



## TAKING STOCK OF THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF TRANSNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT DO WE KNOW SO FAR?

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There is plenty of anecdotal evidence about the cost and benefits of transnational collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions, but few studies test these claims empirically. Those that do focus on the benefits brought about by such partnerships, namely more and better research publications and patents; better foreign language proficiency of internationally mobile students; a higher likelihood of employment at home and abroad; positive attitudes towards open borders and democracy; strengthened research and teaching capacity; and increased attractiveness of collaborating universities to foreign academics. Our systematic review of relevant literature found no quantification of the costs associated with transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education; only qualitative challenges.

### TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS A POLICY INSTRUMENT

The European Union has been looking for ways to increase the quality and relevance of higher education. Fostering transnational collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions is one of the strategic policy options to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of national higher education systems, and to promote other, non-economic goals such as political integration. Transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education generally include multiple individual or institutional members, which cooperate across national boundaries on a variety of educational, research, and innovation activities. In a systematic review of academic studies, we set out to synthesise valid and reliable evidence on the benefits and costs of transnational collaborative partnerships, so that the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of higher education policies that promote economic and non-economic goals by means of incentivising such partnerships could be evaluated.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE COSTS OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION?

Our systematic review of academic studies of transnational collaborative partnerships did not yield any rigorous quantitative evidence on the economic and non-economic costs of such institutional arrangements (for example, the operational and administrative costs of maintaining transnational partnerships, the subsidies given to institutions and individuals participating in such partnerships, or brain drain). This is not to say that transnational partnerships do not incur costs and present challenges for members. Qualitative studies suggest two sets of recurring challenges:

- building symmetric and equitable relationships; and
- negotiating different viewpoints among partners.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION?

Evidence synthesised from rigorous quantitative academic studies on the economic and non-economic benefits of various forms of transnational cooperation in higher education on societies, higher education institutions, and individuals shows that (see Figure 1):

- more and better patents are developed in countries in which higher education and research institutions collaborate with similar bodies from other countries;
- research units and researchers who collaborate internationally publish more, and publications that are co-authored by a transnational team of collaborators have greater academic impact;
- higher education institutions that participate in transnational collaborative activities enjoy strengthened research and teaching capacity, and become more attractive places of employment to foreign academics;
- higher education institutions can achieve economies of scale in teaching by the joint instruction of domestic and international students;
- tertiary students who participate in international mobility or exchange programmes improve their foreign language proficiency;
- students who participate in international mobility or exchange programmes have a higher likelihood of being employed in their home country and abroad;

		LEVEL OF ANALYSIS		
		MACRO (regional/national)	MESO (institutional)	MICRO (individual)
TYPES OF BENEFITS	ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More and better patents</li> <li>- Economies of scale in teaching</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher likelihood of employment at home and abroad</li> </ul>
	NON-ECONOMIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive attitudes towards open borders and democracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthened research and teaching capacity</li> <li>- More and better scientific output</li> <li>- Attractiveness to foreign academics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Better foreign language proficiency</li> <li>- Increased mobility</li> <li>- More and better publications</li> </ul>

*Figure 1: Benefits of transnational collaboration in higher education that are supported by rigorous research-based evidence*

- tertiary students report more positive attitudes towards open borders and democracy after participating in international mobility or exchange programmes; and
- tertiary students who participate in international mobility or exchange programmes are more likely to participate in international study or training mobility and international research collaboration later in their academic careers.

Not all the expected benefits of transnational collaborative partnerships were confirmed by research, however. The 2014 Erasmus Impact Study found no evidence that the employability-related personality traits – such as confidence, curiosity, serenity, tolerance of ambiguity, decisiveness, and vigour – of students participating in the Erasmus programme changed after the exchange; one study did not find evidence that participating in an online international collaborative learning module decreased ethnocentric attitudes among participating university students; a different study found no evidence that international research collaboration was linked to cost-efficiency in terms of scientific production.

The systematic review of empirical evidence also shed light on gaps in existing research. Little is known about the individual and institutional benefits of courses and degree programmes delivered through a transnational higher education consortium. There has been little rigorous research to assess the socio-cultural and political benefits of promoting transnational cooperation in higher education.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

In order for research on transnational higher education partnerships to be policy-relevant, it is especially important for more quantitative studies to adopt rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies, so that a causal link

between various forms of transnational higher education partnerships and relevant macro-, meso- and micro-level outcomes could be properly established. Rigorous case studies are also needed to better understand the challenges associated with implementing and sustaining transnational higher education partnerships, and the contextual forces that may amplify or mitigate the benefits of such partnerships. Last but not least, it is essential to develop a detailed documentation of the costs associated with various forms of transnational higher education partnerships. Only with solid evidence of both the benefits and costs of such partnerships can policymakers' questions about the cost-effectiveness of promoting transnational cooperation in higher education be answered.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Findings from a relatively small but growing body of empirical research suggest that transnational research collaboration in higher education is effective in increasing the quantity and quality of publications and patents. It strengthens institutional capacity for research and teaching and makes collaborating institutions more attractive for academics from other countries. Evidence also suggests that participation in international student mobility programmes is effective in increasing the foreign language proficiency and employability of university graduates.

Given the emerging evidence on these societal, institutional and individual benefits, the provision of incentives for transnational research collaboration and international student mobility appear to be viable policy options for governments that want to promote scientific excellence, increase the global visibility of higher education institutions, and promote the acquisition of foreign language skills.

For more details see: Daniela Crăciun, Kata Orosz, *Benefits and costs of transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education*. EENEE Analytical Report No. 36, October 2018, [http://www.eenee.de/dms/EENEE/Analytical\\_Reports/EENEE\\_AR36.pdf](http://www.eenee.de/dms/EENEE/Analytical_Reports/EENEE_AR36.pdf)