

## Quality challenges in transnational higher education under profit-driven motives: The Vietnamese experience

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Among educational practices in the era of globalisation, developing countries are emerging with diverse representations of transnational collaboration. This paper investigates the operation and regulation of joint programs in Vietnam as a case study of higher education under the impact of profit-driven motives. It first reviews the trends, international agendas, and model frameworks for the provision of transnational services in education. Drawing on professional experience as quality assurance practitioners, higher education policymakers, and transnational education teacher participants, the authors critically reflect on recent development of joint programs in Vietnam pertaining to major quality assurance, decision making, partner selection, and curriculum issues. Corresponding solutions are then recommended with reference to aforementioned frameworks of effective practices. This paper offers both theoretical and practical views of transnational joint programs to inform key stakeholders in the enhancement of international collaboration in higher education. It also hopes to contribute to a more pluralistic perspective of this international practice to the current research field.

### Introduction

Together with the economic spirit of the globalisation era, recognition of the role of education as a revenue generator and a significant service sector is increasing. Increases in student mobility to education-exporting countries, program mobility to local partner institutions, and institutional mobility in overseas campuses are important traits of associated commercialisation processes. Recently, this global flow has been facilitated by inter-governmental initiatives such as the World Trade Organization's *General Agreement on Trade in Services* (GATS) which boost open global markets in education (Chen, 2015; Varghese, 2011; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015).

In most cases, transnational higher education (TNHE) partnerships are characterised by distinct identification of providers and buyers, with buying countries being developing nations and service providers based in developed ones. These service providers include both top universities and lower ranked institutions who are interested in the biggest share of the market, which is the population ready to pursue foreign qualifications at any cost (Alam, Alam, Chowdhury & Steiner, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chen, 2015; Youssef, 2014; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). What may lead the rapid growth of TNHE into a controversial status is compromises in quality of provision and social equality due to commercialisation and privatisation (Altbach, 2000; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Phan, 2017; Shin & Harman, 2009; Youssef, 2014; Ziguras, 2003) to an extreme, such that education could now be seen

... purely as a commercial, tradable commodity. There is no recognition of its role as a means of nation-building; a local storehouse of knowledge; the vehicle to transmit culture and language; the prerequisite for a vibrant democracy and a contest of ideas; a source of innovation and change; or a desirable activity per se (Ziguras, 2003, p. 30)

Quality and regulation issues of TNHE services are discussed in the growing body of literature in 'buying' countries, including China (Huang, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; Yang, 2008), Korea and Japan (Huang 2010), Singapore and Hong Kong (Daquila, 2013; Garret & Verbik, 2003; Li, 2010; Ziguras & Gribble, 2015) and Malaysia (Lim, 2011; Welch, 2011; Ziguras, 2003). Despite being addressed in the current literature, elaboration of the operation of TNHE programs in Vietnam has been limited compared to the unprecedented growth of its joint programs and the complexity of related issues.

This paper seeks to discuss the operation and regulation of joint programs in Vietnam as a case study of higher education under the impact of profit-driven motives. It first reviews the trends, international agendas, and model frameworks for the provision of transnational services in education. Drawing on professional experience as quality assurance practitioners, higher education policymakers, and transnational education teacher participants, the authors critically reflect on the recent development of joint programs in Vietnam pertaining to major quality assurance, decision making, partner selection, and curriculum issues. Corresponding solutions are then recommended with reference to aforementioned frameworks of effective practices.

## **Field of knowledge**

### **TNHE: Diverse in trends and modes**

Cross-border flows in higher education have evolved through different forms and stages in response to varied consumption needs. Initially, demands for educational services exceed domestic institutions' capacity, leading more students to choose to study abroad (Alam et al., 2013; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007) as evidenced by the cases of Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1980s or Vietnam and China in the early 2000s. Within the past three decades, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) noted a fivefold rise in the student volume outside their home countries (cited in Youssef, 2014, p. 104). In the next stage, domestic providers partner with foreign institutions to offer affordable options and to limit outward student mobility. International students enrolled in 1,000 Australian offshored programs accounted for 34% of the year 2004 total intake into Australian institutions (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalié-Trumbié, 2009), illustrating this trend. For local markets that have achieved a certain degree of maturity, local providers will enhance their own capacity to develop alongside with foreign products and to attract neighboring regions (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). Approximately one-fourth of Hong Kong students and a third of Singaporean students at tertiary level are enrolled in foreign institutions' campuses based in Hong Kong and Singapore (Garret & Verbik, 2003). Many Australian university campuses in Malaysia have been established also for this purpose.

The variations in the development of TNHE activities can be characterised into three types of mobility depending on the manner of consumption (Knight, 2014; Youssef,

2014) (Table 1) or into four modes of supplies according to GATS' guidelines for international trade in services (Knight, 2006; Varghese, 2011; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015) (Table 2).

Table 1: Types of cross-border mobility (Knight, 2014; Youssef, 2014)

Types	Examples
People mobility	Students studying overseas
Program mobility	Franchise, double degree, virtual distance, joint programs
Provider mobility	Branch campuses, independent institutions, study centres

Table 2: Modes of supply for educational services in cross-border trade (Varghese, 2011)

Supply modes	Types of arrangement	Examples
Cross-border education	services crossing the border while consumers still inland	distance education, e-learning, virtual universities
Consumption abroad	physical movement of customers across border	a fulltime, exchange or joint degree program
Commercial presence	a commercial presence of providers in a foreign country to render service	local branch, satellite campuses, twinning partnerships, franchising arrangements
Presence of natural persons	temporary travel to provide the service	professors, teachers, researchers working abroad

This paper chooses to exclude franchising, distance learning, and online learning as these require further investigation into governing issues. Instead, it will only focus on joint programs covering partially or fully offshored curriculum, teachers, and administrative staff between one local and another foreign institution (Knight, 2006; Huang, 2009) both awarding credits. Joint programs have been estimated as having one of the largest shares of the TNHE market and argued to receive the greatest interest for future growth (Varghese, 2009). They are also the primary TNHE activities in the country for this case study.

### **Brand building or revenue generating?**

If TNHE is seen as a market where universities function as producers of a special commodity and as competitors for pricing and brand exposure, then it has benefited stakeholders by different means. Offshoring education brings revenues and expansion opportunities to service providers, especially when there are ongoing funding reductions from the government. The global market for educational exporting is estimated by WTO to be worth \$27 billion per year, and specifically exporting activities to Asia (excluding China) affects about half a million students (Nix, 2009). Enriching experiences in teaching and research in an international context will also contribute to 'brand-building' for both academics and institutions while, apparently, students benefit from international qualifications with a more affordable option (Alam et al., 2013; Youssef, 2014; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). For developing countries, in most cases importing bodies, TNHE partnership provides exposure to world-class education systems and an enhancement

opportunity for human resources and economic development (Burgess & Berquist, 2012; British Council, 2013; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Welch, 2011). Therefore, efforts have been made regarding laws and policies to facilitate wider TNHE access and participation (Alam et al., 2013; Chen, 2015; Varghese, 2011), in removing limits on joint venture ownership, visa conditions, and degree granting in both receiving and sending locations, as in Egypt, India, Thailand, Taiwan, Turkey or Greece.

Regardless of real instances of partnership to foster international research and teaching, TNHE is often criticised for unmet goals when money is almost always behind every motive and it is noted that

The multinational and distance [education] movement does not really contribute to the internationalization of higher education world-wide. Knowledge products are being sold across borders, but there is little mutual exchange of ideas, long-term scientific collaboration, exchange of students or faculty, and the like. (Altbach, 2000, p. 5).

Fraudulent practices with ‘diploma mills’, rogue providers, fake accreditation agencies, fly-by-night academics or grade inflation, operating mostly in unregulated settings are ever present risks when the market is no longer profitable (Altbach, 2000; Varghese, 2009; Yang, 2008; Youssef, 2014; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015).

### **Frameworks and guidelines**

To guide entities involved in TNHE activities, UNESCO and OECD have produced a number of documents including *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education* (OECD & UNESCO, 2005), and *Toolkit: Regulating the quality of cross-border education* (UNESCO, 2007), which condition the comparable quality norm between providers and partners based on evaluation systems, guidance to partners, and governmental accreditation requirements. Heavily exporting countries including the US, the UK, and Australia, maintain their own national codes for collaborative ventures, but these are self-regulating in a way that guides rather than governs the practices of educational program exporters. The Quality Assurance Agency’s *UK quality code for higher education* (2014), the Council of Europe’s *Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education* (2001), and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s *Facilitating good regulatory practices for trade and investment in higher education services in the APEC region* (2013) are among such various attempts (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015).

Typically, as a major supplier of TNHE, Australia has generated a model of efficient practices in cross-border educational activities, drawing upon the experience of many Australian institutions, including Curtin University, La Trobe University, Monash University, Murdoch University, and RMIT University, who claim to have achieved successes with more international reputation, larger offshore student bodies, and higher quality provision of programs (Davis, Olsen, & Bohm, 2000; DEEWR, 2008; TEQSA, 2017) (Table 3).

Table 3: Model TNHE practices in Australia  
(Davis, Olsen, & Bohm, 2000; DEEWR, 2008; TEQSA, 2017)

Practices	Requirements	Actions to be taken
Decision-making	availability of resources; inter-department collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• departments grouped into multi-course schools</li> <li>• proposals for offshored programs strictly following university's development framework and interests</li> <li>• central council set up to decide detailed business plan, academic priority strategies, government priorities, requirements from the host country</li> <li>• approval from offshore quality assurance committees</li> </ul>
Quality assurance	equal quality between offshore and home branch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• equivalent entry requirements, course contents</li> <li>• quality assurance scheme set up to regularly assess and evaluate outcomes</li> </ul>
Partner selection	choosing and maintaining a quality partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• detailed list and prior assessment of partner selection principles (i.e. promoting the university's image, financial benefits, feasibility, financial stability)</li> </ul>
Learning and teaching strategies	shifting to a "borderless" university model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• curriculum adaptation on approved content, materials and structures</li> <li>• offshore graduates strictly meeting agreed criteria regardless of means and locations of delivery</li> </ul>

As Vietnam's experience of TNHE has been influenced significantly by Australia, which is by far its largest foreign higher education provider (Dang, 2011), the upcoming discussion of the issues and solutions pertinent to joint programs in Vietnam will refer to these models of practice. It should be noted that good practices recommended by Australia are among various models available which could not be covered within the scope of the current paper. Successful examples from other developing countries will be later employed to provide a more thorough analysis.

## Joint programs in Vietnam and issues of commodified knowledge

### Overview

Since the *Doi Moi* (Reform) in the mid-1980s, Vietnam's open-door policy and laissez-faire oriented economy have paved the way for the blossoming of internationalisation and privatisation in the higher education sector, especially evidenced in mushrooming joint programs nationwide. Partnership programs in Vietnam are generally characterised with an import-oriented approach in adopting 'whole-package' Western programs and standards, since such tasks as managing curriculum, monitoring academic performance, and awarding degrees are undertaken by foreign providers while local institutions are in charge of infrastructure, admission, and administration tasks (Le, 2016; Phan, 2017). Vietnam's TNHE practices have become increasingly diverse in forms, providers, disciplines, curriculums, and fee types. Institutions are offering different delivery modes; with students either enrolled full time in Vietnam or undertaking part of their courses overseas; classes being wholly or partially instructed by foreign lecturers; and with different credit point systems leading to fee types ranging from 1,000 to 7,000 USD a year. The list of joint programs binding a Vietnamese university with an overseas partner is no

longer confined to several American or Australian providers. Rather, it has been extended to a number of hundreds (Le, 2016) with 436 partnership programs licensed in 2016 and is now expanding to include many neighbouring Asian or European institutions (Chen, 2015).

Like most receiving countries, TNHE in Vietnam is seen as a pivotal contributor to the local socio-economic advancement and an essential component of the education system which is regulated by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and local authorities. Offering joint programs serves to prevent brain drain and currency outflow while contributing to a quality human resource for the nation and providing shortcuts to international standards for institutions, academics, and learners (Dang, 2011; Le, 2016; Nguyen, Vickers, Ly & Tran, 2016). Presently, as a WTO and GATS member, Vietnam has allowed for all the four GATS international service modes in education and built a basic regulatory framework for both non-profit and for-profit education services. Therefore, despite not being as liberalised as the United States, Hong Kong or New Zealand, compared with other countries that have not officially joined GATS, Vietnam has really set a foot in the TNHE free trade arena.

However, when the expansion in sizes and numbers of joint programs is largely income-driven, certain quality aspects have been compromised, raising concerns among related parties. The next reflection on Vietnam's regulation of joint programs against guidelines and models of practices for TNHE provision reveals a number of uncertainties regarding their effectiveness.

### **Joint programs and the issue of decision making**

There exists a dilemma in the decision-making process in Vietnam's TNHE practices. Due to power centralisation in certain governmental bodies, the rights over making decisions stay primarily with top organisations, depriving institutions of incentives to innovate (Table 4). Although in several reform initiatives since the 1990s, MOET articulates to grant more autonomy to universities, many activities from developmental initiatives, budgeting, staff recruitment, the opening of courses, curriculums to enrolment quotas are still dependent on MOET's allocation mechanism. According to Le (2011), Vietnamese institutions are hierarchically grouped into four levels, characterising a very small number enjoying autonomy in decision making and leaving the rest with multi-layered levels of control. Partnership with foreign providers is accordingly considered legal only on the condition of obtaining approval from either MOET or three regional universities. Even with MOET's policy to newly establish institutions with international partners, the "Vietnamese educational authorities retain a strongly 'state-centric' view of higher education in which governments, not institutions, are the primary counterparts" (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 5). In a context where most TNHE collaborations are with highly decentralised education systems (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008), operating joint programs in Vietnam can be challenging since governmental approval and accreditation is required at most stages of implementation.

Table 4: Four levels of autonomy at Vietnamese institutions (Do, 2014; Le, 2011)

Institution types	Decision-making power	Level
2 national universities	Prime Minister	Highest
3 regional and 14 key universities	MOET	High
More than 100 other universities	MOET + line ministry	
Provincial universities	MOET + line ministry + provincial authority	

Despite claiming high levels of authority, decision-making bodies have not always properly assumed their responsibilities. MOET's involvement is deemed slow and inefficient, evidenced in the long waiting list for new programs and foreign providers to be approved and accredited for operation. Apart from a limited number of legal documents to regulate TNHE collaborations such as Decree No. 73/2012, detailed guidelines are still absent, creating loopholes for only-for-profit TNHE forms to expand, while MOET can only supervise programs that are registered and reported. In fact, the number of 299 programs recognised by MOET (2017) is just among a sea of other unregistered programs running unknown to the government. It should also be noted that MOET has only exercised regulations over the opening of new courses, while apparently a thorough evaluation procedure throughout the whole process of partnerships, which is of equal importance, is being neglected.

### **Loopholes in quality assurance**

For TNHE where there are fewer restrictions and barriers to academic mobility, the focus of governing bodies has been directed more towards the regulation of transnational providers, so that quality assurance is maintained transparently across the whole system (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). However, this should be the most problematic aspect in the way Vietnam monitors and regulates its joint programs. The quality of many imported courses has been reported to be lower than those offered in the home branch (Phan, 2017; Thanh, 2015; The Government Inspectorate of Vietnam, 2013) and with excessively lenient entry requirements (Thanh, 2010a), due to attempts to minimise costs or insufficient infrastructure. Even when host institutions are aiming at serious and long-term collaboration with overseas providers, the ability to evaluate the quality of either the partner or the program that requires an intensive experience of TNHE is low among local importers.

For institutions that are already licensed to operate joint programs, there is a tendency to exceed the number of courses and students allowed for intake. While enrolment quotas are assigned to institutions by MOET based on certain criteria, admissions in practice may exceed quotas by hundreds of students. In several cases, enrolments in joint programs account for 20% of domestic universities' total intake in an academic year (Thanh, 2010a). Some simple calculations that follow can account for Vietnamese institutions' interest in affiliating with a foreign provider, without proper regard for their capacity. For a business course that is jointly provided with HELP University (Malaysia), International School (Vietnam National University Hanoi) and Institute of Economics and Finance IEFS (Ho Chi Minh City) make a profit of 50% after staff, translators, and facilities expenses

(Thanh, 2010b). The mass opening of courses in addition to the already approved ones exerts greater pressure on academics and facilities, especially when joint programs require a prioritised allocation of qualified staff and learning resources.

Next, an official and independent quality assurance framework established by either the government or universities to provide frequent assessment and evaluation of the running programs is not present in Vietnam. This again is attributed to institutions' dependence on the upper administrative power and in the meantime denies their opportunities and ability to self-evaluate or evaluate their partners. The absence of internal quality assurance also attracts unqualified providers who acquire recognition from 'accreditation mills' (Altbach & Knight, 2007; *Thanh Nien News*, 2017) to enter into Vietnam's TNHE market. Many joint-degree courses are then conducted in a manner where transparent procedures are missing and students are not provided with accurate information to make informed choices. Commonly advertised commitments from providers are that students can get internationally recognised degrees with the same standard as in the home branch. Contrarily, students may end up with low-quality credentials that are not valid in Vietnam or in the partner's country. Since 2004, many students have completed a 4-year technology course at Infoworld School in Ho Chi Minh City without being aware that the qualification they obtain is a certificate rather than a degree (Thanh, 2010a).

### **Partner selection: sacrificing long-term benefits**

Although Vietnam's open door policy and GATS membership have made the country an attractive TNHE destination, it is in most cases up to foreign providers to decide their selection of Vietnam as a receiving country. In a comprehensive inspection of 118 joint programs between 94 foreign providers and 18 universities in Vietnam in 2013, the Government Inspectorate reported dozens of cases of misconducts (Thanh, 2015) and the figure has not stopped climbing to a concerning level. Vietnam National University Hanoi is among the few institutions that have stringent procedures for selecting partners and who claim to aim only at reputable providers (Vietnam National University Hanoi, 2014). However, MOET's inspection of its 20 programs revealed 16 unqualified foreign partners and 12 ill-suited or incomplete curriculums (The Government Inspectorate of Vietnam, 2013). Some foreign partners that research members of Vietnam National University Hanoi pride their partnership on are remarked by Vietnam Education Foundation specialists as not being known in the field of their expertise (Thanh, 2010a). Local institutions are placed under pressure by MOET to establish training relationships with an accredited provider, yet the term 'accreditation' itself should not always be equated with the credibility or reputation of the exporter.

Partnering with a reputable university entails covering high costs and meeting other strict demands, which is already discouraging to Vietnam's infrastructure and human resources. In order to occupy the biggest shares of the market, many entities and foreign providers who are not licenced or authorised to participate in joint program partnerships are still inviting academic enrolments. These operate in a way that the Vietnamese side takes care of advertising for enrolment and organising training activities, while the partner exports whole-package curriculums and issues joint qualifications. The concern is that domestic



entities are often private operators, unreliable and vulnerable to financial collapse (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015), such as study overseas consultant companies, foreign language schools or social organisations beyond the control of MOET which often fail to report the programs they are running, or use invalid certification to attract more students (Thanh, 2015). The International Cooperation Center (Vietnam Association for Promoting Education), for instance, has been working jointly with Columbia Southern University to confer degrees to hundreds of students via their joint programs with legal documents which expired nearly a decade ago (Thanh, 2010b). Besides wasting resources and students' investments in exchange for some qualifications which lack recognition, these joint programs are corrupting the whole country's pathway towards quality education.

Whatever types of partners that local institutions are aiming at, a message to come through is that short-term benefits can sacrifice the sustainable and healthy development of TNHE. Many courses which concentrate only on current market demands, such as marketing, management and computer programming (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008), are sacrificing graduates' benefits by being poorly adapted to the social, cultural and economic context in Vietnam, and by undermining their employability and future study options for the convenience of service providers (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). Additionally, both the country and local institutions are likely to face reputational damage and risk losing more valuable partners who will not compromise their academic standards (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015).

#### **Teaching and learning strategies: Globally or locally oriented?**

Arising in line with TNHE expansion is a rising concern for the appropriateness of exported content and pedagogy in the specific context of 'buying' countries. In principle, educational services achieve their ultimate outcomes once materials and learning resources are culturally adapted to suit the countries where courses are delivered. In practice, however, a commonly observed situation in importing countries is

the separation of education from traditional academic values: classroom based, face-to-face teaching (including pastoral and mentoring roles), by well-qualified research academics, with a commitment to community service; [...] low-ability students (those not accepted into regular, reputable institutions), using pre-packaged cookie-cutter foreign lecturer notes, in cramped office premises under the supervision of poorly qualified locals, supplemented by occasional visits by jet-lagged fly-in fly-out academics (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015, p. xxvi)

Although many joint programs in Vietnam provide good practice in teaching and learning, there still exist some low-quality courses (Phan, 2017; Welch, 2012), insufficient course advisors, and ill-suited delivery in a learning culture which is still heavily impacted by Confucianism. When there is a mismatch between content, pedagogy and expectations, joint programs may not allow students to fully identify the real needs of their localities or set up suitable agendas targets accordingly (Alam et al., 2013; Knight, 2014; Yang, 2008). As argued by Ziguras and Fazal (2001), students benefit from globalised curriculums as they share similar educational experiences with peers worldwide, yet the risk of

'abstracting' the curriculums from real-life contexts emerge and threaten to disassociate learners from their cultural origins (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2014; Sovic, 2012). Since agencies selling education try to impose single uniform but hegemonic standards without reference to local characteristics, such an approach towards teaching and learning can engrave the idea of real knowledge being produced only by Western societies (Sovic, 2012; Sovic & Blythman, 2012; Yang, 2008) and result in clashes in identities as observed by Phan (2017) around the concept of nativism and non-nativism among Vietnamese teaching staff.

### **Joint programs in Vietnam and the need for innovations**

The promotion of cross-border education as a tradeable commodity is an inevitable result of globalisation, yet this TNHE development should only be sustainably beneficial on the condition of relevance, equity and quality (Knight, 2006, 2014). Already experiencing negative impacts of commercialised education on stakeholders and the education system as a whole, Vietnam needs drastic remedies in TNHE practices, starting with addressing its regulatory issues. In the review of cross-border education among OECD members, Vincent-Lanerin and Pfothenauer (as cited in Ziguras & McBurnie 2015, p. 172) noticed from effective models a 'comprehensive, fair, and transparent' system of registration, licensure, quality assurance, accreditation and consultancy for TNHE practices. As emphasised by Vallely and Wilkinson (2008), Vietnam needs to be aware that quality providers will not compromise their standards, nor enter purely as investors, which means the government must be willing to invest in these aspects and assume more of a facilitative rather than dictatorial role towards governing TNHE.

To encourage institutional autonomy, an independent quality assurance body at the governmental level needs to be established and the quality assurance capacity of institutional administrators should be improved. Vietnam can learn from successful examples of Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Turkey, who employ stringent qualification agencies or standard frameworks to set clear expectations for both domestic and foreign institutions and to ensure a consistent and comparable quality of provision (Lim, 2011; Pham, 2010; Phan, 2017; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). As stated by Youssef (2014), problems will continue to persist unless there are 'means of identifying, publicising and shutting down the operations of rogue and fraudulent providers, and the bogus accreditation agencies that support them' (p. 111). Vietnam has a real need for communication channels to make courses and providers' identities accessible to the public. Stricter measures in acting against violated programs and disqualified providers need to complement schemes to limit providers' attempts of commodification of knowledge, as in the case of India mass closing down low-quality providers in 2005 (Pham, 2010). Experiences from Europe and the US in standardising curricular benchmarks such as methods of assessment, credit hours, and degree awarding standards (Shin & Harman, 2009) can also be valuable lessons for the country to improve implementing and regulating procedures, which simultaneously limit the risk of adverse outcomes from the commodification of knowledge.

## Conclusion

Within the scope of this case study, a perspective on four aspects of operating commercialised TNHE has been provided with reference to the specific setting of Vietnam. It is without a doubt that cross-border education is offering new opportunities for the country to practise higher standards in addition to generating generous incomes. However, the quality issue will inevitably pose a dilemma regarding the extent to which regulations and restrictions can be negotiated to embrace these new changes and ventures (Varghese, 2009) as experienced in other developing countries under the intensified commercialisation of TNHE (Phan, 2017; Yang, 2008). With the discussed features of educational partnerships and major points of concerns in Vietnam, this paper argues that effective regulatory mechanisms, especially in relation to quality assurance and decision making, need to be formed for the governing and operation of joint programs to yield more quality and sustainable outcomes.

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