

Knowledge Transfer in Transnational Higher Education Partnerships: A Study of UK-Asian Franchised Programmes

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Abstract

This study investigates knowledge transfer processes in franchised partnerships between UK and Asian universities. Guided by a theoretical framework on inter-organisational knowledge transfer from the business sector, the study employs data from semi-structured interviews and observational insights from both home and host institutions. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that explicit forms of academic and organizational knowledge facilitate knowledge transfer at host institutions. It also confirms the transfer of tacit knowledge is hindered by organizational and cultural distance. However, professional knowledge remains largely overlooked in transnational education (TNE) collaborations. Additionally, partner institutions' characteristics influence the effectiveness of knowledge transfer. While knowledge transfer between UK universities and their overseas partners shares similarities with other industries, this study identifies distinctive features of the higher education sector. These findings offer valuable insights for managers and policymakers involved in the internationalization of higher education.

Key words:

Knowledge transfer, international business, franchised partnership, transnational education, internationalization of higher education

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1. Introduction

Knowledge transfer has been extensively discussed in international business studies, where it is recognized as a critical factor for gaining a competitive advantage in multinational corporations (MNCs). Cross-border knowledge transfer enables firms to leverage global expertise, standardize operations, and adapt to diverse markets (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). Additionally, it facilitates the sharing of best practices, fostering innovation and efficiency, while ensuring consistency in branding and operations (Kogut and Zander, 1993a). Effective knowledge transfer also allows multinational firms to respond swiftly to local challenges, promoting agility and competitive advantage across regions (Buckley and Casson, 2009). By encouraging cross-cultural learning and collaboration, knowledge transfer drives organizational resilience and global success.

Research has identified several key factors that significantly influence cross-border knowledge transfer, including the nature of the knowledge being transferred and the characteristics of the transfer partners. For instance, the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge impacts transfer efficiency (Polanyi, 1966a; Easterby-Smith, Lyles and Tsang, 2008a). Cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations and conflicts, which hinder effective knowledge sharing (Abou-Zeid, 2005; Bui *et al.*, 2016). Organizational structures, whether centralized or decentralized, determine how knowledge flows between subsidiaries (Argote and Ingram, 2000). Furthermore, absorptive capacity—the ability to recognize and integrate external knowledge—plays a crucial role in facilitating successful knowledge transfer (Szulanski, 1996). However, existing research primarily focuses on the business sector, there is a need to expand our understanding of knowledge transfer to other sectors, such as Higher education.

Driven by globalization over the past three decades, internationalization has increasingly become a core strategy for higher education institutions. Transnational education (TNE) has emerged as a key mechanism for universities to extend their reach and influence in the global education market (Mazzarol and Soutar, 1992; Knight, 2004). According to Universities UK, in the 2020-21 academic year, 510,835 students were enrolled in transnational education programmes offered by 162 UK institutions across 228 countries. This number grew by 12.7% in 2021-22 and by an additional 8% in 2022-23, reaching 576,705 students (Universities UK International, 2022). While UK universities have prioritized internationalization due to its social and economic benefits, the challenges associated with knowledge transfer in TNE education remain underexplored.

Some studies have examined various elements of knowledge transfer between university partners. Guzman & Trivelato (2011) analyzed the codification strategies employed by higher education institutions, particularly in cost-saving and managerially-driven contexts. They argued that using standardized course outlines to transfer knowledge can be challenging for courses that involve high levels of tacit knowledge. Li *et al.* (2014) focused on the attributes of knowledge and the characteristics of partners in transnational education, suggesting that the higher the equity stake in a partnership, the greater the motivation for knowledge sharing. Accordingly, equity-based partnerships tend to exhibit higher levels of knowledge transfer than non-equity partnerships. Nevertheless, in the UK, 40.8% of TNE education is delivered through franchised non-equity partnerships, which surpasses other forms of collaboration, while only 6% of TNE programmes are equity-based (Universities UK, 2022). Given the dominant role of franchised programmes in TNE education, it is critical to explore how knowledge transfer occurs in these partnerships.

Despite the large number of franchised programmes offered by UK universities through multiple overseas partners, the mechanisms of knowledge transfer between UK universities

and their partners remain unclear. Investigating these mechanisms is essential, as it could benefit TNE students abroad and support the long-term growth of both home and host universities. To guide this investigation, an inter-organizational knowledge transfer framework from the business sector is adapted (Sutrisno and Pillay, 2015). This research aims to unpack further on different types of knowledge in Higher Education sector and raise implications for future practice in HEIs and businesses.

The paper starts by reviewing the literature on knowledge attributes and partner characteristics that influence knowledge transfer in the business sector, assessing their applicability to higher education. Based on this review, two propositions are formulated to guide the study. The methodology section outlines the rationale for adopting a case study approach and details the data collection and analysis processes. The findings are then presented and discussed in relation to the research questions and propositions. Finally, the paper explores the implications for both research and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge attributes and knowledge transfer in franchised partnership

Knowledge attributes determine what is transferred. Davenport & Prusak, 1998, P5) define knowledge as “a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information”. Knowledge is typically categorized into two forms: explicit and tacit (Koulopoulos and Frappaolo, 1999). Explicit knowledge refers to formal and systematic information that can be easily articulated, codified, and transmitted among individuals (Koulopoulos and Frappaolo, 1999; Nonaka, 1997). By contrast, tacit knowledge is non-verbalized, intuitive, and deeply personal, residing within individuals and not easily captured or codified (Polanyi, 1966b; Mcadam and McCreedy, 1999; Wong and Radcliffe, 2000;.

In business, knowledge is regarded as a critical resource and asset (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). The movement of knowledge through knowledge transfer and the integration of knowledge through business alliance is the most significant strategy for sustainable long-term growth as it is central to a firm’s competitive capability (Grant, 1996; Carlile and Rebentisch, 2003). However, it is recognised in research that the complex nature of certain knowledge types can inhibit successful exchange (Inkpen, 2008). For example, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) reveal that tacitness, ambiguity and complexity of knowledge affect knowledge transfer. Additionally, context-specific factors such as prior experience, cultural distance, and organizational distance also influence knowledge transfer outcomes (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998; Kostova, 1999; Simonin, 1999a). Scholars emphasize that knowledge transfer is dynamic and interactive, evolving through continuous engagement between transferring organizations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

Cross-border knowledge transfer in franchising has been extensively explored in the literature. Studies have consistently shown that cultural misalignment impedes communication, thereby increasing knowledge ambiguity and hindering transfer efficiency (Peter J. Lane, 2001; Simonin, 1999). Hofstede, (2011) conceptualizes cultural distance as the divergence in values, norms, and practices between organizations from different national contexts, which can significantly complicate knowledge exchange. These cultural disparities pose notable challenges in international strategic alliances (Olk, 1997). Furthermore, inconsistencies in training programmes can result in franchisees lacking essential skills and knowledge to operate successfully (Dant & Grünhagen, 2014).

2.1.1 Academic knowledge

In higher education (HE), knowledge is broadly classified into academic knowledge and organizational knowledge (Coukos-Semmel, 2003; Li *et al.*, 2014). Academic knowledge, which encompasses the creation and dissemination of scholarly insights, forms the core purpose of higher education institutions (Altbach, 1998; Coukos-Semmel, 2003). As with other forms of knowledge, academic knowledge includes both explicit and tacit components (Polanyi, 1966a). Guzman & Trivelato (2011) observed that university courses vary in the degree to which their content is explicit or tacit. Tacit knowledge in academic settings can be challenging or even impossible to codify due to knowledge-specific and contextual factors.

The market-oriented changes in higher education institutions (HEIs) have prompted the adoption of codification strategies for transferring knowledge to partner institutions (Guzman and Trivelato, 2011). Codification facilitates knowledge transfer for courses with explicit content but faces limitations when courses involve a high degree of tacitness. Understanding tacit knowledge requires interpretation, which depends on the receiver's professional experience to contextualize codified concepts. Differences in experience, cognitive approaches, and backgrounds among knowledge recipients can further complicate this interpretation. Tsoukas (2002) similarly emphasized that tacit knowledge constrains understanding, as it requires interpretation and cognition for effective transfer.

Building on Coukos-Semmel's work, Li *et al.* (2014) developed a detailed classification of academic knowledge in HE, identifying specific components of explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit academic knowledge includes "course outline, teaching slides, textbooks, assessment strategies (p.344)", while tacit academic knowledge comprises "knowledge delivery, teaching style, course design and course management (p.344)".

2.1.2 Organizational knowledge

Organisation knowledge refers to 'the capability members of an organization have developed to draw distinctions in the process of carrying out their work, in particular concrete contexts, by enacting sets of generalizations whose application depends on historically evolved collective understandings' (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001). This knowledge exists in both explicit and tacit forms, each integral to organizational functioning (Polyani, 1966; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Explicit organizational knowledge is structured and formalized, enabling easier codification, transfer, and communication. It manifests in an organization's policies, procedures, business strategies, databases, directories, and accounting practices (Coukos-Semmel, 2003). By contrast, Tacit organizational knowledge develops gradually through accumulated experience (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polyani, 1966). It emerges as individuals interact with their environment and engage in practical problem-solving (Matthew and Sternberg, 2009). This knowledge is deeply embedded in groups and teams and is often reflected in organizational routines and informal practices (Nelson & Winter, 1982).

Hippel (1994) characterizes tacit knowledge as "sticky information" due to its personal and context-specific nature, which makes it difficult to articulate or codify (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In HE, tacit organizational knowledge is expressed as "faculty-generated knowledge and traditional means of discovery and transmission of knowledge which undergirds its academic programs"(Coukos-Semmel, 2003). Li *et al.* (2014) further classify tacit organizational knowledge in HE as comprising research excellence, management expertise, organizational culture, and institutional experience.

2.1.3 Professional knowledge

In recent years, higher education has undergone significant changes driven by larger and more diverse student populations, as well as the expansion of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The role of academics has extended beyond traditional teaching and research to encompass expertise in course design, technology integration, and administrative responsibilities for modules and programmes. These developments have created an expectation for academics to continuously develop their professional knowledge to ensure a high-quality academic experience and positive student outcomes (OfS, 2023).

Since 2016, the UK government, through the Department for Education (DfE), introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to assess and recognize teaching quality in higher education institutions. As a result, academic promotion is no longer solely dependent on research publications; teaching excellence now plays a significant role.

The Advance HE has partnered with UK universities to run accredited schemes aimed at encouraging academics to engage in professional development. Achieving different professional statuses has increasingly become a requirement for academic promotion. Additionally, the emergence of job titles such as Lecturer (Teaching Focused) indicates a growing shift within higher education institutions (HEIs) towards creating permanent career paths for academics who excel in teaching rather than research (Probert and Sachs, 2015). This shift highlights a clear distinction between traditional academics, who focus primarily on generating knowledge through research with a smaller teaching load, and teaching-focused lecturers, who are expected to teach intensively and deliver knowledge effectively to learners.

We therefore propose that professional knowledge should be distinguished from academic knowledge, as suggested in prior research. While academic knowledge refers to discipline-specific expertise, professional knowledge pertains to the pedagogy of teaching and learning. Both explicit and tacit professional knowledge are essential components of teaching expertise.

Explicit professional knowledge includes teaching theories and frameworks, instructional and assessment strategies, the use of technological tools for teaching, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) documentation. This knowledge is codified, formalized, and transferable through training programmes. In contrast, tacit professional knowledge develops through experience and reflection in context-specific teaching situations. Tacit knowledge encompasses teaching pedagogies, classroom management skills, adaptation to student needs, mentorship and collaboration, as well as personal growth through reflection. This form of knowledge is often intuitive, experiential, and challenging to articulate, requiring time to develop (Toom, 2019).

The interplay between explicit and tacit knowledge is central to professional growth, as formal concepts are internalized and adapted to real-world scenarios, ultimately contributing to effective teaching strategies (Eraut, 2000; Toom, 2019). Research also suggests that while academic knowledge acquisition is typically a self-directed process, professional knowledge is often developed through reflection and learning within collegiate and community settings (Ferman et al., 2010).

In higher education, the effectiveness of knowledge transfer—whether academic, professional, or organizational—may vary depending on the tacitness of each type of knowledge.

Proposition 1. In franchised Transnational Education (TNE) collaborations, various types of knowledge are expected to be transferred. However, tacit knowledge is more challenging to

transfer than explicit knowledge. Among the knowledge types, professional knowledge is the least transferred during the knowledge transfer process.

2.2 Partner characteristics and knowledge transfer in franchised partnership

Knowledge is widely considered a franchisor's most important resource (Lindblom and Tikkanen, 2010). However, the franchisees' ability to apply transferred knowledge ultimately determines the success of the partnership. Consequently, partner characteristics in franchised partnerships have been extensively explored in the literature. Research identifies absorptive capacity, cultural distance, and organizational distance as key factors affecting knowledge transfer (Simonin, 1999a; Argote and Ingram, 2000). Absorptive capacity refers to "the ability of a firm to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). Lane & Lubatkin, 1998b argue that a firm's ability to learn from another depends on the relative characteristics of sources and recipients. We explore these characteristics within the contexts of organizational differences.

Organizational culture plays a critical role in the knowledge transfer process (Tiemessen *et al.*, 1997). Simonin (2004) reveals that a strong aspiration to learn facilitates deeper collaboration and enhances the success of knowledge transfer. Similarly, Pérez-Nordtvedt *et al.* (2008) suggest that mutual motivation among partners increases receptiveness to shared knowledge. Kogut and Zander (1993) find that greater project scope and knowledge complexity increase the tacit and causally ambiguous nature of knowledge.

Ramachandran *et al.* (2009) highlight significant differences in knowledge management practices between public and private HEIs. Advocates for private HEIs argue that their primary advantage lies in their ability to respond swiftly and effectively to market demands (Balán, 1990; Patrinos, 1990). Conversely, according to Mintzberg's organizational structure theory, HEIs are often perceived as bureaucratic entities operating within intricate political systems, where stakeholder interests constantly shift (Mintzberg, 1993). As a result, public HEIs often face unclear objectives and restricted managerial autonomy (Day and Klein, 1987). Additionally, participation in professional development is necessary to ensure the quality of academic programmes, however, compared to full-time staff, part-time academics often receive less initial training (Blackwell, Channell and Williams, 2001a). Reflective development processes are also constrained for part-time academics due to their exclusion from informal networks or the tacit "web of relationships" (Taylor, 1999).

In the most prevalent TNE partnerships—franchised collaborations—it remains unclear whether they exhibit the same level of commitment associated with different partner characteristics. Therefore, further investigation is needed to determine whether variations in these characteristics influence effective knowledge transfer.

Proposition 2. Organizational structure and culture differences influence host partners' motivation in the process of knowledge transfer. Private hosts have a higher motivation for absorbing professional knowledge for teaching and learning, while public hosts have a low motivation due to their research focused orientation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design: a qualitative, multiple case study

This research adopts a qualitative, case study approach to explore knowledge transfer between UK universities and their transnational education (TNE) partners under a franchised partnership model. This approach was considered the most appropriate as it facilitates a rich and contextualized examination of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for studies seeking to gain in-depth insight and understanding of complex organizational, group, and individual dynamics (Ghauri, Gronhaug & Kristianslund, 1995). The case study methodology enables the identification of new constructs emerging from detailed descriptive data (Stake, 1995) and fosters the development of theoretical explanations grounded in real-world observations (Suddaby, 2006). This approach is particularly valuable in fields that have not previously attracted significant research attention as it allows expanding and generalizing theories by combining the existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights.

Our research aims to examine how and why the attributes of knowledge and the characteristics of partner institutions influence cross-border knowledge transfer within TNE partnerships. Given this focus, a qualitative, in-depth case study approach is most suitable (Yin, 2003). Furthermore, employing multiple case studies enhances the validity and credibility of the findings, while mitigating potential biases in observation (Leonard-Barton, 1990).

3.2 Research context

This study is primarily qualitative and exploratory, focusing on the perceptions of key individuals involved in franchised cross-border transnational education (TNE) collaborations. We selected a university from the UK as our study base, given that the UK is one of the two leading countries providing transnational education globally, alongside Australia (Riza and Trifiro, 2024). According to data from HESA, UK TNE grew by 32% from 2016-17 to 2021-22, increasing from just over 400,000 students to approximately 532,500 students.

To select the case for this study, we followed a ‘typical case’ approach. The case university is one of the largest UK universities involved in TNE education. We chose this university for several reasons: First, the large number of students enrolled in its franchised TNE programmes, positioning it 3rd in the UK. Second, the university has extensive experience in TNE franchised programmes, having developed partnerships with numerous international institutions. Third, this university represents a typical UK institution with a robust network of partnerships, which provides a substantial number of cases for the research. This also allows for a degree of control over variations in knowledge transfer processes, as multiple franchisees collaborate with a single franchisor. Thus, our findings regarding knowledge attributes and partner characteristics are likely to be more reliable under such controlled conditions.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. A pilot study was conducted in the UK in 2021, followed by fieldwork in Malaysia, Singapore, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Vietnam from 2022 to 2024. In total, 40 interviews were conducted in English with ten organizations involved in nine cases. Of these, 32 interviews were conducted in person at the interviewees' offices in the UK, Malaysia, Singapore, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Vietnam, while 10 interviews were conducted online via video calls due to international travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours and were recorded with the prior consent of the interviewees. The interview questions were semi-structured and were carefully designed in advance to guide the discussions and ensure that key issues were addressed. Interviews were conducted with individuals responsible for the TNE programmes at various

organizational levels. In addition to interviews, selected university documents relevant to the TNE partnership were analyzed to facilitate triangulation of views and support the validation of the data (Denzin, 2017).

Addressing potential biases in qualitative research is complex yet essential (Nowell et al., 2017). This study employed several strategies to mitigate bias. First, the validity of the data was enhanced by verifying interview findings with documentary evidence and observations. Second, in some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted at key stages to validate initial interpretations.

4. Findings

4.1 Knowledge characteristics and knowledge transferring

Academic knowledge transfer, particularly explicit academic knowledge was highlighted by all of the interviewees. Explicit academic knowledge was transferred through course handbooks, teaching slides, and assessments. As the following quote demonstrated, explicit academic knowledge is easily accessible by the TNE partners:

‘Normally there is a deadline set by the faculty which request to update module content for the new academic by the end of July each year. Even though our students won’t start that early, but I know this is for TNE partners who normally start earlier. Once we updated everything, they will be copied over to the partners’ site, so the teaching staff there can access and start to prepare for their teaching’. (Module leader 5, UK)

The effective transfer of explicit academic knowledge can also be verified by the following quote:

‘We have the module guidelines (Handbooks). It includes everything what the subject is about from A-Z, weekly lecture slides and tutorial questions, assessments, the rubrics for marking, marking allocation (marking schemes), and even the sample exam questions, so we have great support.’ (Module tutor2, Malasia)

However, some subjects were perceived as more challenging to teach for local teaching staff, indicating tacit academic knowledge is crucial for effective knowledge transfer. As a TNE module tutor (Module tutor 5, Malasia) explains:

‘I feel that some subjects are more difficult to teach than others. I teach a module, Business Strategy. The module used case studies from developed countries which we and my students are not familiar with. Although we have all the resources for teaching a module, sometimes we don’t know whether we have misinterpreted what the module leader wants us to teach’. (Module tutor 6, Malaysia)

This challenge highlights the difficulty of transferring explicit knowledge without a corresponding tacit understanding (Polanyi, 1966). Compared to subjects such as Financial Accounting—where knowledge can be easily codified—courses with a higher degree of tacitness face greater challenges. This is because course leaders, who typically design the modules, may struggle to fully articulate their expert knowledge in lecture slides (Guzman & Trivelato, 2011; Li et al., 2013). In such cases, a deeper understanding of the subject matter is essential for effective knowledge transfer. This can be achieved either through direct two-way communication among teaching teams or participation in disciplinary research networks.

As for organisational knowledge, Interviewees reported no difficulties in sharing explicit organizational knowledge. In franchised partnerships, institutional roles, responsibilities, and obligations are clearly outlined in franchise agreements. TNE partners must adhere to the rules, guidelines, and standards set by the home university, without the flexibility to adapt them to the local context.

One major issue in TNE provisions is quality assurance. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of marking moderation, which is jointly conducted with the home university at the module level. Marking moderation is a well-established practice among UK universities and serves as a key mechanism for ensuring the quality of TNE programs. In practice, after a local marker completes grading, a sample of the marked assessments, a marksheet, and a marking summary are uploaded for moderation by the corresponding module leader at the home university.

‘I was briefed by xx (home university’s representative) about the (marking and moderation) process. The (home) university regulation is updated yearly, and I have noticed that I need to access the system and notice any update or any changes that the university makes in their policies or regulations.’ (Programme coordinator 2, Vietnam)

‘After completing marking, I submit them to our admin team who will pass over to the moderator in the UK. We were instructed to give students feedback following a sandwich style: what you did well, what could improve in this assignment, what you can take forward to next assignment. As soon as we receive the feedback from the module leader, for example, they agree on the grades provided but suggest areas for improvements on certain points. I would try to make improvements based on the comments. We only receive feedback via emails from the admin team, we don’t receive it directly from the module leader in the UK.’ (Module tutor7, Penang)

To maintain marking quality, the home university employs an online marking moderation system. However, access is restricted to local administrative teams, who are responsible for uploading samples, marksheets, and summaries on behalf of the markers. Once moderation is complete and the marking is approved, it is reviewed by external examiners from the home university. Local administrative teams only notify markers if corrections or improvements are requested by the home university’s module leader.

Interview findings suggest that marking moderation, as a key component of explicit organizational knowledge in quality management, has been successfully transferred to TNE partners. Even newly established partnerships appear to adopt the process quickly. As one interviewee from a host institution that had been operational for only a year commented:

“Uploading marking samples, in my opinion, is a good practice. The process is easy as everything is digitalized now. I know places where you still have to post everything physically, so this system is convenient for us.” (Programme Lead 1, Sarawak)

In contrast, tacit organizational knowledge is more difficult to transfer, as it is not individual-based and is challenging to codify (Li et al., 2013). The difficulty increases when management know-how is transferred across institutions operating in different cultural contexts. Franchise partnerships typically do not expect to receive tacit organizational knowledge about university management. However, management expertise in achieving teaching and research excellence can significantly influence the effectiveness of knowledge transfer. While tacit organizational knowledge may not be a priority for franchisees or franchisors, explicit organizational knowledge has been effectively transferred, facilitated by advancements in information technology.

Existing research indicates that knowledge transfer is more likely in equity-based joint-venture partnerships, where partners co-establish overseas campuses, leading to greater commitment and opportunities for tacit knowledge exchange (Li et al., 2013). In contrast, franchised partnerships rarely mention research expertise transfer but emphasize teaching expertise development.

‘Based on my experience, in the UK they have a different culture regarding how students should be educated. This is a UK programme that we have brought here to be taught in a localized context. The teaching style is indeed different, so it would be helpful to have a workshop provided by UK colleagues on how to teach these modules. We do have experience, but sharing their teaching experience would give us better insight into the UK teaching style.’ (Module tutor 7, Sarawak)

‘We would like to join the module leader’s lecture online or have lecture recordings shared with us.’ (Module tutor 9, Singapore)

These comments suggest that professional knowledge related to teaching and learning is often overlooked in the knowledge transfer process. Professional knowledge refers to the theoretical and practical understanding required to effectively facilitate student learning and contribute to their overall development. Professional knowledge is often developed through formal education, ongoing professional development, and reflective practice. Teaching expertise represents individual-based professional knowledge, including pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners, curriculum knowledge, assessment and evaluation, classroom management and technology proficiency.

In the UK, Advance HE promotes professional development by collaborating with universities to offer accredited programs aimed at enhancing teaching expertise. More than 80% of UK universities require staff to complete a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching or an equivalent qualification (Gosling, 2010) and Advance HE fellowships are often mandatory for career progression.

Continuing professional development (CPD) is broadly defined as any activity designed to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, leading to changes in their educational practice (Fenstermacher & Berliner, 1985, p.49). This can include formal programmes, such as the Postgraduate Certificate, as well as informal activities like peer mentoring.

When asked about CPD engagement, one head of school responded:

‘Our staff are required to undertake 10 hours training every year, but they have the autonomy to choose the training they need. It can be online courses on the Udemy.’ (Head of School, Kuala Lumpur)

However, Udemy is a general online learning platform rather than one specifically designed for teacher training. A module tutor reflected on the accessibility of CPD opportunities:

“I attended the teaching and learning conference online organized by the [home] university last year, but I had to leave early due to the eight-hour time difference. This year I cannot attend because it is not hybrid.” (Module Tutor, Penang)

Home university staff confirmed that CPD opportunities were shared with partners:

‘I always forward the information and resources including the University’s and the faculty’s Teaching and Learning conferences to the partners I am the link tutor for. Especially during the Covid period, all the conference were held on online.’

Formal CPD programmes for TNE partners appear limited. The lack of CPD provision could stem from financial and operational constraints or differences in institutional cultures.

The evidence detailed above supports Proposition 1, which suggests that the nature of knowledge influences the extent of knowledge transfer in franchised programs between UK universities and their international partners. While explicit academic and organizational knowledge is effectively transferred, professional knowledge both explicit and tacit receives less attention due to the limited emphasis on tacit organizational knowledge within franchised agreements.

4.2 Partners' Characteristics and Knowledge Transfer

While equity partnerships (e.g., joint ventures, co-owned campuses) involve shared ownership and substantial financial commitment, franchised TNE agreements are more suitable for institutions seeking rapid international expansion with minimal risk. Franchised programmes typically require minimal local customization and limited operational involvement from the home university. These arrangements are appealing to institutions looking for lower financial and managerial commitments, as franchise partners are responsible for daily operations.

The motivations of both home and partner universities in establishing franchised collaborations were clear and consistent. As illustrated by the following comment from a UK university Dean:

“TNE partners and their students are important to us. In our internationalisation strategic plan, we specify our goals regarding student growth and how we intend to support TNE partners.” (Dean, UK university)

Additionally, generating income motivated host partners to establish franchised programmes with UK universities. A strong institutional relationship with a UK university provides a steady income stream and serves as a strategy to mitigate weak positions in the local market. Franchisees were eager to leverage the home university's brand to attract and engage students. A senior manager from a host institution remarked:

“We want our students to feel part of the (home) university. If our students can get the (home) university ID cards or T-shirts with the university's logo, it will bring them closer to the university they are studying with and receiving their degree from.” (Senior Manager, KL)

Although there is a strong motive to collaborate with UK higher education providers, it was observed that knowledge transfer was hindered due to the nature of the franchised agreement and the organizational and cultural distances between the home and host institutions.

A franchise agreement between a franchisor and a franchisee is often described as an "incomplete contract" (Mathewson and Winter, 1985), as it is impossible to fully specify all decisions within the contract, leading to agency problems. When a contract is signed, both the principal (franchisor) and agent (franchisee) should invest in the brand with aligned interests. However, agents may under-invest in quality, as they do not capture the full benefits of improvements in quality.

Research also shows that public and private universities differ in several fundamental ways, including institutional objectives, resource availability, and organizational constraints (Scott & Falcone, 1998). While public universities focus more on knowledge dissemination and creation, private universities are typically profit-driven, with a primary aim of disseminating knowledge without extensive research capabilities (Ramachandran, Chong, & Ismail, 2009). In this study, 7 of the 9 partner institutions were private, and 2 were public.

Although there was no significant difference between public and private institutions in accessing explicit academic knowledge as they are readily available through the home university's virtual learning environment (VLE), the motivation to maintain the brand and contribute to programme development varied. Public partners expressed less motivation to actively maintain the brand and provide input. As one module tutor from a public institution noted: "It's the (home) university's responsibility to ensure the quality of the programme." (Module Tutor, Public Institution, Da Nan)

In contrast, private partners demonstrated a greater willingness to provide feedback and engage in improving programme quality. One programme leader from a private institution commented: "We would like to have more meetings with module leaders in the UK. This helps us better understand how to teach the module and how to engage students. In my module, I think it would be beneficial if the module leader used local cases from Malaysia rather than those from Western countries." (Programme Leader, Private Institution, Singapore)

When it comes to tacit academic knowledge transfer, public institution partners exhibited higher motivation than private ones. One public institution tutor shared: "I presented a paper at the (home) university's annual conference last year. Additionally, I am a member of ACCA and regularly participate in their events." (Module Tutor, Public Institution, Hanoi)

While both public and private institution staff held at least a Master's degree, public institution staff were more actively engaged in developing their subject expertise, as evidenced in their CVs. Conversely, staff from private institutions were less involved in academic conferences or publications, attending trainings only when required by their institutions. One private institution module tutor described:

"When I joined this institution, I was required to attend training on Outcome-Based Education and Blackboard activities." (Module Tutor, Private Institution, Malaysia)

Organizational knowledge relating to quality assurance was examined through interviews. The home university's quality team provides clear documentation and processes that are updated annually. For example, the moderation mechanism for assessment marks requires collaboration and agreement between module leaders at both home and host institutions to ensure quality assurance. Link tutors are expected to train academic staff on marking and moderation processes, and a dedicated representative from the home university regularly provides training to host staff.

Both public and private hosts showed high motivation in absorbing explicit organizational knowledge, as it is accessible via the home university's website and additional training. However, for tacit organizational knowledge, public institutions expressed a desire for more two-way communication, highlighting an opportunity for developing tacit knowledge. This contrasts with private institutions, where responses indicated less interest in such interactions. One public institution tutor remarked:

"I would prefer to discuss the feedback with the module leader rather than simply adjusting marks without understanding why." (Module Tutor, Public Institution, HK)

On the other hand, a tutor from a private institution in Malaysia noted: "I just do what the module leader asks me to do. If they ask me to adjust the marks, I will adjust." (Module Tutor, Private Institution, Malaysia)

Existing literature agrees that cultural and organizational differences can impede the effective transfer of tacit organizational knowledge (Simonin, 1999b). While the moderation process

could be a valuable opportunity for developing tacit knowledge through discussions with module leaders, private hosts tended to view these comments with deference rather than as a shared opportunity for improvement. In contrast, public hosts were more open to engaging in discussions for mutual enhancement.

In terms of professional knowledge transfer, both public and private hosts provided minimal information regarding their engagement with professional knowledge from the home university. An investigation revealed that the home university offers a wide range of professional development courses through its dedicated online platform, though these courses are exclusively available to home university staff. The validation documents for new programmes included a brief mention of “staff development,” but it was clear that professional knowledge resources are arranged at the university level and not tailored for franchisees.

A link tutor from the home university shared:

“I was contacted by a colleague from the central library who asked me to inform international partners about a CPD programme. This programme, which includes three online sessions on AI and its use in teaching and assessment, seemed very timely and beneficial for our partner staff. I shared the information with programme leaders in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. Only the partners in Hong Kong and Malaysia responded, with Hong Kong expressing gratitude, while Malaysia inquired if attendees would receive a certificate.” (Link Tutor, UK university)

This response illustrates that while private institutions were more eager to participate in professional development, public institutions, such as those in Vietnam, showed less interest, possibly due to existing training provisions or limited time for additional professional development.

The findings suggest that host partners have varying levels of motivation to absorb professional knowledge. Public institutions tend to have less engagement with professional knowledge transfer, possibly because they view teaching staff as capable of self-directed development. In contrast, private institutions are more inclined to take advantage of available opportunities, although they seek formal recognition for participation.

This analysis indicates that franchised programme partners are motivated differently due to agency problems. Public hosts are more motivated to absorb tacit academic and organizational knowledge, while private hosts show greater motivation to absorb explicit academic, explicit organizational, and tacit professional knowledge. These findings support our proposition 2 that differences in organizational structures and cultural contexts influence the types of knowledge transfer in franchised partnerships.

5. Discussion

This paper examines how knowledge attributes and partner characteristics influence knowledge transfer in franchised programmes between UK universities and their international partners. Our findings contribute to the under-researched area of knowledge transfer in Transnational Education (TNE), specifically in the most prevalent partnership form in this field. We expand upon the two types of knowledge identified in prior research, introducing a third category—professional knowledge which we argue is a distinctive form of knowledge in higher education, alongside academic and organizational knowledge. Figure 1 below summarizes the findings of this study.

Our results align with prior research on international knowledge transfer, which suggests that the extent of knowledge transfer is influenced by the attributes of the knowledge being transferred (Kogut and Zander, 1993; Chen, 2004). Explicit knowledge, defined as knowledge that can be articulated, formalized, and codified (Zollo, 1998), is found to be easier to transfer, both in academic and organizational contexts. In contrast, tacit knowledge, characterized by concepts, ideas, and experiences that cannot be easily articulated or objectified (Tsoukas, 2005), is more difficult to transfer for both academic and organizational knowledge. Furthermore, while tacit academic knowledge is driven by personal pursuit and accumulated through engagement in research communities or discipline-specific networks, tacit organizational knowledge encompasses the collective and accumulated managerial expertise required to achieve excellence in research and teaching. Notably, it is not the intention of franchised partnerships to transfer or share tacit organizational knowledge.

There is limited evidence of professional knowledge transfer in both forms, which can be attributed to three main factors. First, host partners may fail to recognize the value of professional development opportunities due to cultural and organizational differences, as well as external environmental factors (Blackwell, Channell and Williams, 2001b; Jacoby, 2006). This lack of recognition stems from a belief that they already possess the necessary capabilities or that further development is unnecessary. Second, academic staff at home universities are motivated to engage in CPD programs, as these are often mandatory for career progression and linked to achieving professional fellowships. In contrast, partners in franchised programmes operate in environments where time is scarce, and priorities are placed on research and teaching, rather than professional development. Third, the management of professional development is typically centralized at the university level for the home university, whereas franchised programs are managed at the faculty or departmental level, which leads to communication gaps and a mismatch between the intentions of the home university and the realities at the host institution.

Franchised partners operating in locations outside the home university's country may not perceive the development of professional knowledge as important, which aligns with (Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) argument on absorptive capacity. Absorptive capacity refers to a partner's ability to recognize, assimilate, and apply new knowledge, which is contingent on their existing knowledge base. If host partners lack the necessary prior knowledge or context, they may fail to recognize the value of knowledge offered by the home university. Nevertheless, professional knowledge, developed through reflective practice and collaborative learning with colleagues and mentors (Ferman, 2010; Bleach, 2014), plays an increasingly important role in higher education. Engagement in professional development programmes can enhance communication between home and host staff and can also incentivize academic staff to enhance their teaching and research skills, particularly in disciplines with high tacitness (Guzman and Trivelato, 2011b). Chart 1 illustrates how the flow of professional knowledge should be structured between home and host partners to facilitate effective knowledge transfer.

In conclusion, this study advances the understanding of knowledge transfer in franchised TNE partnerships by expanding the conceptualization of knowledge to include professional knowledge as a distinct category. Our findings reveal that knowledge transfer is influenced by both the attributes of the knowledge itself and the characteristics of the partners involved. Specifically, tacit knowledge—both academic and organizational—poses particular challenges for transfer in the context of franchised programmes. Furthermore, professional knowledge, despite its importance, remains under-transferred due to organizational and cultural barriers. These findings have significant implications for the management of franchised TNE

partnerships and highlight the need for better integration of professional development opportunities into the partnership structure.

6. Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This study highlights an underexplored area in transnational education (TNE)—the process of knowledge transfer between franchised partners. It reveals that professional knowledge is often overlooked in these partnerships, despite its critical importance, particularly in cross-cultural TNE programmes. Within higher education (HE), tacit academic knowledge is often shared freely between partners, as it does not significantly affect the competitive advantage of the UK institutions involved (Li et al., 2014). However, professional knowledge, which is essential for the success of franchised partnerships, should be incorporated into the training programmes offered by the franchisor. While there may be cost implications associated with franchising, developing teaching and learning skills through the franchisor's continuous professional development (CPD) activities can enhance communication between teams from both sides, foster a deeper understanding of academic modules, and encourage academic staff at host institutions to enhance both their teaching skills and research capabilities. In a franchised partnership, both parties benefit from low-cost commitment and flexibility. The franchisee is not expected to absorb tacit organizational knowledge, and the franchisor is not obligated to transfer it. Nevertheless, tacit organizational knowledge is a key driver of a university's competitive advantage. To develop long-term relationships and stand out in a competitive environment, both parties must invest in the partnership and contribute to the mutual strengthening of their brand.

While this research provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on data from a single UK university and its international TNE partners, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating additional UK universities with franchised partners. Second, effective knowledge transfer requires not only the willingness of individuals to learn but also innovative methods and technologies. Future studies could explore how emerging technologies can enhance knowledge transfer in TNE collaborations. Finally, while this study primarily examines the one-way knowledge flow from the franchisor to the franchisee, it is essential to recognize that successful partnerships require mutual collaboration. Future research should investigate the potential of two-way knowledge exchange in franchised partnerships to further enrich the knowledge transfer process.

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