to be offered solely in the host organization (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016).

Another related paradox is control versus localization. For branding or quality concerns, many home institutions prefer the international branch campus model, despite it being more expensive and riskier (Hickey & Davies, 2024; Kent, 2020). This concern for control can sometimes lead to limited or no adaptation of the curriculum to the host context, essentially following the home context norms and standards, thus constraining cross-cultural integrations (Healey, 2023). This *either/or* approach can also be seen in how some TNE campuses describe themselves: "looks like, feels like and is like a British institution" (Universities UK International, 2018, p. 46). Interestingly, these descriptions are supplemented with information that the British educational model on these campuses is blended with local traditions and standards (Universities UK International, 2018). This depiction might be an example of the *acceptance/opposition* strategy, where contradictions are noted and accepted, but handled as best as possible via facilities and activities that immerse students in the home culture, while acknowledging local sensitivities (Hickey & Davies, 2024). Another approach is *temporal separation*, where home and host context experiences occur during different time periods (e.g., study tours, internships, academic cooperation, spending time on home/host campus) for various parts of the program (Cranwell

et al., 2021; Pan, 2021). *Temporal separation* could also involve adopting the home university's practices and routines early in the TNE arrangement, and allowing more decentralization in later stages, once the arrangement has proven its legitimacy.

By encouraging TNE partnerships, host governments hope that know-how spillovers will allow local institutions to copy home university innovations, bringing in sector-wide impact (Healey, 2023). The paradox is that while the arrangement cannot survive without know-how sharing, countries such as China and India have leveraged their learning to increase local capacities, potentially making TNE agreements redundant. Once the host context becomes more confident, it may become less open to home institution-imposed standards and routines (Healey, 2023; Lawton & Tsiligiris, 2018; Messenger & Bloisi, 2020). Altbach (2010) reports on a Chinese partner requesting a UK branch campus to be research-oriented as well; a substantial challenge for the UK side. This paradox could be tackled via a *synthesis* approach, shifting from a North-to South export model to a reciprocal, equitable exchange supporting host development (British Council, 2024b). *Temporal separation* could begin with a basic partnership to secure revenue and establish academic foundations before moving to research collaborations over time (British Council, 2024a). A *both-and* approach could be a joint governance entity, with shared decision rights across home and host leaders, balancing teaching and research collaborations (Wang, 2026).

Another common paradox is about home versus host staff employment. Using home staff provides the most comparable academic experience for local students but amplifies costs and hinders staff retention (Hickey & Davies, 2024). Hiring local staff can obstruct strict harmonization of the home and host context outputs. A *both-and* approach would keep both local and home staff at an optimal level satisfactory for students and faculty desiring an international experience, while allowing local staff development (Hickey & Davies, 2024). A *synthesis* approach could deploy technology (such as flipped classrooms, online education, etc.) to reduce costs while still providing access to international staff. *Spatial separation* would divide tasks between the home and host contexts so that costly duplication is avoided. Time-sensitive or culture-related issues could be handled by the local administrative staff; institutional issues such as quality assurance and academic standards could be allocated to the home institution (Hickey & Davies, 2024).

Generating sufficient student numbers to make a profit is another paradox in TNE. Some arrangements adopt an *acceptance/opposition* approach, as with elite universities acknowledging this paradox, yet limiting supply to maintain their status, whilst less prestigious universities take a *both-and* approach by focusing on the mass market on the one hand (Hickey & Davies, 2023; Kent, 2020) and providing scholarships (Pan, 2021) or large tuition discounts (Healey, 2023; Kent, 2020) to top students.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This essay is meant as a provocative suggestion to explore paradoxical thinking as a way to tackle the TNE journey (de Matos & Cunha, 2022). Our reflection highlights that TNE paradoxes can be questioned by holding a mirror to the situation rather than taking the default option or the "lesser evil" (Pinelli et al., 2025). Repeated selection of one pole eventually drives the other into oblivion (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023), while embracing the contradictions can generate a sense of urgency and creative conflict, leading to innovation

(Pinelli et al., 2025). The awareness that critical reflection opens opportunities to manage tensions also engenders a need for higher education leaders to develop a paradox mindset (Guyottot & Thelisson, 2024; Kemp & Scoffham, 2022; Lai & Jung, 2025).

Given the diversity of TNE agreements and what is defined as 'success', many other paradoxical conditions warrant further research. A straightforward contingency approach will not suffice; case-by-case analysis of the nuances of each context is needed to generate new theory and practices. For instance, asymmetrical power relations hinder effective responses to paradox (Amaral et al., 2026). The home context is generally regarded as the dominant party (Babu, 2025; Messenger & Bloisi, 2020; Stein, 2017), yet there are arguments that knowledge flow is no longer unidirectional and that power increasingly lies with host governments and students (Hickey & Davies, 2024). Critical perspectives (Buckner & Stein, 2020; Critical Internationalization Studies Network, n.d.; Stein, 2017) highlight uneven power relations shaping global higher education collaborations, arguing that internationalization often reproduces geopolitical hierarchies, marking the field by structural tensions rather than neutral cooperation. However, while critical and decolonial approaches focus on the historical and structural origins of these tensions, paradox theory offers a complementary lens by examining how organizational actors experience and navigate such tensions in practice. Integrating paradox theory with critical internationalization scholarship can thus enable a more nuanced understanding of both the structural sources of tensions (the "why") and the organizational strategies through which they are negotiated in TNE collaborations (the "how").

The paradox lens has engendered a paradigmatic shift in organization and management research (Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024), yet its use in research on interorganizational collaboration is relatively recent (Fortes et al., 2023; Vangen, 2016). Existing approaches in the literature have dealt with TNE tensions through the adaptation, alignment, or cultural difference frameworks, aiming at resolving or diminishing tensions. Hence, we suggest the application of a paradox lens to TNE is a novel and useful, yet largely neglected approach to navigating such tensions. This application can extend the theory's conceptual applications and broaden the understanding of TNE collaborations and other hybrid agreements involving competing institutional logics in international higher education (Lai & Jung, 2025). The way universities and governments navigate such paradoxes will significantly shape their pathways to development (Pan, 2021).

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