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Addressing student challenges in transnational education in Oman: the importance of student interaction with teaching staff and Peers

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ABSTRACT

Transnational education is rather common in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with among the highest TNE enrolments of any region worldwide. Approximately a third of the Omani students in higher education are registered in programmes offered transnationally, and a UK university is the main provider. The aim of this study was to identify the challenges that Omani students perceive when studying in transnational education by means of a survey and in-depth follow-up interviews. The findings show that challenges relate mainly to students' adaptation to transnational higher education pedagogies, the challenges of academic writing, and challenges related to the international or UK culture of the programme. It argues in favour of widening the definition of contextualisation from simply including local examples to a pedagogical approach in TNE that supports students in dealing with their challenges in the TNE contexts.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen more and more an increasing expansion of transnational education (TNE) (British Council 2016). TNE is here defined as the provision of education to students in a country other than where the provider is located (McNamara and Knight 2015), with the following key elements applicable: the local higher education institution (HEI) teaching staff provide academic support; teaching staff are expatriates resident in the host country; and the distance HEI provides the programmes, qualification, and quality assurance (Knight 2016). With the increasing number of students in TNE it is important to understand student challenges, so that they can be better supported towards academic success (Sanford 1968; Ward, Trautvetter, and Braskamp 2005). This study aims to contribute to the nascent body of research into TNE in the Gulf region and specifically investigates the challenges Omani students experience in UK TNE programmes. Students perceive challenges when they perceive a disconnect between previous learning contexts and new learning context, or between valued context and present context (cf. Vermunt and Verloop 1999). There is a need to consider contextual specificities which

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influence how UK TNE is experienced by students (Sin, Leung, and Waters 2019). Given that there is scant research specifically into the student experience and their challenges in TNE in Oman while the student numbers are quite substantial, this paper also draws on the relevant literature on international student experience as they share similar characteristics and challenges, on research conducted into student related aspects in the Gulf and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and on TNE research elsewhere.

Transnational student experience

There is a limited body of research into the TNE student experience in the Gulf and MENA region, currently covering themes such as student satisfaction, first-year integration, and the contrast between previous learning experiences and the expectations of a Western university. Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman (2012) noted that United Arab Emirates (UAE) students from state schools in an international branch campus found the programmes more academically challenging as they were not accustomed to independent learning, problem solving, and essay writing. Qatari students in a Canadian branch campus (Lemke-Westcott and Johnson 2013) indicated they had needed to shift from memorisation in high school to comprehension in the university programme. Previous learning experiences were also found to impact on the first year experience and degree of academic success of medical students in Bahrain (Holden 2018). Factors such as moving from an Arabic medium secondary school to an English language curriculum and the pedagogical-didactical disconnect were found to make this transition particularly challenging. Holden (2018) argued that for a successful academic transition students need to realise in time that their long-held self-efficacy and learning styles may not fit the new educational context they are in and that they need to adapt.

Outside the Gulf and MENA region some recent studies have focused on TNE student perspectives on contextualisation and the transfer of learning to local and regional societies; on effective teaching methods; and on developing academic literacy. In a study in Singapore, Hoare (2012) concluded that TNE providers still have some way to go in designing curricula that facilitate in-class intercultural and transnational comparisons as the postgraduate interviewees had reported losing interest in class when lecturers drew on foreign case studies and Western philosophies. Students' local knowledge should be utilised in debates and discussions so that transfer of learning to the context of Singapore takes place. Similarly, Yao and Collins (2019) found that discussing topics in class with a group of classmates was perceived by students in a Vietnamese German university to be an effective learning practice, and in a context where both staff and students are non-native speakers of English, pre-class learning activities and collaborative learning outside class helped them to deal with English language issues. They recommended shifting to cooperative learning with a stronger role for teaching staff facilitating student engagement through group work in class. For TNE students in Hong Kong, Evans and Morrison (2011) found that the most challenging factors in the first year include academic writing, comprehending lectures, participating in seminars, acquiring specialist vocabulary and getting familiar with new forms of assessment and grading.

Conceptualising challenges of students in TNE

As TNE contexts are international learning contexts research, literature on international student experience abroad might help us identify the essence of student challenges in TNE contexts. We therefore also review relevant literature on international student experience, although we are aware that TNE context is a rather specific form of international education context as it provides an international programme in a local context for local students, whereas regular international education contexts provide local programmes for international students.

Dimitrov and Haque ([2016](#)) studied the international student experience at Canadian campuses and identified ways to making teaching more effective across cultures. Three elements in their observations are particularly relevant for TNE context as well; tailoring the content to students with different years of linguistic ability, creating opportunities for peer learning, and mentoring students' transition into a new academic culture. Supporting international students in learning how to write assignments in a New Zealand university was deemed necessary even after an initial writing course (Skyrme [2018](#)). Writing support within the discipline included extensive assignment instructions and individual formative feedback from staff, while some students also sought peer support. The nationwide need for academic teaching staff to support international students in Australia in their English language competence development during their studies was highlighted by an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) steering committee (DEEWR, [2009](#)). While this committee developed a useful set of good practice principles to support the development of English language proficiency of international students, Murray ([2012](#)) nevertheless argues that there is no one-size-fits-all when student profiles and English language proficiency needs may vary across disciplinary contexts and curricula. In addition to international students' English language proficiency and challenges related to cultural disconnect between previous education contexts and the new international context, there may be additional gaps in practical subject skills and subject knowledge. Specific support in these pedagogical student challenges, most prominent in the international foundation year, have been described by Jones et al. ([2020](#)). However, this seems to imply that addressing the deficits will automatically lead to student success throughout their undergraduate programmes. Yet when students are not actively supported in how to apply their language skills in their oral or written communication, progression to a higher year of English language proficiency will not automatically take place (Benzie [2010](#)). Lea and Street ([2006](#)) argue that not only internationals but also home students will benefit from the academic literacies model that they proposed. This model connects students' learning of subject content with the discipline-specific writing requirements.

Overall, the literature on both TNE student experience and international student experience show similar student challenges which can be summarised in three broad thematic dimensions: challenges related to a linguistic disconnect, challenges related to a pedagogic disconnect, and challenges related to cultural disconnect between previous learning context and new learning context.

Aims of this study

In order to get a more in-depth understanding of TNE student challenges we designed a case study focussing on the challenges Omani student experience in TNE. Omani students in TNE find themselves in a novel teaching and learning environment that is structured around the interplay between the UK curriculum and non-native English language speaking expatriate academics. Almost all teaching staff are expatriate academics from Philippines, India, Pakistan, Middle East and North Africa. Each academic brings along their own culturally embedded assumptions of what teaching in higher education entails. Therefore, this study aimed to identify what specific challenges Omani TNE students perceive in this environment. Based on these student challenges this study will provide in the practical implications what type of support students need as a first step towards creating a conducive teaching and learning environment in which TNE students can succeed academically. This study moved deliberately beyond the initial transition phase into TNE by including students in second and third year of Bachelor's programme, as the issues associated with transition into the first year of higher education may be more accentuated in TNE but occur globally in both regular HE contexts and international contexts.

Students in Oman come from a teacher-centred schooling system where curricula and examinations allow success through memorisation, and where the development of higher order thinking skills has long not been prioritised (World Bank 2013). Contrarily, the latter is what is emphasised in UK curricula in higher education (Quality Assurance Agency 2011). The Ministry of Higher Education in Oman actively encourages quality assured higher education in the private sector, as the public sector cannot absorb the growing number of students. TNE thus increases access to higher education for local students, both students who start college directly after finishing school, and mature students. All private higher education institutions are required to be affiliated with an accredited university abroad, most of which are from the UK. The vast majority of the students in Oman first attend a foundation year that focuses on English language proficiency, academic study skills, mathematics, and information technology before starting on their Bachelor's programme.

Method

This study used a mixed-methods research approach with a survey, followed up by interviews with twelve students in order to interpret the data based on insights gained from the students.

Research context

This case study was conducted in a private college in Oman. TNE is well established in this country with approximately one third of the students in higher education registered in private institutions, as shown in Table 1.

In this college, the UK undergraduate programmes in the Department of Computing Studies (CS) and the Department of Business and Management Studies (BMS) are delivered to predominantly Omani students (96%), both students who start directly

Table 1. Omani students registered in higher education institutions.

Academic year	Private	Public/all other
2013–2014	60,294	116,691
2014–2015	68,350	138,632
2015–2016	70,294	141,790

Source: National Centre for Statistics & Information (n.d.).

after finishing school and mature students, by non-native English language speaking academics from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, the MENA region, and recently also a few from Oman. The minimum English language requirement for both students and academic staff on the programmes is an IELTS 6, a requirement set by the partner university and the Ministry of Higher Education respectively.

Participants

The aim was to get a sample of approximately 1,000 students, distributed proportionally across the undergraduate years in each department, and therefore this number of hard copies was handed out in core modules across the undergraduate programmes, which resulted in 790 students filling in the anonymous survey, a response rate of 79%. Thirty-five copies had to be rejected, as they were not completely filled in resulting in 757 valid responses, 746 of which were from Omani students and 11 from students originating from other countries in the Gulf and MENA region. The respondents made no additional comments. At the time, there were 429 students registered in CS and 2,372 students in BMS. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the responses.

Twelve Omani students were interviewed; eight from BMS and four from CS, as at this point saturation took place. Table 3 shows the profile of the interview participants.

Data collection and procedure

The student survey was adapted from a teacher survey conducted in a study by Lamers, Admiraal, and van der Rijst (2020). Where necessary, statements were rephrased from the teacher to the student point of view, for example 'adapting my style of teaching' into 'adapting to different styles of teaching'. Lecturers distributed the survey to their students in class and gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the survey, emphasising its anonymity and voluntary nature.

In the survey, students were asked to indicate how challenging each of the items was on a 5-point scale from '1' corresponding to 'not at all' and '5' corresponding to 'very', so that a higher average represents more of a challenge. The mid-point of the response scales

Table 2. Questionnaire survey responses per year in the undergraduate programmes.

	BMS	CS	Total
Year 1	196	21	217
Year 2	176	64	240
Year 3	240	60	300
Total	*612*	*145*	*757*

Table 3. Profile of participants in the interviews.

Respondent	Gender	Year
BMS1	M	1
BMS2	F	1
BMS3	M	2
BMS4	M	2
BMS5	M	3
BMS6	M	3
BMS7	F	3
BMS8	F	3
CS1	F	2
CS2	F	2
CS3	F	3
CS4	M	3

Table 4. Item mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) (*N* = 757).

Questionnaire item		M	SD
Pedagogical challenges			
2	Adapting my style of studying (compared to school)	2.67	0.90
6	Different expectations that the lecturer has of me (compared to school)	2.66	0.92
9	Getting enough support from the lecturer outside class	2.62	0.94
3	Adapting to different styles of teaching (compared to school)	2.62	0.93
11	Developing critical thinking skills	2.60	0.89
19	Finding opportunities to study together with other students in the college	2.56	0.91
5	Understanding how to avoid plagiarism	2.51	0.97
8	Getting enough support from the lecturer inside class	2.51	0.95
16	Working with other students in class (in pairs or in groups)	2.40	0.99
Linguistical challenges			
13	Writing long answers in exams	2.73	0.90
14	Writing assignments	2.71	0.92
15	Giving presentations	2.63	0.94
7	The level of English required for my studies	2.55	0.96
17	Speaking English in class	2.37	1.01
Cultural challenges			
10	Online access to the UK library	2.72	0.93
12	Applying theory to practice	2.69	0.91
18	Balancing study and work	2.66	0.88
4	Understanding UK module content	2.61	0.95
1	Getting familiar with the academic rules and regulations of the British higher education system	2.52	0.97
20	Study outside class	2.50	0.94

was formulated as 'it varies'. Descriptive statistics for each item are included in Table 4. Responses were not significantly different between students in BMS and CS programmes. All items in the questionnaire survey were clustered into the three dimensions of student challenges found in the literature. These three dimensions will provide a theoretical lens through which the data of the questionnaire survey and the interviews will be interpreted and presented in the result section.

The in-depth follow-up interviews were piloted with three students, and twelve students were sought to participate in the interviews with the assurance that what they said would not be attributable to any individual. All students agreed to the interviews being audio recorded and used for research purpose only. They were given a hard copy of the survey items and the interviewer read each statement out aloud as they moved through the interview. Interviewees were asked to what extent they considered each

one challenging and why, how they had adapted, and what support they found useful. They were also asked if there was anything else they wanted to add. Interviews lasted between 25 and 39 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts were analysed and coded through reiterative reading, initially per transcript on general comments students made about the three dimensions of students' challenges in TNE and on responses to the specific questionnaire items, and in the second phase across each item for a more fine-grained analysis. The frequency with which remarks related to the dimensions of students' challenges in TNE occurred was tabulated per statement. Next, relations within dimensions were interpreted in order to distil meaning and their implications (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Finally, the transcripts were read once more for anything that might disclaim the interpretation or conclusion, and a few minor adaptations were made.

Findings

Table 4 summarises the general descriptive statistical results of the questionnaire survey data per item.

The mean scores for the survey results lie quite closely together. The high standard deviations for each statement, however, indicate that students differ greatly in how they experience challenges in TNE. For the two faculties combined the highest scoring challenge is writing, whether in exams or in assignments, whereas working with other students and speaking English in class were the least challenging. Independent t-test did not show any significant differences between the two faculties (with $\alpha = 0.05$ and Bonferroni correction for the number of analyses). The interviews with students give a more fine-grained insight into student challenges and what kind of environment and support students find effective. In the section below, we present the three components, each starting with the survey statements that were rated as most challenging, illustrated by the students' experiences as related in the interviews and situating them in the literature.

Pedagogical challenges

The first, and largest, component may be interpreted as students' challenges adapting to an unfamiliar pedagogical environment of the UK undergraduate programme the students are in. Within this component the survey results indicate that adaptation of their own style of studying is generally perceived as the most challenging, notably new assessment forms, no exclusive focus on exams and memorisation, and new advanced vocabulary being introduced in every module. Teacher expectations are also higher, specifically regarding independent and self-regulated learning.

'*Actually it's more challenging, because it is up to you. If you would like to learn here, nobody will tell you "you have to learn this" so it should come from your heart. You are learning for your study, so you are focused and you should be not like in secondary school, you just follow the teacher, you just copy it from the board.*' [BMS6]

When students come from an Arabic medium secondary school system with a traditional focus on information transmission and exam-oriented rote learning from a book (World Bank 2013), it is a shift for students to enter into English medium UK Bachelor's programmes where the focus is on the dialogical process of learning, independent learning with critical reading of sources, and critical writing.

There were multiple interview participants who described a wide variety in teaching approaches ranging from very negative to very positive experiences, and the extent to which they had found certain aspects challenging were depending on the teacher. This might be another plausible explanation for the high standard deviation in the survey. Only occasionally the student experience depended on the module content or topic. This is in line with earlier research that found that lecturers' teaching practices can play a crucial role in supporting students' adaptation of learning behaviour (Eaves 2011), and can have a positive influence on the quality of the learning experience (Bryson and Hand 2007; Kuh et al. 2006; Zepke and Leach 2010). The lecturers whom the participants consider to be most supportive are those who take a student-centred approach facilitating active learning in class so that students not only achieve the learning outcomes, but also acquire discipline specific vocabulary and the necessary skills for academic writing. This finding is in accordance with what Jordan et al. (2013) and Bovill, Jordan, and Watters (2015) found in a similar context in Iraq.

The development of critical thinking skills was perceived as quite a challenge as well and students felt that lecturers vary too much in their approaches. Critical thinking may have been an item that is difficult conceptually and participants interpreted it solely as problem solving. Three of them stated explicitly that this is not developed in class and another three mentioned lecturers only focus on the subject. With lecturers who do set up group discussions though, four participants commented on how they enjoyed these and that they really need more.

> We need to solve problems more often in class. The discussion style suits us, especially students like us. Even when someone is not very interesting you have to listen to the lecturer while through the discussion you can be active in the learning. [BMS6]

> Everybody in the group helps me and I get more ideas about the scenario, so you get more solutions for the problem. [CS2]

In general, students thought in-class group discussions would help to develop critical thinking skills. Yet they indicated that not all lecturers set up discussions and some just gave a lecture. It might be that lecturers assume students' English is insufficient to set up such activities in this environment or rather that it is incongruent with their own transmitting information teaching approach (Arenas 2009). The literature indicates that lecturing is counterproductive to optimal learning (Loughran 2013), and Virtanen and Tynjälä (2019) found that lecturing correlated negatively with the learning of generic skills such as problem solving and critical thinking, but that interaction with staff and peers was conducive to learning these skills, similarly to what the interview participants indicated they needed.

Finding opportunities to study together with other students in the college and studying outside class were not perceived as a challenge. Most participants indicated that only a few lecturers told them explicitly what they needed to do outside class. An unexpected

outcome of the interviews is that nine participants have been in long-term study groups throughout their Bachelor's programme. These study support groups frequently emerged un-elicited in the interviews and proved to be instrumental in dealing with challenges. Participants had set these study groups up themselves and the social aspect of learning and knowledge construction seems very important:

> Before I was studying in the morning and then I changed to the afternoon, but they still come to ask me "We have a problem with this, what have you taken in your class?" and we are sharing the information. We share the information they got in the morning from a different teacher, and I give them from the afternoon. It became very easy for us. [BMS8]

The kind of practice that these TNE students believe to be effective and particularly suitable for them is cooperative learning set up by the lecturer inside class and collaborative learning outside class, as it facilitated their learning and was a stimulus not to fall behind their friends. Peers played an important and positive role for the students interviewed, similar to what Peregrina-Kretz et al. (2018) found. Students met outside class to help each other in understanding the content and the vocabulary, a valuable aspect in learning communities (Brouwer and Jansen 2019; Montgomery and McDowell 2009), and in understanding the requirements for assignments.

Student challenges related to avoiding plagiarism mostly were related to getting a better understanding of academic integrity and ethical behaviour, such as referencing and citing in reports and papers. Teaching staff and the UK curriculum might provide more explicit help and pedagogical support for students. Successful strategies to reduce plagiarism amongst students might include academic writing programme and individual feedback to students (cf. Divan, Bowman, and Seabourne 2015; Palmer, Pegrum, and Oakley 2019)

The next item is a practical challenge. Lecturers are required to schedule an extra five hours of academic advising per week, yet participants pointed to lecturers not always being available. Six students reported seeking additional explanation regarding the module content, the assignment instructions or a draft of their writing.

> Clearly, they help, it depends on the timing, they are not always free and they have lots of students to deal with. [CS1]

Expecting a high level of support from lecturers outside class is similar to what Prowse and Goddard (2010) found in Qatar, and what participants in the study by Picton, Kahu, and Nelson (2018) showed when contacting lecturers for early feedback on assignments.

Linguistical challenges

Survey respondents perceived the level of English required for their studies nor getting support from their lecturers inside the classroom as that much of a challenge. More than half of the interview participants perceived their English as good enough to manage in class, and said they could ask questions regarding content or vocabulary. Experiences with lecturers varied widely again as a few spoke about teachers who pro-actively support them in class to learn more English (academic) vocabulary, yet others just want to finish the slides and ignore questions. As one student answered in response to this item:

> That depends on the teacher, the person. Some of them are very supportive; you just ask them, they will be more than happy. Some of them usually just want to finish, they want just proudly talking, talking, do not ask any questions. [BMS3]

The interview participants were almost unanimous in finding there was nothing as challenging as writing, apart from two students who like writing as such. First and foremost came writing long answers in exams, sometimes with requirements of up to 750 words per question. Some issues are related to task fulfilment, organisation and concision, as illustrated below:

> In the exam, I like to write more, because I don't know whether this is correct or not so I write everything I know. [CS2]

Another main issue they raised was time constraints in exams, which affected their spelling, neatness and accuracy in accounting, or accessing advanced vocabulary, even at level 6, as one student explained:

> Maybe I knew it before, but in the exam I was in such a hurry and nervous and I don't have long time, so I use simple short words that I remember at that time. [BMS3]

The topics themselves could also be problematic when they moved beyond what was covered in class, had not been discussed in class at all, or were long theory questions. Some stated explicitly that they were not trained in class how to write long answers.

Similarly challenging were writing assignments, which more than half of the participants reported as totally new and they therefore relied heavily on the assignment instructions. Again student experiences varied from one lecturer to the next, with many students learning through trial and error.

> It was challenging, of course. This was the first time I had to write an assignment, here in the college. In the beginning you have to do it three or four times until we know the strategy, how we can start it. [BMS3]

> Some teachers make us practise in class. Now I have one teacher, she comes in class and checks, we write in class, if anything not clear, you can ask . . .. Now I think that if all teachers are like this teacher I think all students will be fine. [BMS1].

Other issues students raised here were shortage of books in the library at the time of assignments; collecting data; a challenging topic; the length; proper referencing; formal register; insufficient amount of time given till deadline; and finding reliable websites. One student in his additional comments wished the teachers would give briefs, examples, and formats of how to write assignments.

Similar to what Sawir et al. (2012) found with international students, the students here identified writing as the most challenging aspect, whether in exams or assignments, which may be closely related to critical thinking and critical writing. Lengthy open exam questions in the final year relate to higher order thinking skills and require far more than the regurgitation of memorised facts demonstrating knowledge (Smith 2011). It might also be that students are not sufficiently familiar with assessment verbs, and that there is a gap between how lecturers and students understand the meaning of these assessment verbs (Williams 2005).

Not surprisingly, giving presentations was considered to be relatively easy by the interview participants as was speaking English, although this was not always the case for their classmates. Working with other students in class is also relatively easy and participants mentioned sharing ideas and explaining to each other helps them learn, although some point at the issue of mixed gender groups. A few highlighted that the class management skills of the teacher are important here. This finding corresponds to those reported by Almarghani and Mijatovic (2017) in Libya and by Yao and Collins (2019) in TNE in Vietnam.

All in all, achieving learning outcomes seems to be closely linked to academic literacy, something that applies to students worldwide, but is even more accentuated in TNE in Oman and may be closely linked to disharmonious profiles in English language proficiency where reading and writing are far less well developed than speaking and listening.

Cultural challenges

Cultural challenges can relate to many aspects which vary over contexts and settings, such as national culture, institutional culture, technological culture, western culture or academic culture. Only a few students indicated that there is a cultural issue in that some girls are too shy to ask questions in class. Nevertheless, they raised issues with English multiple times across six other statements, notably advanced discipline specific vocabulary as opposed to informal English. There is a strong interrelation between language and culture. We interpreted challenges as linguistic when students talked about writing, reading, speaking and listening, and we interpreted it as a cultural issue when students spoke about the interpretation of a situation often through language. This student makes a point towards the difference between academic culture and culture in other settings.

> There's two types, we have general English and in universities especially there's academic English. Most of our people they don't understand what's the difference. [CS4]

Most participants admitted that they had not tried to access the online UK library and that they preferred to get a book out of the library or look things up on the Internet. Yet the survey results indicate that online access is quite a challenge and this might be a matter of passwords having to be changed regularly.

More than half of the participants stated that applying theory to practice is not done in class and that it is therefore challenging. All college students have to deal with applying theory to practice. However the interview data provided indication that many examples in lecture materials and student assignments in the TNE curriculum related to practices in UK contexts. The UK context are different from contexts in Oman and therefore the item 'applying theory to practice' was included in the cultural challenges category.

Some students said the better teachers make the link in class or give them a case study to practise making the link, and other students said the level of difficulty may depend on the theory itself. A few indicated that other students shared their work experience in class and could show the meaning of the theory in practice. Balancing work and study is quite challenging, but some said that with good time management they can manage.

The UK academic regulations are quite different from their previous school contexts as half of the interviewees pointed out. It took about two semesters to become familiar with although not in much detail as the use of formal English has been a barrier:

> The English in general is not that strong in the GCC countries. So understanding the rules and regulations comes from understanding the language itself. [CS4]

The challenges of adapting to the expectations of the UK programmes are not limited to the initial transition into TNE, but also to adaption to an academic culture. Naturally, students at all levels showed to be dependent on the teachers, for example for the guidance and the development of higher order thinking skills, understanding the UK regulations and study content, and relating general theories to context specific practices.

Where understanding UK module content is concerned, this may be challenging depending on the difficulty of the concepts, on the vocabulary used, or a combination of the two. Half of the interview participants indicated that it depends on how the lecturer explains new content:

> But others they explain to you in detail, they give you examples; they make it easy for you, not fast. So it depends on the teacher, what I noticed. [BMS3]

Discussion and conclusion

This study sets out to identify what specific challenges students perceive in the specific TNE teaching and learning context in a Omani private college. Based on the survey data and in-depth interviews with students this study identified challenges on the three dimensions identified in the current literature on TNE and international student experience. In this case study in the Omani TNE college students perceive major challenge on the linguistical dimension. Specifically, writing was perceived as a challenge, while speaking and listening was not perceived as much of a challenge by the students. The major pedagogical challenge as perceived by the TNE students was related to adapting to a unfamiliar pedagogical environment of the UK undergraduate programme. Specifically the UK programme's focus on self-regulated learning and the development of critical thinking skills was perceived as challenging. On the cultural dimension of students' challenges the students in this study did not perceive much challenging situations. The UK programme regulations and expectations were not perceived as a barrier by the students. Adopting to an academic culture and adoption to academic use of the English language were stressed by the students.

Naturally, there is an interrelation between the three dimensions of students' challenges. Linguistical challenges, pedagogical challenges, and cultural challenges are inextricably linked to one and the other. For example critical thinking skills have to a vast extent a linguistic element, because if a student cannot express his or her thinking in words than a lecturer cannot assist that student in further developing these skills. Cultural challenges also have both linguistic as well as pedagogic elements as was stressed by the students in this study. The cultural dimension can be broken down into issues related to the academic culture, the home culture, the national culture, and the international culture. TNE teaching and learning contexts should pay attention to all these interacting cultures students have to deal with.

Although the challenges students experience in all international education contexts are thematically similarly related to language, culture and pedagogy, the TNE context is in some ways unique and differs from the situation of international students at home

universities or students at international business colleges. The pedagogical challenges are different because the UK curriculum does not always connect to local pre-university education and most teaching staff are not educated within the UK curriculum. The linguistic challenges are different because TNE students do not always have other venues, outside of college, to improve their English. And the cultural challenges are different because TNE students have to navigate through various cultures, such as home culture, national culture, academic and international culture. As there is scant literature on TNE and specifically on student experiences in TNE, we need to be aware of this unique context at branch campuses around the globe. We suggest to apply the knowledge base on international student experiences carefully to the context of TNE and at the same time develop a specific knowledge base for TNE education.

Practical implications for support to students in TNE in Oman

Based on the interviews held with students in which they gave examples of good practice employed by some of the lecturers that helped them cope with the academic demands of the UK programme, we come to the conclusion that first and foremost, TNE lecturers need to be consistent in their teaching approach. The instances of good practice that the students identified as effective and the central role they placed on teaching staff concur with Kuh et al.'s (2006) overview of the literature on effective teaching. These examples of good practice relate specifically to the development of critical thinking skills, something the Omani students were not familiarised with during primary and secondary school. Therefore, the lecturers, rather than merely assessing students on their critical thinking in exam questions or assignments, need to explicitly design learning activities such as group discussions and debates to practise these skills in class. Secondly, and even more crucially, they need to support students in how to transform ideas discussed in groups to writing these up in notes or slides for presentations followed up by formal writing for assignments, as suggested by Lea and Street (2006). Students need to be explicitly taught how to improve their writing within their discipline similar to what Ryan (2011) proposed for reflective writing. Students could be put in pairs or small groups and asked to compare good and poor answers previously written in exams, identify key linguistic features of each, assess peer work and identify how the written text can be improved, before moving to their own writing.

As some participants indicated that critical thinking was not developed in class, and some that they enjoyed class discussions, TNE students in Oman are likely to benefit from cooperative learning activities set up regularly by all lecturers, such as debates, discussions, case studies and class presentations, to support the development of higher order thinking skills. Cooperative learning can be made more effective by structured procedures stipulated by the lecturer (Davidson and Major 2014); setting students pre-reading, guided reading and structured discussion questions in class (Cruikshank, Chen, and Warren 2012); or designing worksheets (Heron 2019).

Students in Oman may also find value in the pre-class learning activities to prepare for in-class workgroups or lectures, just as TNE students in Vietnam reported (Yao and Collins 2019). What may be particularly useful for students in TNE is the use of special software that makes a video recording showing the slides and records the voice of the lecturer presenting and explaining the topic for that week. Students could then be

required to view the 'lecture' part online before class, look up vocabulary they do not know yet, check understanding with peers in their study group, and come with follow-up questions to class. This format would free up the contact hours for learning activities that develop students' critical thinking and writing in dialogue with lecturers and peers.

Implications for the wider international context

The context in which UK TNE in Oman takes place is a complex one and brings specific challenges to the teaching and learning environment. The academics teaching UK programmes are expected to contextualise the modules in such a way that it facilitates learning in TNE, yet contextualisation is often understood in a narrow way as in giving local examples students can relate to, and thus making content comprehensible. It would require the expatriate academics to consider their own educational values and pedagogy, those of the UK provider, and those of the host country (Karram 2014). This study indicates that what would transform learning, however, is to expand the term so as to include culturally suitable pedagogy, which in this case would mean cooperative learning and group discussions; drawing global comparisons using local and regional case studies; scaffolding dialogues and debates towards critical thinking and analysis; and actively supporting students in acquiring the academic literacy within their discipline.

The interview participants placed the teaching staff and their practice central to their experience. And although some practices were not characteristic of their school system, they were able to recognise effective teaching practice when exposed to it. They also noted that there is no consistent approach to teaching while inconsistency impacts negatively on the quality of teaching as a whole. This is a challenge for institutions in TNE as Wilkins, Butt, and Annabi (2017) found in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, and addressing this inconsistency in their policies should be a focal point for institutions. Additionally, institutions need to actively encourage students to set up study support groups from the start since the interviewees had indicated that in response to this environment and types of assessment, collaborative learning facilitated their learning process and contributed to their academic success.

And last but not least, the benefits of a UK programme and students gaining an internationally recognised degree while studying in their home country are at risk when the profiles of academic staff are inadequate for the complexity of the teaching and learning environment in which they work as it requires a much greater awareness of the linguistic demands placed on the students. Only at levels higher than B2 or an IELTS 6 are language users able to express themselves on academic topics (Council of Europe 2018), both in speaking and writing. We therefore recommend that at national level the English proficiency required for academic teaching staff be raised to a minimum of C1 or an IELTS 7, so that they can competently support students in the development of academic literacy within their discipline which the progressively more demanding cognitive and linguistic skills require of the students throughout their undergraduate programmes.

Disclosure statement

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