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Deriving value from TNE - Jisc's Blog on HEGlobal, 8 February 2015

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Esther Wilkinson, Business Development Lead for TNE at JISC, considers the opportunities for TNE growth and calls for greater collaboration between international and information teams to effectively manage standards of UK TNE provision

Transnational education (TNE) is seen as a key priority by UK government's industrial strategy and generates hundreds of millions of pounds every year according to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but what's not so clear is how prepared the sector is to capitalise on this significant opportunity in the years ahead.

Without the right technologies in place institutions delivering education overseas run the risk of not being able to deliver consistent and high quality TNE. Last year Jisc undertook a major study with the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) to find out how much IT infrastructure was being considered in UK higher education (HE) TNE planning and delivering.

We targeted two groups that we felt were vital in the delivery of TNE - international offices and IT departments - and received responses from 84 distinct UK institutions. The findings have now been collated and certainly make for some interesting reading.

Firstly, one of the things that struck us was the relative isolation of IT departments. Almost half of IT staff (45%) we questioned weren't aware of their own institutions' TNE programmes, with many unable to answer questions on international operations. And, while 27% did claim to play in role in TNE development planning, just 1% of those questioned said they were involved in the initial decision making, being brought in much later.

There's a similar lack of awareness from IT staff when it comes to system risks and threats arising from activities abroad. When asked if data-related problems had previously been encountered abroad through their university's TNE activities, just over half (52%) answered 'don't know', while 57% were unaware if their institutional risk assessments included IT infrastructure.

Understandably, a question that has come out of this work is how international offices and IT departments can better join up and ensure each party is engaged and committed to the institution's TNE efforts. In the past, the fast-rising popularity of TNE has meant that there has not always been time to consider where the IT department fits in TNE programme planning and delivery. Yet it's a critical role they have to play, and growing awareness of this, as well as encouragement by international staff, will only help in involving them in this process.

Other findings to emerge were perhaps less surprising. When asked about delivery modes,

online provision, blended or distance learning came out top, chosen by 54% of our respondents, with establishing a branch campus abroad the least popular (10%). This is in keeping with previous data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) which put partnership-type operations as out-weighting branch campuses at a factor of about 30 to one, but of course does not detract from the validity of branch campuses as a TNE conduit - it's simply a case of preference.

And what's next? Well, as TNE becomes more widely accepted as an effective delivery method for international education, it's vital that institutions are made aware of the opportunities and kept abreast of new developments. A key action that Jisc is taking forward is an engagement campaign which will aim to fill this knowledge gap, increase IT staff involvement in TNE development and delivery, and share best practice. Watch this space for more details.

Jisc is supporting the HEGlobal event 'Technology: TNE's silent partner?' on March 11 2015 which will explore the technology needs of TNE in greater detail.

About the author

Dr. Esther Wilkinson is a specialist in higher education strategy and planning. She is currently leading for Jisc on the provision of technology support for TNE by UK HE and FE institutions.

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