






Trends and Patterns of Research on Transnational Education: A Bibliometric Analysis with Scopus Data, 1972–2023

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Abstract

Transnational Education has experienced rapid global expansion over the past three decades, yet there are many underresearched aspects. This study presents the first bibliometric analysis that covers not only higher education but also other levels of education, including K–12. Drawing on 1,627 Scopus-indexed publications from 1972 to 2023, the findings show significant growth in TNE research, particularly since the 2010s. The UK, Australia, and the US are leading contributors, while Asian countries such as China, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Vietnam are emerging as key players. Thematic patterns vary by sector: internationalisation and institutional concerns dominate in HE, while socio-cultural and language acquisition issues feature prominently in K–12. The study highlights the significance of situating research on

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international schools in the broader TNE landscape, and identifies research gaps with implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

Keywords

Transnational education, TNE, cross-border education, international schools, bibliometric analysis, K-12 education, higher education

Introduction

Transnational education (TNE), the cross-border mobility of programmes, providers, or education services, has become a defining feature of international education across higher education (HE), vocational education and training (VET), and the growing K-12 sector (Knight & McNamara, 2017). Emerging from the 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services, the concept of TNE, also termed International Programme and Provider Mobility (IPPM), is defined by UNESCO/Council of Europe (2001) as education delivered in a country different from the awarding institution. Within this context, “providers” often refer to educational institutions, awarding bodies, or organisations that deliver TNE programmes. Wilkins and Huisman (2024) have broadened this definition to include the cross-border transfer of HE systems, cultures, and values, even when delivered domestically, thereby capturing more culturally embedded forms such as country-branded universities.

The growth in transnational HE (TNHE) has been substantial in recent years. For instance, the UK reported over 510,000 TNE students across 228 countries and territories in 2020–2021, representing a steady 12.7% increase from the previous year (Desai & Westphal, 2022). This unprecedented proliferation of TNE signals future expansion (Knight & Liu, 2017). TNHE typically involves program mobility (e.g., joint programmes, franchising) and institutional mobility (e.g., international branch campuses) (Knight & McNamara, 2017). At the K-12 level, international schools that deliver internationalized curricula or qualifications also fall within the scope of TNE, particularly under program mobility classifications (Wu & Koh, 2022). In recent years, a growing number of elite private schools have also entered the TNE landscape by opening overseas campuses (Bunnell et al., 2020). As of July 2021, more than 12,000 international schools operated globally, serving 5.68 million students (ISC Research, 2021).

TNE has evolved since the mid-1990s and attracted growing scholarly attention (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). Key reviews have mapped early themes and journals (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016), and outlined TNHE’s development in three phases: institutionalisation (1999–2004), development (2005–2014), and proliferation (2015–2022) (Dai et al., 2023). Dai et al. also highlighted major research gaps, including the absence of a universal quality assurance framework, limited analysis of stakeholder power dynamics, and a disconnect between policy and implementation. However, their

reviews only accounted for first-listed authors, overlooking contributions from co-authors, and focused predominantly on regional TNHE, limiting its comprehensiveness.

Building on these studies, this article offers a broader and more inclusive bibliometric analysis. In contrast to the regional scope of Dai et al.'s (2023) and the Western-centric reliance on databases in Kosmützky and Putty (2016), this study applies a significantly wider set of keywords (e.g., education hub, branch campus, joint university, and joint programme) and adopts a global, cross-sectorial perspective. In doing so, it addresses key limitations in both scope and representational bias.

A further contribution is the inclusion of the K–12 sector, which has been largely overlooked. Previous works often focus on the International Baccalaureate (Bores-García et al., 2023; Jaafar et al., 2023), school leadership (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018), or methodological concerns (Schippling, 2018). Pearce (2023), however, challenges traditional typologies and draws attention to the growing prominence of “internationally national” schools. Such conceptual shifts underscore the need to comprehensively map the K-12 TNE literature.

Using a bibliometric analysis of 1,627 Scopus-indexed publications from 1972 to 2023, this study provides a comparative overview of research patterns across educational levels. It addresses macro-level trends in knowledge production, extending bibliometric methods used in prior work (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022). Responding to gaps in the existing literature, this study makes a unique contribution by providing a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the TNE landscape, along with an updated TNE classification framework that encompasses all education sectors, including K-12. As such, the article offers valuable insights to inform future research, policy and practice. The following research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How are TNE publications distributed across different educational levels, and what are the volume and growth patterns for HE and K-12 TNE over time?

RQ2: What are the major contributors to TNE research in HE and K12 levels in terms of countries, authors, and research groups?

RQ3: What are the major topics in the HE and K-12 TNE literature, and how has the focus shifted over time?

Opportunities and Challenges of Transnational Education

As TNE becomes an increasingly prominent feature of international education, the literature has highlighted both its potential and its complexities. It enables students to access internationally recognised qualifications without relocating, reducing the financial burden of studying abroad (Knight & Liu, 2019). It potentially fosters cross-cultural exposure and pedagogical innovation by embedding global content into local learning environments (Phan et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of TNE as an alternative to disrupted overseas mobility (Sun et al., 2022).

From a policy perspective, TNE is often framed as mutually beneficial. Host countries can expand educational capacity, limit brain drain, and enhance system quality (Choudaha, 2019), while provider countries see TNE as a means to diversify revenue and enhance international university reputations, especially during stagnant international student recruitment periods (Healey, 2020). TNE also helps sustain international education capacity amidst policies that restrict inbound student flows to reduce net overseas migration in major providing countries like Australia, Canada, and the UK.

However, the expansion of TNE is accompanied by critical concerns. It can act as a form of soft power, allowing stronger nations to exert influence on weaker economies (Rizvi, 2019). Without sufficient localisation, imported curricula risk marginalising local knowledge and reproducing colonial hierarchies (Tran et al., 2019; 2017). Other concerns include unequal partnerships, English-language dominance, and weak quality assurance mechanisms (Knight & Liu, 2019).

Transnational Education Beyond Higher Education

TNE research remains uneven across education levels. Although TNHE is well-documented, other sectors such as K–12, early childhood education, and VET are underrecognised.

K–12 international schools, originally created for expatriate families (Hayden, 2011), have evolved into hybrid “internationally national” institutions that serve socio-economically privileged local populations while delivering foreign curricula (Pearce, 2023). These schools align with Wilkins and Huisman’s (2024) expanded definition of TNE, as they reflect the cross-border transfer of educational cultures and systems, even within domestic settings. Viewed through this lens, international schools, including those delivering foreign curricula to domestic student populations or operating under global brands, clearly fall within the contemporary scope of TNE.

Despite this alignment, the international school sector has traditionally developed as a distinct strand of international education research, often examined separately from TNE. This separation has obscured the fact that international schools represent a form of TNE (Adick, 2018), particularly when understood through UNESCO’s guideline (2001) and Knight and McNamara’s (2017) definition of IPPM. As a result, inconsistent terminology and limited conceptual clarity have persisted across educational levels, further compounded by the scarcity of theoretical studies on TNE (Knight & Liu, 2017). To address this gap, the present study includes search terms such as *international schools*, *offshore schools*, and *international schooling* to capture the broader K–12 TNE landscape.

Other sectors, including VET and lifelong learning, remain largely neglected. Offshore VET programmes, for example, are key to internationalisation strategies but rarely studied. This gap stems partly from data limitations and the stigma of VET as ‘second class’ or ‘low status’ in Asian societies (Tran & Dempsey, 2017, p. 247). Wilkins’ (2002) early study of British vocational qualifications in Oman is one of the few exceptions. A more inclusive definition and investigation of TNE is needed to capture these overlooked areas.

Transnational Education Delivery Modes

Under the General Agreement on Trade in Services framework categorises trade in education into four modes: program mobility, student mobility, institutional mobility, and staff mobility (Tilak, 2011). In TNE, the focus is on programme and provider mobility or arrangements, where students study in a country different from that of the awarding institution, distinct from traditional international student mobility (Tran et al., 2025; UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2001). While student mobility is not the defining feature of TNE, it often plays a facilitating role, as some students use TNE as a more affordable pathway to international study and global exposure (Li et al., 2021). However, articulation or pathway programmes, which often involve short-term mobility between partner institutions, support such transitions but are not formally classified as TNE (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2012; Knight & McNamara, 2017).

Knight and McNamara's (2017) classify TNE into independent and collaborative provision, depending on the relationship between home and host institutions. Independent TNE models are led entirely by the foreign provider, which assumes responsibility for curriculum, delivery, and quality assurance. While led by the home institution, independent models may involve limited host-country collaboration, mainly for regulatory or administrative purposes. In contrast, collaborative models, such as partnership, joint and dual degrees, and twinning, feature more balanced partnerships, with both parties involved in programme design, pedagogy, and quality assurance.

New partnership models have also emerged from edtech providers like Online Education Services and Educonomy. Another emerging model is that of country-branded universities, locally owned institutions that receive academic and organisational input from foreign providers without crossing national borders (Wilkins & Huisman, 2024). Although not traditional TNE providers, they often engage in joint or dual degrees and franchising, and are therefore included in this study where relevant.

While Knight and McNamara's framework was developed with HE in mind, it is adaptable to other sectors, including K–12. For instance, Burgess (2016) identifies three main modes of TNE at the school level: **franchising**, **twinning (including blended/online delivery)**, and **branch campuses**. This study builds on their models by extending the typology to include K–12 provision, as outlined in Table 1. However, in this study we classify franchised arrangements as a form of collaborative TNE provision, rather than independent provision as in Knight and McNamara's framework. This is because they involved shared responsibility: the home (foreign) university typically provides curriculum, teaching materials, and quality assurance, while the local partner institution delivers the programme. Increasing hybridity also means many TNE arrangements span multiple categories. For example, a joint degree delivered through an offshore branch campus may be considered both a “joint institutions” and an “international branch campus” programme.

Table 1. TNE Classification Framework.

Mode	A. Independent TNE provision	B. Collaborative TNE provision
Programme-based TNE	<p>1. External degree-awarding provision</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>external degree, external quality assurance</i></p>	<p>4. Validation / Franchised / Licensed programmes</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>validation, franchising, licensing, import/export</i></p> <p>5. Partnership programmes Commonly used terms: <i>joint/double/multiple degrees, twinning, dual diploma/certificate, accreditation credits</i></p>
Institution-based TNE	<p>2. International branch campus</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>satellite campus, offshore campus, overseas campus, foreign branch campus, international schools, offshore schools</i></p>	<p>6. Joint institutions / Schools / Campus facilities</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>co-developed, binational, co-founded, multinational, joint venture universities/colleges/schools</i></p>
Distance/ online TNE	<p>3. Self-study / Distance education</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>open university, MOOCs, online academies, international/cross-border homeschooling</i></p>	<p>7. Distance education with local academic partner</p> <p>Commonly used terms: <i>partner-supported online or blended distance education</i></p>

Source: Authors developed from Knight & McNamara (2017) and Burgess (2016).

Methodology

This study employs bibliometric analysis, which analyzes bibliographic data from a large set of documents rather than reviewing individual literature or synthesizing research findings. Scopus was chosen as the data source due to its broader coverage compared to other scientific databases such as Web of Sciences (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2022).

The data combines results from two searches: one focused on *transnational education* (with existing literature mainly in higher education) and the other on *international schools/offshore schools* (mainly K-12). Due to the distinct terminology and research traditions in these areas, separate search queries were used to ensure comprehensive coverage, incorporating various terms related to TNE as detailed in Table 1 above.

The searches were executed using the advanced search form of Scopus at 3:00 PM on May 6th, 2024. The first query is detailed below:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (“transnational education*” OR “cross-border education*” OR “offshore education*” OR “borderless education*” OR “transnational higher education” OR “cross-border higher education*” OR “crossborder higher education*” OR “offshore higher education*” OR “cross-border degree*” OR “cross-border tertiary education*” OR “offshore program*” OR “transnational program*” OR “offshore teaching” OR “offshore delivery”) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“international branch campus*” OR “branch campus*” OR “educational hub*” OR “validation program*” OR “franchise program*” OR “partnership program*” OR “joint university*” OR “joint college*” OR “staff mobility” OR “program mobility” OR “institution* mobility” OR “higher education”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (transnation* OR cross-border OR borderless OR offshore)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, “final”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOCT”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “BUSI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ARTS”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ECON”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “PSYC”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “DECI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “MULT”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ch”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “cp”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “bk”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “re”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)) AND EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2024))

The second query is detailed as below:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (“international school*” OR “offshore school*”) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, “final”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “SOCT”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “BUSI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ARTS”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “ECON”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “PSYC”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “DECI”) OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “MULT”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ch”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “cp”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “bk”) OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “re”)) AND (EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2024)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”))

The searches initially yielded 2,168 and 1,234 publications, respectively. During the screening phase, Scopus filters were utilized to exclude irrelevant documents with detailed criteria as follows:

- Document types: article, conference paper, book, book chapter, review;
- Subject area: within Social Sciences, including Business, Arts and Humanities, Economics, Psychology, Decision Sciences, Social Sciences, and Multidisciplinary;
- Language: English;
- Published year: exclude 2024

During the eligibility screening, the first and third authors independently reviewed the abstracts and full texts to ensure alignment with the TNE classification framework

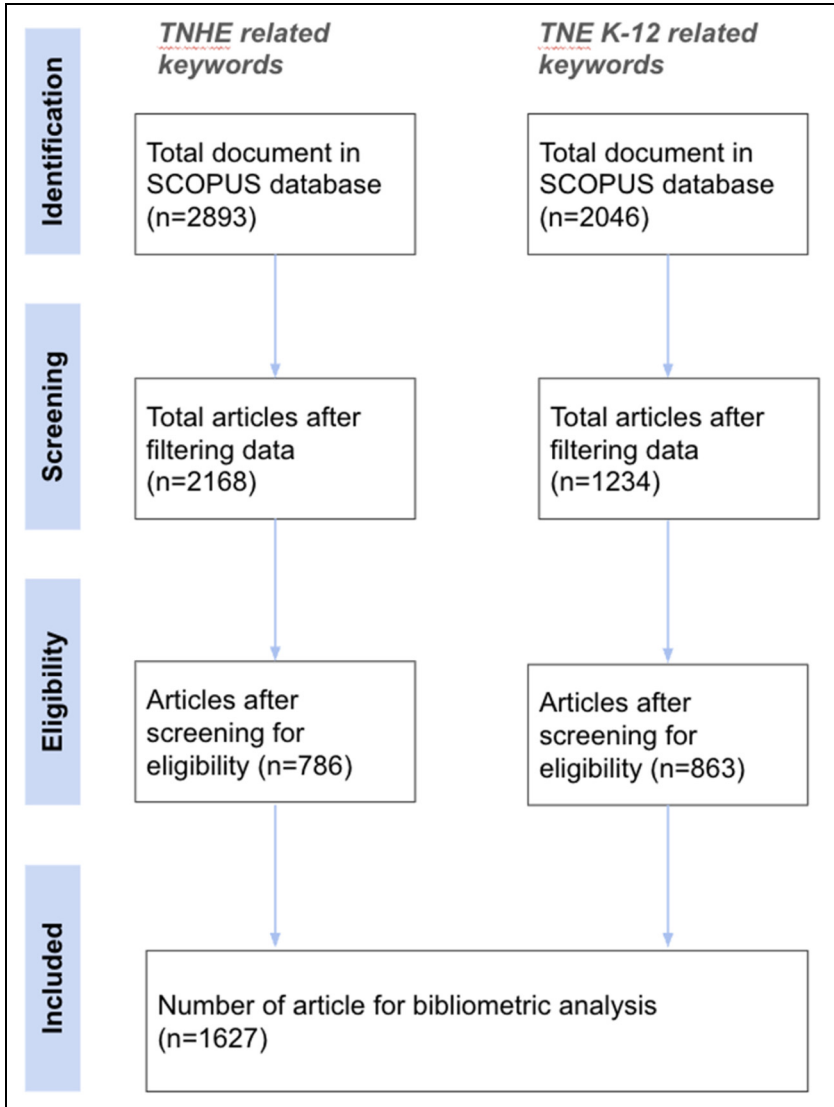


Figure 1. The PRISMA Diagram Presenting the Analysis Dataset of the TNE Literature.

presented in Table 1, excluding works that fell outside the study's scope. The exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Studies focusing solely on traditional international student mobility (i.e., students studying full-time overseas in non-TNE programmes or institutions);

Table 2. Publication Shares Across Educational Levels, 1972–2023.

Levels	Number of publications	Share of publications
General Education (K-12)	839	51.57
Higher Education	755	46.40
Early Childhood Education	21	1.29
Professional Training	5	0.31
Vocational Education and Training	3	0.18
Lifelong learning	1	0.06
Total	1627	100%

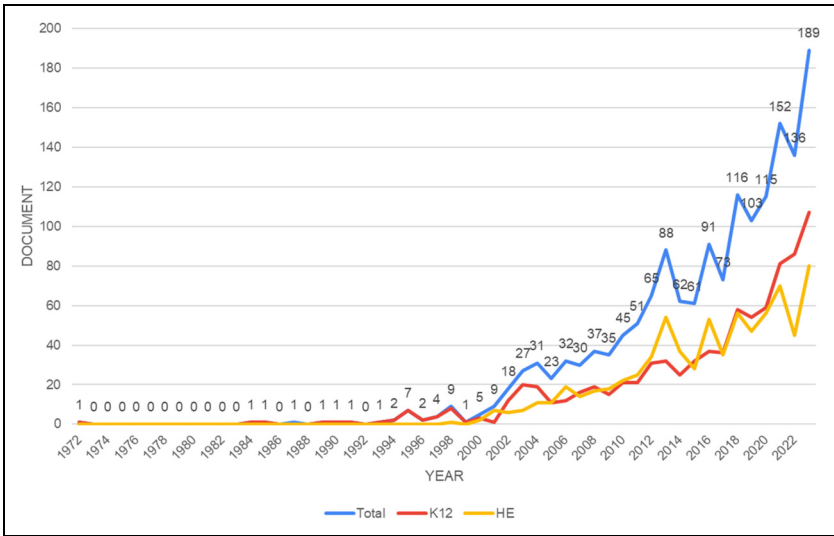


Figure 2. The Growth of TNE Literature in the Scopus Database, 1972–2023.

- Research on international education lacking reference to programme or provider mobility;
- Historical accounts of international education not related to TNE;
- References to cities or regions as education hubs without discussion of specific TNE programmes or institutions;
- Globally recognised programmes (e.g., Montessori) without evidence of transnational delivery by international providers;
- Studies unrelated to TNE, such as those on transnational politics or the activities of international agencies.

Following this process, 786 and 863 eligible publications were retained from the two queries, respectively, resulting in a final dataset of 1,649 publications for bibliometric analysis (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Top 10 Countries/Regions in Terms of the Number of the TNE Publications, 1972–2023.

Ranking	Country/Region	Number of Publications					
		Total	HE	K12	TC(R)	CPD	AYP
1	The UK	323	155	165	5,507 (1)	17	2015
2	Australia	257	167	82	3,967 (3)	15	2014
3	The USA	223	87	126	3,946 (2)	18	2014
4	China	131	76	53	923 (6)	7	2020
5	Hong Kong	128	47	77	2,061 (5)	16	2016
6	Malaysia	67	33	34	687 (9)	10	2017
7	Canada	65	26	38	2,775 (4)	43	2016
8	Netherlands	53	32	20	797 (7)	15	2016
9	The UAE	40	32	8	732 (8)	18	2018
10	Germany	40	21	19	532 (10)	13	2018

NP = Number of Publications; **TC(R)** = Total Citations (Ranking); **CPD** = Citations per Document; **AYP** = Average Year of Publications.

Findings and Discussion

Distribution Across Educational Levels

Table 2 presents the distribution of publications by educational level, based on manual review of abstracts and full texts. K–12 and HE dominate the landscape, accounting for 51.6% and 46.4% of all publications, respectively—reflecting the longstanding scholarly attention to these sectors.

By contrast, Early Childhood Education, Professional Training, VET, and Lifelong Learning are significantly underrepresented, together comprising less than 2% of the literature, with a maximum of 11 citations. This points to a substantial research gap and indicates that TNE’s influence outside K–12 and HE remains largely unexplored.

Publication Growth

Figure 2 highlights the growth of TNE literature across HE, K-12, and all educational sectors. Research on international schooling began in the early 1970s, nearly two decades before the first study on TNHE. This early reflects the rise of international schools in the 1920s, which served children of expatriate diplomats, transnational organization employees, and foreign military personnel (Hayden, 2011). The first article discussed types of international schools and the need for a global university entrance requirement, leading to the establishment of the International Baccalaureate (Terwilliger, 1972). In comparison, the earliest TNHE publication emerged in 1998, examining TNE models delivered by Australian institutions (Adams, 1998).

Both fields expanded markedly from the 2000s, with accelerated growth from the 2010s onward. K–12 TNE consistently outpaced TNHE in volume, averaging 16 annual

publications versus 12 between 2000–2010. This trend continued from 2011–2023, with K–12 generating 50 publications annually, slightly ahead of HE’s 47 publications.

TNHE literature shows more fluctuation, likely due to its later emergence and rapidly diversifying delivery models, such as MOOCs, education hubs, and international branch campuses (Knight & McNamara, 2017). Changing scope and terminology have affected indexing and keyword consistency. In contrast, K–12 TNE, with more stable institutional structures, has maintained consistent themes and terminology, leading to smoother bibliometric patterns.

Geographical Distribution

Table 3 reveals the countries most active in TNE research. The UK leads with 323 publications and 5,507 citations, reflecting its long-standing engagement in the field. Australia, the US, China, and Hong Kong follow the UK in research output. Among the top three, the UK maintains a balanced focus on both HE and K-12 sectors, while Australia leans towards HE, and the US towards K-12.

Canada stands out with the highest average citation rate per paper (43) despite only 67 publications, nearly triple the UK’s rate (17 citations). This can be attributed to the affiliation of the field’s most-cited author, a point to be elaborated on later.

Among the top 10 most prolific countries, Australia, the UK, the US, and Canada are major sending nations, while China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the UAE are major host markets. Asia’s rise as a TNE hub is driven by rapid economic development, higher education investment, and proactive policy strategies to promote international partnerships (British Council, 2024; Huang, 2007). The presence of major international branch campuses in these countries also reinforces their role as TNE hubs (Knight, 2011).

China, notably, has also become a TNE exporter, establishing over 100 institutions and programmes in nearly 50 countries. This includes Confucius Institutes which are non-profit centres under China’s Ministry of Education promoting Chinese language and cultural outreach, as part of its “going out” strategy (Tang & Tang, 2022). China’s dual role as both a major TNE provider and recipient could be attributed to its growing economic power and increasing demand for international education. As a recipient, it is seeking to enhance its domestic education system through international partnerships (Huang, 2003) and as a provider, it leverages educational resources to expand global influence (Tang & Tang, 2022).

Top Authors and Co-Authorship Patterns

Table 4 highlights the top 20 scholars (10 each for HE and K-12) in TNE literature. These authors collectively contributed 23.5% of HE and 17.5% of K-12 TNE publications. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate their co-authorship dynamics, revealing both independent researchers and strong networks within each sector.

Table 4. Top Authors in Terms of TNE Publication Number in HE and K-12 Sectors, 1972–2023.

Rank	Author	Affiliation	NP	TC(R)	CPD	YP	Rank	Author	Affiliation	NP	TC(R)	CPD	YP
K-12 Sector													
1	Wilkins, Stephen	The British University in Dubai, UAE	21	881 (2)	42	2012–2023	1	Bunnel, Tristan	University of Bath, UK	33	581 (3)	18	2005–2023
1	Mok, Ka Ho	Lingnan University, Hong Kong	21	549 (3)	26	2008–2021	2	Poole, Adam	Beijing Foreign Studies University, China	23	184 (6)	8	2019–2023
3	Knight, Jane	University of Toronto, Canada	14	2265 (1)	162	2006–2023	3	Hayden, Mary	University of Bath, UK	18	695 (2)	38	1994–2022
4	Waters Johanna L.	University of Oxford, UK	12	357 (6)	30	2012–2022	4	Thompson, Jeff	University of Bath, UK	14	826 (1)	68	1994–2022
5	Leung, Maggie W.H.	Utrecht University, Netherlands	11	329 (8)	30	2012–2022	5	Lee, Moosung	University of Canberra, Australia	10	277 (4)	28	2011–2021
6	Ziguras, Christopher	RMIT University, Australia	10	477 (4)	48	2001–2014	6	Bailey, Lucy	University of Bahrain, Bahrain	9	149 (15)	17	2015–2023
6	Han, Xiao	Lingnan University, Hong Kong	10	198 (17)	20	2016–2023	6	Gardner-mctaggart, Alexander	University of Manchester, UK	9	150 (14)	19	2016–2023
8	Healey, Nigel M.	Fiji National University, Fiji	8	327 (9)	41	2008–2020	8	Tarc, Paul	University of Western Ontario, Canada	8	176 (9)	22	2009–2022
8	Pyvis, David	Curtin University of Technology, Australia	8	249 (7)	31	2005–2013	8	Zhang, Zheng	The University of Western Ontario, Canada	8	59 (37)	7	2014–2023
8	Huisman, Jeroen	Ghent University, Belgium	8	542 (5)	68	2012–2021	10	Wright, Ewan	Education Ontario, Canada	7	161 (12)	23	2014–2023

NP = Number of Publications; **TC(R)** = Total Citations (Ranking); **CPD** = Citations per Document; **YP** = Years of Publications.

*Note: Authors may have multiple affiliations; however, in this study, we documented the affiliations associated with the highest number of publications.

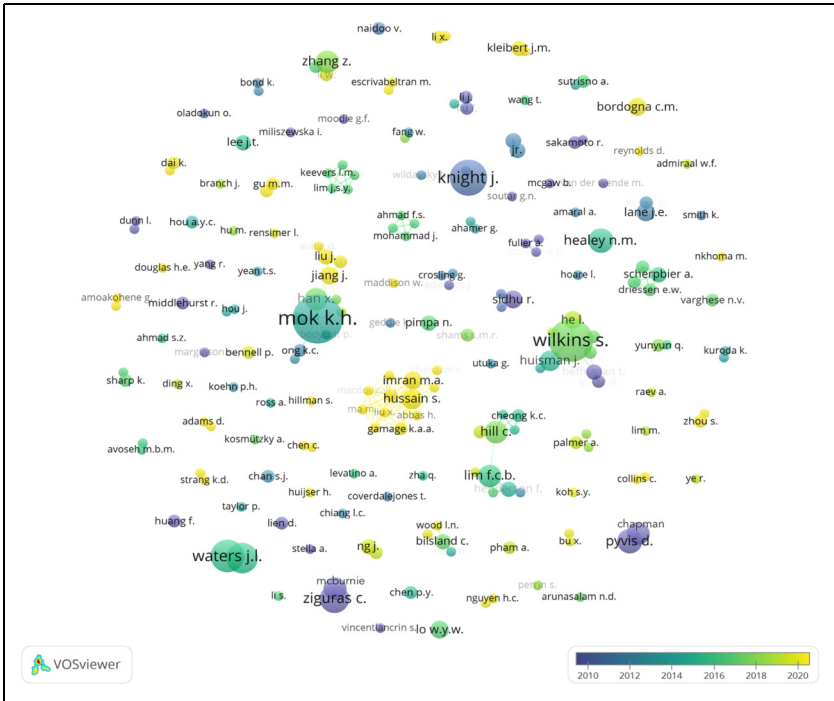


Figure 3. Co-Authorship Network in TNE in HE Sector, 1998–2023 (Display of 207, Threshold Two Publications).

HE Sector. Stephen Wilkins (British University in Dubai), Ka Ho Mok (Lingnan University, Hong Kong), and Jane Knight (University of Toronto) are the leading figures in TNHE research. Wilkins and Mok each produce 21 documents, though Wilkins has higher total citations and citation rates. Knight, also with 21 publications, leads in total citations (2,265) and citations per document (162), largely due to her seminal contributions to internationalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and education hubs (Knight, 2011).

Regarding collaboration, Knight tends to publish independently, while Mok and Wilkins actively engage with both established and emerging scholars. Notably, Mok collaborates with early-career researchers like Jiang, Liu, and Wang, whereas Wilkins connects with both seasoned (Heffernan, Huisman) and early-career scholars (He, Annabi). Other established scholars, such as Pyvis and Chapman, Ziguras and McBurnie, and Waters and Leung, also engage in frequent co-authorship.

A newer network led by Sajjad Hussain (University of Glasgow) has gained visibility since 2019, focusing on TNE in engineering and the impact of COVID-19.

These findings differ from Dai et al.’s (2023) review of WoS-indexed studies, which found limited collaboration in TNHE. This discrepancy highlights how database choice

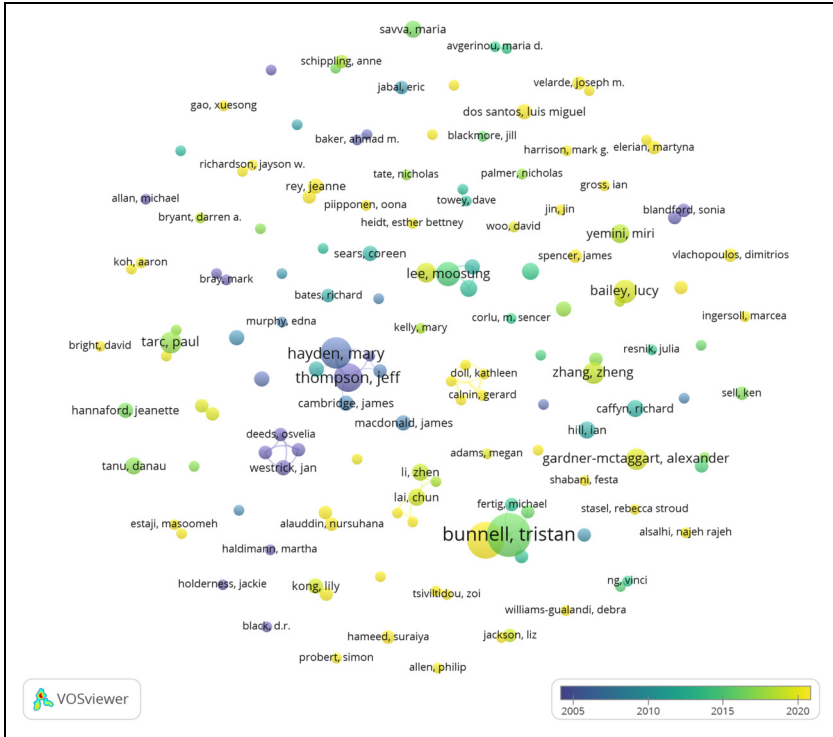


Figure 4. Co-authorship Network in TNE in K-12 Sector, 1972–2022 (Display of 142, Threshold Two Publications).

affects the portrayal of scholarly networks, with Scopus offering broader coverage and likely a more accurate depiction of the field.

K-12 Sector. The top K–12 authors have sustained active engagement. Tristan Bunnell (University of Bath) leads with 33 publications, often co-authoring with Adam Poole (Beijing Foreign Studies University), who ranks second with 23. Together, they form the most prominent co-authorship network in the field.

Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson (University of Bath) are the most cited researchers, with 695 and 826 citations respectively. They are central to a long-standing network of seasoned scholars, including Cambridge, Walker, and McDonald. Their research has laid the groundwork for understanding key aspects of international schools, such as their growth (Hayden, 2011), relationship to international education (Hayden & Thompson, 1995), the concept of internationalism (Cambridge & Thompson, 2004), and the experiences of third-culture kids (Fail et al., 2004).

HE and K-12 Comparison. Keyword analysis across HE and K–12 TNE research reveals both shared and sector-specific priorities. Common keywords such as “*transnational education*,” “*internationalisation*,” “*globalisation*” and “*culture*” indicate a shared emphasis on cross-border educational practices, the impact of globalization on education, and the cultural dimensions of transnational learning environments. This common ground underscores the global nature of TNE, where educational systems strive to integrate international perspectives and practices. Both sectors also highlight specific geographical regions of interest, with a strong emphasis on Asian countries. Additionally, they both highlight issues of quality assurance, curriculum development, and the experiences of students and teachers in transnational educational settings. Finally, The inclusion of “*Covid-19*” reflects the pandemic’s profound disruption and transformation of TNE practices.

However, the differences between the two sets of keywords are more pronounced and sector-specific. HE keywords delve into the **economic, institutional, and operational** aspects of TNE, with terms like “*quality assurance*,” “*capacity building*,” “*education hub*,” “*international branch campus*,” “*partnerships*” and “*student satisfaction*” appearing frequently. This indicates a greater focus on regulatory frameworks, quality standards, and economic implications in the HE sector.

In contrast, K-12 keywords emphasize **socio-cultural dimensions** of TNE, with topics related to schooling, identity, language acquisition, and cultural aspects. The emphasis on identity and cultural adaptation is evident from keywords such as “*third culture kid*,” “*global nomad*,” “*multicultural education*,” “*intercultural understanding*,” and “*identity*,” reflecting the personal and social aspects of TNE in younger students. Language-related terms such as “*bilingualism*,” “*multilingual education*,” and “*literacy*” reflect interest in diverse linguistic contexts and educational outcomes.

Emerging Topics in HE. Beyond traditional keywords like TNHE quality assurance, accreditation, and student motivations and experiences (Dai et al., 2023; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016), our findings reveal emerging topical interests.

Recent TNHE research has expanded to include topics such as “*English Medium Instruction*” (EMI), “*marketization*,” “*sustainability*,” “*international student mobility*,” and “*identity*,” though these areas remain emerging. These themes provide nuanced insights into the evolving nature of student identity in TNHE programs (Ou & Gu, 2021), the increasing prevalence of EMI and its impact on student learning and employability (Tran & Nguyen, 2018), and the educational inequalities associated with EMI in TNE models (Barnawi, 2022). Additionally, they examine the development of targeted and diversified TNE markets to ensure sustainable business models and revenue streams.

“*International branch campus*” (IBC) remains the most discussed delivery mode, aligning with Knight & Liu’s (2019) findings. Older terms like “*franchise*,” “*offshore campus*,” “*twinning*,” and “*distance education*” now appear less common. The continued scholarly focus on IBCs persists despite only 7% of UK TNE students enrolling

in them in 2020–202 (Desai & Westphal, 2022), likely due to their visibility and perceived complexity (Escriva-Beltran et al., 2019). While Altbach and Wit (2020) argue IBCs attract more research than warranted, Wilkins (2020) contends that IBCs are a distinctive and intriguing organizational form, deserving attention across various areas such as governance, pedagogy, policy, and quality assurance.

Sustainability is another emerging theme, reflecting a shift from growth to long-term impact and legacy (Hill & Lim, 2022). This is particularly salient for TNE-exporting countries like Australia, the UK, and Canada, which face inbound mobility restrictions due to migration pressures and accommodation shortages. Additionally, TNE is increasingly seen as a climate-responsive alternative to traditional student flows, reducing carbon emissions while supporting global educational access (Tran et al., 2023).

Emerging Topics in K-12. Recent K–12 research increasingly addresses international school teachers' well-being and professional identity in precarious contexts. Poole and Bunnell (2021) describe "*precarious privilege*" to capture the tension between job security and the perceived lifestyle benefits of international school employment. Challenges include short-term contracts (Bunnell & Poole, 2023) and adaptation pressure (Stroud, 2022). Resilience is a growing theme: Poole (2020) introduces "*resilience capital*", describing how teachers develop adaptive capacities that translate into social and cultural capital. Strong leadership, collegial support, and a sense of community are critical to well-being (Wigford & Higgins, 2019).

Leadership in international schools is another growing area, emphasizing its role in shaping school culture, practices, and outcomes. Effective leaders must navigate high staff turnover, intercultural complexity, and board relations (Gardner-McTaggart, 2018). Leadership practices that foster trust, collaboration, and positive school culture are central to sustaining staff and student outcomes (Morrison, 2018).

Finally, despite increasing research on international schools, the term "transnational education" remains underused in this literature (just 12 occurrences since 2014). Greater consistency in applying the TNE framework to international schools would enhance their recognition as an integral part of the global TNE landscape.

Conclusion

This bibliometric review of 1,627 Scopus-indexed publications (1972–2023) reveals substantial growth and diversification in TNE research. The UK, Australia, and the US dominate publication output, while China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam are emerging as key contributors. K-12 and HE remain the primary research foci, though early childhood education, VET, and lifelong learning remain notably under-represented. The findings highlight the dominant themes of internationalization and globalization, alongside sector-specific interests such as economic and institutional concerns in HE and socio-cultural and language issues in K-12.

Theoretically, it highlights the need to expand and refine existing TNE classification frameworks to encompass all educational levels, especially K-12. Positioning

international schools within the broader TNE discourse helps bridge conceptual gaps and calls for a more inclusive typology. Such integration could enhance cross-sector understanding and enhance data collection practices (Knight & Liu, 2019).

Practically, the limited representation of TNHE in scholarly outputs, particularly in books and conference papers, points to a need for dedicated dissemination platforms. Publishers and editors should be encouraged to support TNHE-focused publications that inform policy, practice, and scholarship. While national and international conferences (e.g., UK–East Asia Dialogue, IEAA TNE Forums, Transnational Education Conference (UUKi)) serve policymakers and practitioners, there remains a need for academic forums that foster deeper scholarly engagement and encourage wider indexing of conference proceedings. Building a community of practice among researchers, institutions, and policy stakeholders is key to advancing TNHE implementation.


This analysis also identifies several priorities for future research. First, more work is needed on underexplored sectors such as VET, early childhood education, and lifelong learning - areas growing in global significance but currently overlooked. Second, despite distinct sectoral interests, greater attention should be paid to the links between K–12 and HE TNE, particularly student transitions from international schools to TNE universities and the cross-sectoral experiences of faculty. Third, although international branch campuses (IBCs) remain a focal point of TNHE research, other delivery modes, including franchises, joint programmes, distance education, and partnerships with edtech firms, deserve further scrutiny due to their expanding influence and inherent uncertainties (P. Altbach & Wit, 2020). Additionally, the socio-cultural and economic impacts of TNE on local communities remain poorly understood and merit closer investigation. Another emerging area for exploration is the influence of digital transformation on TNE development, regulatory frameworks, and teaching and learning practices.

While offering a comprehensive macro-level perspective, this study is subject to several limitations. First, some relevant TNE works were omitted due to Scopus indexing limitations, despite meeting search criteria (Huang, 2003; Teichler, 2004; Wilkins, 2016). Second, several authors share commonalities in their family names and initials (such as Li X. and Li W.), leading to minor inaccuracies in author analysis findings. Third, the use of English-only sources may have overlooked non-English literature. Fourthly, graduate theses and dissertations, rich in methodological diversity but not indexed in Scopus, were not included (e.g., Sughnani, 2019; Truong, 2018), limiting a fuller understanding of the TNE landscape. Lastly, inconsistencies in author-assigned keywords may have constrained the depth of the keyword analysis. Future research could address these gaps, adopt mixed-methods designs, and explore evolving research directions within the global TNE landscape.


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