

Transnational Education as a National Strategy: A Policy Analysis of the United Arab Emirates as an Emerging Global Education Hub

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Abstract

Transnational education (TNE) has become a central component of the United Arab Emirates' strategy to position itself as a global education hub and to support the transition toward a knowledge-based economy. This study adopts a qualitative secondary research design based on policy document analysis and thematic literature review to examine TNE as a national strategy in the UAE. Data were drawn from national policy frameworks, international organization reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature on cross-border higher education and international branch campuses. The analysis identified five key themes shaping the UAE's TNE ecosystem: strategic positioning and nation branding, governance and regulatory complexity, marketization and competition, access and equity challenges, and sustainability and national capacity building. The findings suggest that while the UAE has successfully attracted international institutions and enhanced its global academic visibility, persistent challenges remain regarding regulatory coherence, inclusivity, and long-term contribution to local knowledge production. The study contributes to policy debates by emphasizing the need to shift from growth-oriented TNE strategies toward more integrated, equitable, and development-focused models.

Keywords: *Transnational education; Higher education policy; United Arab Emirates; Education hub; International branch campuses; Cross-border higher education*

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Introduction

The globalization of higher education has significantly reshaped the ways in which knowledge, academic credentials, and institutional influence cross national borders. One of the most prominent manifestations of this transformation is the expansion of transnational education (TNE), broadly defined as educational provision in which learners are located in a different country from the institution awarding the qualification (Knight, 2011; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012). Over the past two decades, governments have increasingly reframed TNE from a peripheral internationalization activity into a strategic policy instrument linked to economic diversification, global competitiveness, and human capital development (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Healey, 2023).

Globally, transnational education has expanded through multiple delivery models, including international branch campuses, franchised programs, dual degrees, articulation arrangements, and online cross-border provision. This growth has been particularly pronounced in regions positioning themselves as international education hubs, where TNE is embedded within national development strategies rather than operating solely as a market-driven activity (Knight, 2011). Scholars have argued that education hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represent a new phase in the internationalization of higher education, characterized by deliberate state intervention, regulatory engineering, and geopolitical ambition (Wilkins, 2020; Zhang, 2024).

Among these emerging hubs, the United Arab Emirates has become one of the most concentrated sites of transnational higher education worldwide. The country hosts a large number of international branch campuses from the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, France, and India, with Dubai and Abu Dhabi functioning as regional centers for cross-border higher education provision (Bridi, 2020; Wilkins, 2010). The expansion of TNE in the UAE is closely aligned with broader national policy frameworks such as UAE Vision 2031 and Centennial 2071, which emphasize the development of a knowledge-based economy, innovation capacity, and global connectivity. From a policy perspective, transnational

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education in the UAE is therefore not treated merely as an education sector phenomenon but as a strategic mechanism for national development and global positioning.

Despite its rapid growth and apparent success, the UAE's TNE ecosystem raises important policy questions. Existing research has highlighted tensions surrounding regulatory fragmentation, quality assurance consistency, institutional sustainability, affordability, and the limited integration of branch campuses into national research ecosystems (Bridi, 2020; Wilkins & Huisman, 2021). Furthermore, while TNE has expanded access to internationally recognized qualifications within the country, concerns persist regarding whether this access is socially inclusive or disproportionately concentrated among affluent domestic and expatriate populations (Bhuan, 2016; Wilkins, 2020). These debates reflect broader global concerns about whether transnational education serves primarily as a market-oriented export industry or as a genuine contributor to equitable human capital development.

Although a growing body of literature examines international branch campuses and transnational education globally, fewer studies adopt an explicit policy analysis lens focused on the UAE as a national strategy. Much of the existing work emphasizes institutional management, student experience, or market positioning, while comparatively less attention has been given to how state policy frameworks, governance structures, and regulatory architectures shape the long-term sustainability of the UAE's education hub model. This represents an important gap, particularly given the country's ambition to transition from an education importer to a global knowledge producer.

Accordingly, this study undertakes a policy-based secondary analysis of transnational education in the United Arab Emirates. Drawing upon policy documents and reports from national authorities and international organizations, as well as relevant academic literature, the paper examines the strategic objectives underpinning the UAE's TNE model, the governance and regulatory mechanisms through which it is managed, and the key challenges affecting its long-term effectiveness. By situating the UAE within broader debates on transnational education and education hubs, the study seeks to

contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how TNE functions as a national policy instrument in emerging knowledge economies

The revision of the speciality literature.

Transnational education (TNE) has been conceptualized as a mode of cross-border higher education in which learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based (Knight, 2011). This broad definition encompasses multiple delivery modes, including international branch campuses, franchising, twinning programs, articulation agreements, and increasingly, digitally mediated provision. Scholars argue that the expansion of TNE reflects a shift in the internationalization of higher education from student mobility toward program and institutional mobility (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Wilkins and Huisman (2012) conceptualize international branch campuses as a strategic institutional response to global competition, enabling universities to enhance reputation, expand markets, and diversify revenue streams. Similarly, Healey (2023) argues that contemporary TNE has evolved from opportunistic market expansion into a structurally embedded component of global higher education systems. This evolution has intensified debates around governance, quality assurance, and the role of the state in regulating cross-border provision.

Knight (2011) further introduces the concept of “education hubs” to describe countries that deliberately position themselves as regional centers for international education through coordinated policy interventions. In this framing, TNE becomes not only an institutional strategy but also a national policy instrument, closely tied to geopolitical influence and economic development objectives.

Global Growth of International Branch Campuses and Education Hubs
The growth of international branch campuses (IBCs) has been widely documented in the literature. Wilkins and Huisman (2021) argue that IBC expansion has matured into a relatively stable global market, with host countries competing to attract reputable foreign institutions. Zhang’s (2024) scientometric review of IBC research demonstrates a significant increase in scholarly attention over the past decade,

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indicating the growing importance of this phenomenon within higher education research.

Education hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are often cited as emblematic of this new phase of internationalization. These countries actively deploy higher education as part of broader national branding and development strategies (Knight, 2011). Unlike traditional sending countries such as the United Kingdom or Australia, hub countries are characterized by strong government involvement in regulating, financing, and strategically shaping transnational education ecosystems.

Bridi (2020) notes that in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, TNE has been explicitly linked to national visions for post-oil economic transformation. Rather than functioning solely as private market ventures, international branch campuses in the Gulf often operate within policy frameworks designed to attract foreign investment, develop human capital, and enhance international prestige.

The UAE has emerged as one of the most densely populated locations globally for international branch campuses. Wilkins (2010) provides one of the earliest systematic analyses of higher education expansion in the UAE, highlighting how rapid market liberalization and competition reshaped the sector. Subsequent research by Wilkins (2020) shows that universities operating in the UAE increasingly adopt differentiated positioning strategies in response to competitive pressures, regulatory requirements, and student expectations.

Bridi (2020) specifically examines transnational higher education in the UAE, arguing that the country represents a hybrid governance model combining market-driven provision with strong state regulation. This model has allowed the UAE to attract prestigious foreign institutions while maintaining a degree of oversight over quality assurance. However, Bridi also notes persistent challenges related to sustainability, institutional dependency on expatriate faculty, and limited integration with national research ecosystems.

Bhuian (2016) further highlights concerns about the long-term sustainability of Western branch campuses in the Gulf region, noting that student perceptions of value, institutional reputation, and employability outcomes significantly influence the viability of TNE

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provision. These findings suggest that while the UAE has been successful in attracting institutions, maintaining long-term legitimacy and stability remains an ongoing policy challenge.

A central theme in the literature concerns the governance and regulation of transnational education. Wilkins and Huisman (2012) argue that international branch campuses operate in complex regulatory environments where institutions must simultaneously comply with home-country expectations and host-country accreditation systems. This dual accountability often generates operational tensions and governance complexity.

Healey (2023) critiques the market-oriented logic underpinning much of contemporary TNE, arguing that excessive commercialization risks undermining academic integrity and social responsibility. He advocates for stronger regulatory frameworks that prioritize social justice, equity, and long-term educational value over short-term financial gains. These concerns are particularly relevant for education hub countries such as the UAE, where the rapid expansion of private and foreign provision has sometimes outpaced the development of fully coherent regulatory systems.

Wilkins and Huisman (2021) emphasize that late entrants into mature TNE markets—such as newer international branch campuses in the UAE—face intensified pressures related to reputation-building, differentiation, and regulatory compliance. This suggests that host-country policy frameworks play a critical role in shaping not only institutional success but also the overall sustainability of the national education hub model.

Although TNE is frequently promoted as a mechanism for expanding access to international-quality education, scholars question whether this access is equitably distributed. Bhuian (2016) argues that high tuition fees at branch campuses in the Gulf region often position TNE as an elite pathway, accessible primarily to affluent domestic and expatriate populations. Wilkins (2020) similarly observes that student recruitment strategies in the UAE tend to prioritize international branding and market positioning rather than inclusivity.

Altbach and Knight (2007) caution that the globalization of higher education may reproduce existing inequalities if cross-border provision primarily serves commercial rather than developmental objectives. From this perspective, TNE risks becoming an export

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industry rather than a genuine contributor to national human capital development.

These critiques highlight the importance of policy frameworks that explicitly integrate equity objectives into TNE strategies. Without such alignment, the long-term contribution of transnational education to inclusive national development remains uncertain.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into international branch campuses, institutional strategies, and student experiences, fewer studies explicitly examine transnational education through a comprehensive policy analysis lens focused on the UAE. Much of the scholarship concentrates on micro-level dynamics, such as institutional management or student perceptions, rather than macro-level governance and national strategy (Bridi, 2020; Wilkins & Huisman, 2021).

Furthermore, although education hubs are frequently discussed conceptually (Knight, 2011), there remains a need for deeper empirical and analytical engagement with how national policy architectures shape the long-term sustainability of TNE ecosystems. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing policy documents and academic literature to critically examine transnational education as a national strategy in the UAE.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative systematic policy analysis design combined with structured thematic synthesis to examine transnational education (TNE) as a national strategy in the United Arab Emirates. Data were drawn from three categories of secondary sources: (1) national policy and regulatory documents related to higher education and TNE in the UAE (including strategic frameworks and accreditation guidelines), (2) reports published by international organizations involved in higher education governance (e.g., UNESCO, OECD, British Council), and (3) peer-reviewed academic literature on transnational education, international branch campuses, and education hubs. A structured search strategy was applied using Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed databases, and major academic publishers (Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and SAGE),

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employing keywords such as “transnational education,” “international branch campuses,” “education hubs,” “UAE higher education policy,” and “TNE governance.” Sources were included if they were published between 2007 and 2025, peer-reviewed (for academic literature), and directly relevant to TNE policy, governance, or internationalization, with explicit relevance to the UAE or comparable education hub contexts. The final analytical corpus comprised 21 documents. These materials were analyzed through a three-stage thematic synthesis process involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which enabled the identification of five dominant themes: strategic positioning and nation branding, governance and regulatory architecture, marketization and competition, access and equity challenges, and sustainability and national capacity building. Analytical rigor was strengthened through triangulation across multiple source types and by maintaining consistency between emerging themes and established theoretical frameworks. As the study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary data, no human participants were involved and ethical approval was not required.

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

Following thematic analysis of policy documents and academic literature, five dominant themes emerged that characterize transnational education (TNE) as a national strategy in the United Arab Emirates: (a) strategic positioning and nation branding, (b) governance and regulatory architecture, (c) marketization and competition, (d) access and equity challenges, and (e) sustainability and national capacity building. These themes are presented below. Strategic Positioning and Nation Branding: The findings indicate that TNE in the UAE functions as a deliberate national strategy aimed at global positioning rather than merely an education sector activity. Policy documents emphasize education as a driver of the knowledge economy, innovation, and international competitiveness. Knight’s (2011) framework on education hubs is particularly applicable to the UAE, where higher education is used to enhance geopolitical visibility

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and global reputation. Wilkins (2010) demonstrates that the rapid expansion of higher education institutions in Dubai and Abu Dhabi was closely linked to economic diversification and global city branding strategies. Bridi (2020) further confirms that international branch campuses in the UAE are embedded within national development agendas rather than operating independently as market-driven ventures. This indicates that TNE is structurally aligned with long-term state objectives rather than short-term institutional gains.

Governance and Regulatory Architecture: A second major theme concerns governance complexity. The analysis reveals that the UAE operates a multi-layered regulatory system involving federal and emirate-level authorities. While this structure has enabled institutional flexibility and rapid expansion, it also introduces regulatory fragmentation. Wilkins and Huisman (2012) argue that international branch campuses often experience governance tension due to dual accountability to both home-country and host-country quality assurance systems. This dynamic continues to be observed in more recent scholarship, with contemporary studies emphasizing that regulatory misalignment and overlapping jurisdictions remain persistent challenges in cross-border higher education governance (Lane, 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Bridi (2020) notes that this governance structure creates ambiguity around degree recognition, institutional autonomy, and long-term system coherence. Recent analyses further highlight that education hubs such as the UAE face increasing pressure to strengthen regulatory coordination as TNE ecosystems mature (Healey & Hickey, 2024; Zhang, 2024). From an analytical perspective, this suggests that the UAE's success in attracting foreign institutions has outpaced the development of a fully integrated national TNE governance framework.

Marketization and Competitive Pressures: The literature consistently highlights the market-oriented nature of the UAE's TNE ecosystem. Wilkins (2020) shows that higher education institutions in the UAE

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adopt differentiated branding and positioning strategies to survive in a highly competitive environment. This includes emphasis on international rankings, employability narratives, and Western accreditation.

Bhuiyan (2016) similarly finds that students' perceptions of institutional prestige, value for money, and career outcomes strongly influence enrollment decisions, reinforcing a quasi-commercial higher education market. This pattern reflects broader global trends in which students increasingly behave as informed consumers and institutions operate as competitive service providers (Naidoo, 2003).

This marketization trend aligns with Altbach and Knight's (2007) argument that globalization increasingly positions higher education as an export industry rather than a public good. Marginson (2006) further argues that global competition, reputation-building, and status hierarchies are now central drivers of institutional behavior in transnational higher education markets. The analysis therefore suggests that although the UAE's TNE model is framed as a national strategy, it operates simultaneously as a competitive education marketplace.

Access and Equity Challenges: A further theme concerns the tension between expanded access and social equity. While TNE has increased access to internationally recognized qualifications within the UAE, the findings suggest that this access remains socially stratified.

Bhuiyan (2016) argues that high tuition costs at international branch campuses in the Gulf region limit participation primarily to affluent domestic and expatriate populations. Wilkins (2020) supports this observation, noting that many institutions prioritize international branding over widening participation agendas. Similar concerns have been raised in broader TNE scholarship, where cross-border provision is increasingly associated with elite reproduction rather than democratization of opportunity (Buckner, 2019; Marginson, 2011).

Empirical research also suggests that international education pathways tend to disproportionately benefit students with greater economic and

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cultural capital, reinforcing stratification within host systems (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009). Collectively, these findings raise critical questions about whether TNE in the UAE functions primarily as an elite educational pathway rather than an inclusive human capital development mechanism.

Analytically, this reflects a misalignment between national development rhetoric and actual socio-economic accessibility outcomes. Sustainability and National Capacity Building: The final theme concerns long-term sustainability. While the UAE has successfully attracted prestigious foreign institutions, the literature questions whether the current model sufficiently contributes to indigenous knowledge production.

Bridi (2020) highlights that many branch campuses in the UAE remain primarily teaching-focused, with limited research output and weak integration into national research ecosystems. Wilkins and Huisman (2021) further argue that late-stage entrants into mature TNE markets, such as those in the UAE, face increasing challenges related to reputation building, institutional legitimacy, and long-term viability.

Healey (2023) critiques this model more broadly, suggesting that without deeper investment in local research capacity and socially embedded education systems, transnational education risks becoming structurally dependent rather than developmentally transformative.

Table 1: Analytical Findings

Theme	Key Analytical Insight
National Strategy	TNE is used as a tool for global positioning and economic diversification
Governance	Regulatory fragmentation creates coherence challenges
Marketization	Institutions operate within a highly competitive education market
Access	Participation remains skewed toward socio-economically privileged groups
Sustainability	Limited integration into national research and knowledge ecosystems

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This study set out to examine transnational education (TNE) as a national strategy in the United Arab Emirates through a policy-based secondary analysis. The findings reveal that the UAE's TNE ecosystem is not merely an outcome of institutional internationalization but is deeply embedded within state-led development agendas. This positions the UAE within what Knight (2011) conceptualizes as an "education hub," where higher education functions as an instrument of national branding, geopolitical positioning, and economic diversification. The analysis therefore supports the argument that TNE in the UAE should be understood primarily as a policy tool rather than as a purely market-driven educational phenomenon. A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the tension between strategic ambition and governance coherence. While the UAE has successfully created a favorable environment for attracting international branch campuses, the findings suggest that regulatory fragmentation may limit the long-term effectiveness of this strategy. Wilkins and Huisman's (2012) argument regarding the dual accountability pressures faced by international branch campuses is clearly reflected in the UAE context, where institutions must navigate multiple regulatory authorities and accreditation regimes. This fragmentation risks creating inconsistencies in quality assurance, degree recognition, and institutional accountability, which could undermine stakeholder trust over time. The findings also raise important questions about the social purpose of transnational education in the UAE. Although TNE has expanded access to international qualifications within the country, the literature indicates that such access remains unevenly distributed. As Bhuian (2016) and Wilkins (2020) demonstrate, high tuition fees and market-oriented recruitment strategies often restrict participation to socio-economically privileged groups. From a policy perspective, this suggests that the current TNE model may prioritize global prestige and market competitiveness over inclusive human capital development. This aligns with Altbach and Knight's (2007) critique

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that the globalization of higher education can reinforce inequality when driven primarily by commercial imperatives.

Another significant implication of the findings relates to sustainability and national knowledge production. While the UAE's success in attracting internationally recognized institutions enhances its global academic standing, the limited integration of many branch campuses into national research ecosystems raises concerns about long-term capacity building. Bridi's (2020) observation that international branch campuses in the UAE remain largely teaching-oriented suggests that the current TNE model may be insufficient for developing indigenous research capacity. Healey's (2023) call for a more socially just and development-oriented approach to international higher education is therefore particularly relevant in the UAE context, where deeper investment in local research ecosystems could transform TNE from an imported service into a genuinely transformative national asset.

Importantly, this study also contributes to broader debates on education hubs by illustrating that success cannot be measured solely by the number of international institutions hosted. Rather, the effectiveness of a national TNE strategy should be evaluated in terms of governance coherence, equity outcomes, contribution to knowledge production, and alignment with long-term development goals. The UAE's experience demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of TNE as a national strategy: it shows that while rapid expansion and global recognition are achievable, sustaining long-term educational and societal value requires continuous policy refinement.

Overall, the discussion underscores the need to move beyond celebratory narratives of education hubs toward more critical, policy-oriented evaluations. By situating the UAE's transnational education strategy within global theoretical debates on internationalization, marketization, and equity, this study provides a more nuanced

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understanding of how TNE operates as both an opportunity and a challenge for emerging knowledge economies.

Conclusions

This study examined transnational education (TNE) as a national strategy in the United Arab Emirates through a policy-based secondary analysis. The findings demonstrate that the UAE's TNE ecosystem is not an incidental outcome of globalization but rather a deliberately constructed policy instrument designed to support economic diversification, global positioning, and the development of a knowledge-based economy. In line with Knight's (2011) conceptualization of education hubs, the UAE has strategically leveraged international branch campuses and cross-border provision to enhance its international academic reputation and geopolitical visibility.

However, the analysis also reveals that rapid expansion alone does not guarantee long-term effectiveness. Consistent with Wilkins and Huisman (2012) and Bridi (2020), the study highlights governance fragmentation, regulatory complexity, and uneven institutional accountability as persistent structural challenges within the UAE's TNE framework. These issues raise concerns about coherence in quality assurance and long-term system sustainability. Without stronger policy alignment between federal and emirate-level authorities, the effectiveness of TNE as a national strategy may remain constrained.

Furthermore, while TNE has expanded access to internationally recognized qualifications within the UAE, the evidence suggests that this access remains socially stratified. High tuition costs and market-oriented institutional strategies limit participation primarily to privileged groups, echoing broader critiques that cross-border higher education can reinforce inequality when driven by commercial imperatives (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bhuian, 2016; Wilkins, 2020). This tension between global competitiveness and social inclusion remains a central policy dilemma for the UAE's education hub model.

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The study also raises important questions about long-term capacity building. Although international branch campuses contribute to teaching provision and international visibility, their limited integration into national research ecosystems constrains their contribution to indigenous knowledge production (Bridi, 2020). As Healey (2023) argues, transnational education must move beyond market expansion toward a more socially embedded and development-oriented model if it is to deliver sustainable national benefits.

Overall, this paper contributes to the literature by framing transnational education in the UAE explicitly as a state-led policy strategy rather than merely an institutional or market phenomenon. It suggests that the success of education hubs should not be measured solely by the number of foreign institutions hosted, but by the extent to which TNE contributes to governance coherence, equitable access, and long-term national knowledge development. Strengthening these dimensions will be critical if the UAE is to evolve from being a global education importer into a globally influential knowledge producer.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that while the UAE has achieved notable success in positioning itself as a global education hub, further policy refinement is required to ensure that transnational education (TNE) contributes meaningfully to long-term national development rather than functioning primarily as a market-driven export sector. Several policy implications emerge from the analysis.

First, there is a need for greater regulatory coherence across federal and emirate-level governance structures. As highlighted by Wilkins and Huisman (2012) and Bridi (2020), fragmented regulatory oversight can lead to inconsistencies in quality assurance, degree recognition, and institutional accountability. Policymakers could consider developing a more integrated national framework for transnational education governance that harmonizes standards between federal accreditation bodies and local authorities. Such alignment would enhance transparency, strengthen stakeholder trust, and improve the global credibility of the UAE's higher education ecosystem. Second, the findings suggest that equity and accessibility

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should be more explicitly embedded within TNE policy objectives.

Although TNE has expanded access to international qualifications, high tuition fees and market-oriented recruitment strategies limit participation largely to socio-economically privileged populations (Bhuian, 2016; Wilkins, 2020). Policymakers could address this imbalance by incentivizing institutions to expand scholarship provision, introduce tiered fee structures, and collaborate with public-sector actors to support broader participation among Emirati and lower-income student populations. Without such interventions, the developmental potential of TNE risks being undermined by persistent social stratification. Third, this study underscores the importance of shifting policy emphasis from institutional attraction toward national capacity building. While international branch campuses enhance the UAE's global reputation, their limited integration into local research ecosystems constrains their contribution to indigenous knowledge production (Bridi, 2020). Bibliometric evidence suggests that international branch campuses are increasingly engaged in research activities and contribute materially to host nations' scientific output, indicating the potential of IBCs to contribute to local research ecosystems (Pohl & Lane, 2018; Zhang, 2024). Moreover, importing branch campuses has been identified as a strategy that can build research capacity in contexts such as Abu Dhabi (Lane & Pohl, 2017). Recent analyses of the UAE's education hub development highlight research integration challenges as a key area for policy attention (Jaleel, 2025). A broader systematic review of TNE literature also emphasizes the importance of research and innovation engagement as success factors for sustainable cross-border education (Tran et al., 2023). In line with Healey's (2023) argument for a more socially embedded model of international higher education, policymakers could strengthen requirements for research engagement, local collaboration, doctoral provision, and faculty development within branch campus operations. This would enable TNE to evolve from a predominantly teaching-focused model into a more sustainable contributor to national innovation systems.

Finally, the UAE's experience suggests that the success of education hubs should be evaluated not only by quantitative indicators such as the number of international institutions hosted, but by qualitative outcomes related to governance quality, social inclusion,

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and long-term developmental impact. Knight's (2011) framework implies that education hubs achieve legitimacy when higher education is embedded within broader societal objectives rather than positioned solely as a branding or commercial exercise. Future policy development should therefore prioritize impact-driven rather than growth-driven TNE strategies.

Proposed Policy Framework: Building on the findings of this study, this paper proposes an Integrated TNE Policy Framework for Sustainable Education Hubs. The framework conceptualizes transnational education as a system that must be governed across five interdependent dimensions: strategic alignment with national development goals, regulatory coherence, equity and social inclusion, research and national capacity building, and accountability for long-term impact.

The framework suggests that the effectiveness of transnational education should not be evaluated solely by quantitative expansion indicators (e.g., number of international branch campuses), but rather by qualitative developmental outcomes such as contribution to local research ecosystems, enhancement of human capital, and promotion of inclusive access. By emphasizing systemic integration rather than market expansion alone, the framework positions TNE as a long-term national development instrument rather than a short-term reputational strategy.

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Integrated Policy Framework for Sustainable Transnational Education in the UAE



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Diversity, ESG, and Stock Performance
Source: Author's own elaboration

Limitations and Future Research: Like all secondary, policy-based studies, this research is subject to certain limitations. First, the study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including policy documents and existing academic literature. While this approach is appropriate for policy analysis, it limits the ability to capture real-time institutional practices or lived experiences of stakeholders such as students, faculty, and administrators. As Wilkins (2020) notes, institutional realities within international branch campuses can diverge significantly from policy narratives, suggesting the value of complementary empirical investigation.

Second, the analysis focuses primarily on the UAE as a national case study, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other education hubs. Although the UAE shares characteristics with hubs such as Qatar, Singapore, and Malaysia, national contexts differ in governance structures, political economies, and cultural expectations (Knight, 2011). Comparative cross-national research would therefore be valuable in determining whether the tensions identified in this study—such as marketization, equity

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challenges, and governance fragmentation—are systemic features of education hubs or context-specific outcomes.

Third, much of the existing literature on TNE in the UAE emphasizes institutional strategy and student experience rather than long-term socio-economic outcomes (Bridi, 2020; Wilkins & Huisman, 2021). This highlights an important avenue for future research: longitudinal studies examining the actual impact of transnational education on national human capital development, labor market outcomes, and research capacity. Such evidence would be essential for evaluating whether TNE genuinely contributes to sustainable development rather than functioning primarily as a symbolic or commercial asset.

Future research could also benefit from mixed-methods approaches, combining policy analysis with interviews, surveys, or institutional data. This would enable scholars to move beyond document-level analysis and provide deeper insight into how policies are interpreted, implemented, and experienced by different stakeholders within the UAE’s transnational education ecosystem (Healey, 2023).

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