

Review of UK Transnational Education
Greece and Cyprus 2015



Case study:
The experience of UK universities
in Greece and Cyprus

Introduction

During 2015, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook a review of UK TNE in Greece and Cyprus. The purposes of the review were to safeguard the reputation of UK higher education in these countries and elsewhere by demonstrating a robust, independent approach to its quality assurance, and, by doing so, to support the further growth of high quality UK provision internationally.

As part of the TNE review of Greece and Cyprus, the QAA review team also developed a set of case studies. The case study in this document provides a short overview of the recent experience of UK universities with an active presence in Greece and Cyprus. It draws on information obtained from visits to each provider, held in the summer and autumn of 2015. In total, nine universities were visited, of which five had a partner in Greece two had a partner in Cyprus and two had a presence in both Greece and Cyprus. The UK providers visited were: University of Central Lancashire; University of Greenwich; Heriot-Watt University; University of Hertfordshire; University of London International Programmes; London Metropolitan University; Middlesex University; The Open University; University of the West of England.

Also available on our website are two other case studies focusing on qualifications involving a UK degree-awarding body in conjunction with another degree-awarding body: the University of Central Lancashire operating in Cyprus and the Open University operating in Greece.

Further case studies, as well as an overview report and individual review reports for TNE Greece and Cyprus 2015 are available on the QAA website, at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/review-of-overseas-provision

Case study: The experience of UK universities in Greece and Cyprus

Greece

Strategy and Governance

A number of the providers in this case study align international outreach with their overall mission. This may involve 'life changing access to high quality university education that meets the diverse needs of a global community' disseminating knowledge 'on an international scale' to meet 'international demand for UK provision', and developing 'the skills required of global citizens'.

The providers featured in this case study all take a strategic approach to transnational education (TNE), generally locating it within their broader international strategies. International aspirations are set out in strategic planning documents that clarify institutional ambitions and, in some cases, top-level targets for a range of international activities, including student recruitment and the proportion of international students within the provider's student body as a whole. Strategic planning is generally global, with Faculties, Schools and Departments working with international or partnership offices to operationalise global goals in specific countries and regions.

To facilitate governance, a common strategic goal for several UK providers is to limit the number of partners with which they work. Institutions gave several reasons for this, including clearer financial benefits, economies of scale and general ease of management. One University commented that the creation of deeper links with fewer overseas partners had been facilitated by a reduction in the number of its internal organisational units, from nine Schools to four Faculties, and by developing the expectation that Faculties would join existing partnerships rather than creating new ones.

While all providers stated that they conducted appropriate due diligence checks on prospective partners, few such checks could have anticipated the scale or duration of the current financial crisis affecting Greece, and there may be lessons to be learned by the sector here as it explores new markets. Providers in Greece have enjoyed varying fortunes. While three UK providers report continuing financial viability, with student admissions holding steady or even increasing slightly, three providers have seen partner financial difficulties and the accumulation of partner debt lead to the termination of previously successful long-term partnerships.

Higher education in Greece

Greece appears to be a mature market for UK providers, a number of which have longstanding partnerships with Greek private sector colleges and a tradition of recruiting Greek students to their UK campuses that goes back even further. In most cases, providers ascribe their decision to establish an in-country presence in Greece to a shortfall in the country in higher education supply at a time of increasing demand for degree-level qualification. At the time of the QAA visit, Greece had 24 state universities, 14 Technological University Institutes (TEIs) and a small number of specialist academies in areas such as the uniformed public services.

Providers found that establishing a presence in Greece was relatively unproblematic. There is no local regulator other than the Greek Ministry of Education. The Ministry requires UK providers to show evidence of their accreditation as degree-awarding bodies in the UK and to submit a register of the courses they have approved for delivery by Greek partners. Private sector partners require Ministry accreditation in the form of a license to operate and are required to provide the Ministry with an annual monitoring report.

UK providers with a presence in Greece are also helped by the fact that Greek students are appreciative of the UK's higher education culture and its general approach to learning and teaching. Most providers describe Greek students as a little older than their UK counterparts, as being engaged, articulate and confident, and as having high expectations. Many students live with, and are supported by, their family, and providers are clearly aware of the importance of family life in Greek society.

There is no government support in the form of loans or grants for students registering with private sector partner colleges and the colleges themselves receive no state funding. The government does not use funding mechanisms to intervene in the higher education market with the intention to correlate graduate supply with predicted national needs. TNE has tended to respond to market forces by offering degree programmes based on emerging demand, in areas such as business, commerce and trade, as well as in niche areas such as speech therapy, energy systems and technology .

Historically, because state university degree programmes in Greece typically require four years of full-time study, standard UK three-year programmes have been regarded in Greece as achieving the equivalent of Level 5 rather than Level 6 of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), providing an obstacle to employment in public sector occupations. Moves by Greece towards alignment with the Bologna Process have led to government recognition of UK degrees for students who studied in the UK, through the Hellenic National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), which is DOATAP. Graduates with UK qualifications from TNE programmes studied in Greece are required to apply for recognition of their professional qualifications. This process is conducted by the body for the Recognition of Professional Qualifications (SAEP) which for the past two years is subject to delays.

Adaptation of the UK higher education model

UK providers have used three main TNE accreditation and delivery models: franchised delivery, validated delivery, and delivery by distance learning. At least one provider has switched from franchised to validated delivery.

UK providers clearly place considerable trust in their Greek partners, and see them as ideally positioned to advise on new degree programmes for which a market is emerging. In some cases this has led to tension between franchised and validated accreditation models, with UK providers preferring the former because of the control it affords them, and in-country partners preferring the latter because it enables them to respond quickly to market-specific opportunities that may have no exact counterpart in the UK. In practice, UK providers operating a franchised model have worked flexibly with their partners to agree local content that complies with existing learning outcomes, or to add new modes of delivery to existing programmes, modifying the programme specification accordingly.

Providers take different approaches to the recruitment of students to their partner colleges in Greece. While one provider currently delegates recruitment entirely to its partner college, the majority make admissions decisions themselves and require Greek applicants to use their standard online application process.

There is also significant variation in providers' approaches to the language of instruction used by their Greek partners. While some require all teaching and assessment to be conducted in English, two providers permit programmes to be delivered in both English and Greek. In one partner college the language of instruction varies according to the pathway

that students choose. Programmes specialising in shipping, hospitality and travel are taught exclusively in English, while other pathways are taught in Greek at Levels 4 and 5 and, optionally, in English at Level 6. Another provider allows all teaching and assessment at its partner college to take place in Greek. In such cases providers must take steps to ensure that the integrity of assessment practices is assured and that student achievement across the Greek and English-speaking cohorts is comparable. The appointment of experienced, bilingual external examiners (English-Greek) plays a crucial role in oversight of standards.

Academic standards

UK providers have adopted similar approaches to managing links with Greek partners. The most common structure uses link tutors or academic liaison tutors, who oversee day-to-day interactions with partner colleges in Greece. These include providing information and advice when needed, visiting partners once or twice a year, attending assessment boards and course committees, meeting staff and students, and contributing to teaching. Programme leaders are also in regular contact with academic directors in Greece.

Some providers whose international strategic plans aim to develop a limited number of high value partnerships are operationalising this through relationship management roles aimed at developing and maintaining cross-faculty links with the same partner.

Providers generally feel that regular contact with Greek partners over many years is key to assuring oversight of the quality of the learning experience available to students. In some programmes this also promotes high levels of integration, with staff teaching the same discipline in the UK and in Greece, providing opportunities for students in the two countries to work on joint projects.

UK providers also take an active role in the appointment of academic staff with appropriate qualifications and teaching experience. Their involvement ranges from joint shortlisting to sight of applicant CVs and periodic updates in the annual monitoring round. Some partners also provide professional development opportunities in learning and teaching and in quality assurance. Providers generally have little difficulty in finding well qualified lecturing staff, many of whom possess a UK degree and who are fully conversant with the culture of UK higher education.

Partners are routinely involved in annual monitoring, periodic review and external examining processes. Partners write annual monitoring reports using data supplied either by the UK provider or by the partner itself. Providers integrate partner annual monitoring reports into their standard review process, and the resulting action plans are implemented via the partner's academic director and monitored by the link tutor. Providers seem to be making an effort to make both annual monitoring reports and external examiner reports available to staff and students in Greece, but there is some uncertainty as to how well or consistently this works in practice.

Cyprus

Higher education in Cyprus

The recognition of higher education qualifications is overseen by the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (KYSATS), established in 1996, whereas the activity of the TNE providers in Cyprus is supervised by the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (the Agency), established in November 2015.

Regulation of providers

The new regulations indicate that higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cyprus may award qualifications of HEIs from other EU member states through arrangements typically described as franchise or validation, subject to the following conditions. In summary, the HEI, and its programmes being delivered in Cyprus, must be from, and appropriately recognised by, an EU member state. The qualification should be the same as the one awarded in the home country, providing students with the same opportunities as those on the home country in relation to, for example, professional rights. These conditions are controlled by the Agency which evaluates the TNE offered by local Cypriot institutions.

Recognition of qualifications

KYSATS is an independent national council for the recognition of higher education qualifications obtained in Cyprus or overseas. It is a member of the ENIC/NARIC network (comprising NARIC together with the European Network of Information Centres) and was established partly in response to growing professional mobility between EU member states in the late 1980s. When evaluating overseas qualifications it uses as its reference point corresponding programmes in the same discipline awarded by the public universities and State Higher Education Institutions in Cyprus itself. Where there is no corresponding programme in Cyprus, it uses comparators in other countries, particularly those that are EU member states.

KYSATS awards two types of recognition of qualifications. Firstly, Equivalence, where qualifications delivered through an approved accreditation arrangement align with the formal requirements of the University of Cyprus or other State Higher Education Institutions. Equivalence may also be awarded, under certain conditions, for programmes delivered by distance learning. Secondly, Equivalence and Correspondence where, in addition to the prerequisites for Equivalence, there is a curricular overlap of at least two thirds between the candidate qualification and corresponding qualifications in Cyprus.

Adaptation of the UK higher education model

One provider describes how, having taking over an existing partnership between a Cypriot college and another UK higher education institution, it needed to align its provision progressively with MOEC's regulatory requirements. A key goal was to move from the earlier bespoke franchise, which had allowed some variation in award titles and content between the UK provider and its Cypriot partner, to a full franchise accreditation model, in which programmes and award titles were identical. The provider identified the latter as the single most important factor in obtaining KYSATS recognition.

Academic standards

The adoption of the standard franchise model has delivered three main benefits for the UK provider. Firstly, it clarifies and improves oversight of academic quality and standards of delivery at the Cyprus partner. Secondly, it leads to the termination of courses developed by the partner but in which the UK provider has little expertise or interest in sustaining. Finally, it enables the partner in Cyprus to play a full role in sustainable course development and cultural adaptation within the boundaries provided by a single set of programme specifications. All programmes of study are delivered and assessed in English.

These developments are facilitated by improving communications between institutional leads, programme and link tutors in the UK and programme and module leaders in Cyprus, and by increasing the number of student exchanges and bidirectional visits of academic and professional services staff. Approximately 20 members of staff from the UK provider visited the partner college in 2014–15. This level of interaction enabled consideration to be given to the improvement of the learning environment, investment in extra-curricular activities, and closer alignment of assessment strategies. A standard approach to external examining and annual monitoring has been adopted, with annual monitoring reports being authored by the partner and reported to partnership boards that meet three or four times per annum.

Conclusions

TNE forms part of the international and partnership strategies of the UK providers contributing to this case study. TNE is operationalised by Schools, Faculties and Departments with the support of central services such as international and partnership offices. The latter appear to have an increasingly important role where providers are working to reduce risk and complexity in their overseas operations by reducing the number of overseas partners and by maximising cross-faculty engagement with those that remain. Partnerships with in-country colleges were often established to meet a shortfall in higher education capacity in Greece and Cyprus and are, in many cases, longstanding relationships that have demonstrated considerable resilience during the current economic crisis.

There is some local regulation of TNE in Greece, while TNE in Cyprus is comprehensively regulated by the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture. UK providers have used both franchised and validated accreditation models, reflecting interplay, and occasionally tensions, between institutional oversight, local regulation and partner ambition and autonomy. By and large, UK providers have encountered relatively few difficulties in establishing and maintaining a presence in Greece and Cyprus. Several providers report that partner institutions and students in both countries are comfortable with the UK's higher education ethos, and engage willingly with quality assurance and enhancement processes. The latter work most effectively when providers and partners have a clear understanding of each other's responsibilities and have developed high levels of mutual understanding through frequent interactions and visits. Students in Greece and Cyprus are generally slightly older than their UK counterparts and have high levels of motivation and expectation. Although the prolonged recession has regrettably claimed some casualties, providers report stable or growing recruitment in their remaining partnerships, and show a continuing commitment to their TNE activities in Cyprus and Greece.

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