

Article

Post-COVID-19 Development of Transnational Education in China: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Transnational education is education delivered to students in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based. While the outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly affected higher education, transnational education has exhibited its resilience against the pandemic, and has been continuously expanding in China. In parallel with the golden opportunities for the expansion of transnational education in China after the pandemic, a series of challenges resulting from the transnational context needs to be taken into due consideration, and to be properly addressed. In this paper, the opportunities and challenges for the post-COVID-19 development of transnational education in China are systematically discussed, based on the transnational education delivery at a Sino-Foreign cooperative university. Following our observations on opportunities and challenges, several suggestions are proposed, to address the potential challenges for the stable post-COVID-19 development of transnational education in China.



Citation: Sun, Y.; Li, N.; Hao, J.L.; Di Sarno, L.; Wang, L. Post-COVID-19 Development of Transnational Education in China: Challenges and Opportunities. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 416. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12060416>

Academic Editor: Maria José Sousa

Received: 25 May 2022

Accepted: 16 June 2022

Published: 18 June 2022

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Keywords: civil engineering; COVID-19 pandemic; digital and intelligent era; flipped classroom; future education; higher education; Sino-Foreign cooperative university; transnational education

1. Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) delivers education to students located in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based [1–3]. That is to say, TNE is an arrangement whereby programmes or courses are provided by an institution located in one country, but are delivered to students who are based in another country, as illustrated in Figure 1. A number of researchers have been working on the development of TNE, and have produced various explanations of TNE based on their own perspectives, which have enriched the definitions of TNE. For instance, Healey [4] defines TNE as cross-border education, borderless education, or offshore education, which provides education to students in third countries. Stafford and Taylor [5] suggest that TNE is the offering overseas of 'home university' courses and awards by, or with, overseas partners, or through the university's overseas branch. The connotations of TNE are expanded by Francois [6] to include the provision of educational services and programmes that transcend national borders and incorporate the scholarship and policies pertinent to such provision. These various perspectives on TNE indicate that it is inherently international and involves a variety of delivery channels which include, but are not limited to, online education, branch campus teaching, the "fly-in" faculty, local delivery, double awards and mixed models [4,7–11], as shown in Figure 2. Due to the variety of teaching and learning modes, TNE has rapidly expanded worldwide. According to statistics, the number of overseas students enrolling in UK higher education by means of TNE significantly increased from 337,260 in the academic year 2012–2013, to 510,835 in the academic year 2020–2021 [12], with a substantial growth

of 51.4%. In 2020–2021, UK TNE was delivered in 225 countries and territories, among which China was the country hosting the most UK TNE students (12%) [12], owing to the diverse TNE activities carried out in China.

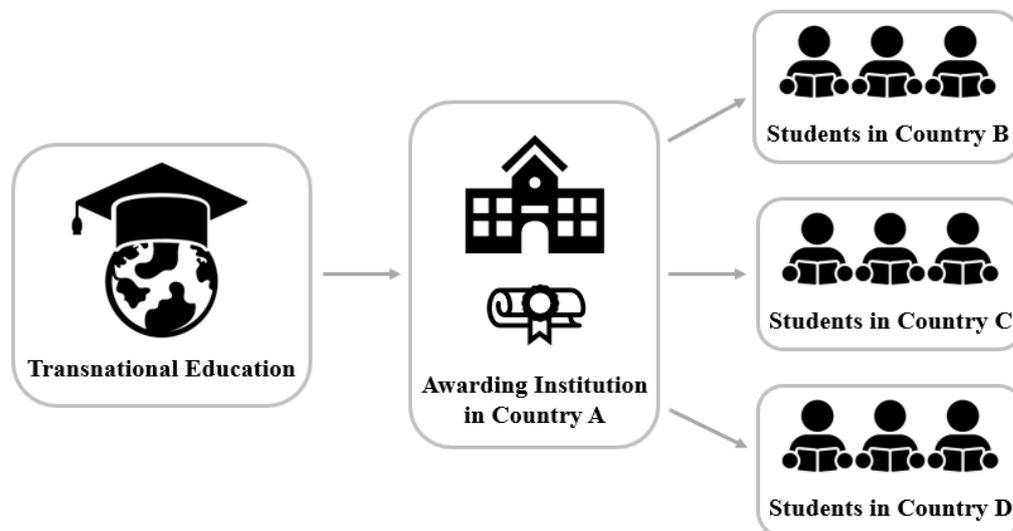


Figure 1. Graphical illustration of transnational education.

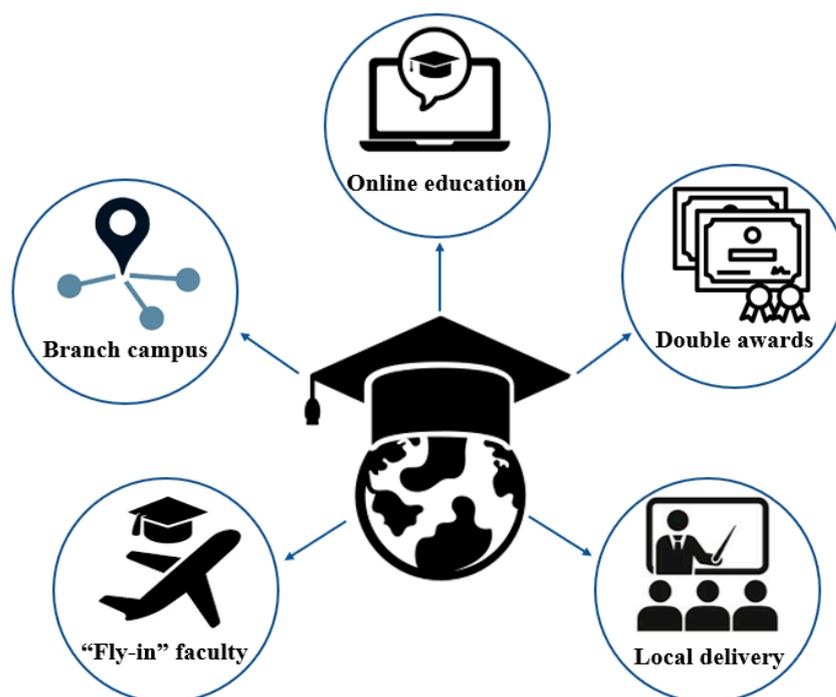


Figure 2. Diverse delivery modes of transnational education.

Coupled with the large number of successfully implemented TNE programmes, 10 Sino-Foreign cooperative universities have been founded in China, as listed in Table 1, including Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College (BNU-HKBU), Brunel London School-North China University of Technology (BLS-NCUT), Chinese University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen (CUHKS), Duke Kunshan University (DKU), Guangdong Technion-Israel Institute of Technology (GTIIT), Shenzhen MSU-BIT University (MSU-BIT), New York University Shanghai (NYUS), University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU), and Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool

University (XJTLU), with the earliest institute being UNNC, established in 2004, and the latest institute being BLS-NCUT, which originated in 2021. It is worth noting that most of the Chinese host universities are listed as top universities in “Project 985” or “Project 211” [13] while most of the foreign partner universities are world-renowned institutions with high rankings and long histories. These institutes are partnerships of top Chinese and foreign universities, and not only enable the delivery of TNE, but also facilitate East-West communications, leading to a globally diverse learning experience for Chinese students and their international counterparts.

Table 1. Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities in China.

Sino-Foreign Cooperative University	Year of Establishment	Foreign Affiliation	Sino Affiliation
BNU-HKBU	2005	Hong Kong Baptist University	Beijing Normal University
BLS-NCUT	2021	Brunel University London	North China University of Technology
CUHKS	2014	Chinese University of Hong Kong	Shenzhen University
DKU	2013	Duke University	Wuhan University
GTIIT	2015	Technion-Israel Institute of Technology	Shantou University
MSU-BIT	2016	Lomonosov Moscow State University	Beijing Institute of Technology
NYUS	2012	New York University	East China Normal University
UNNC	2004	University of Nottingham	Zhejiang Wanli University
WKU	2011	Kean University	Wenzhou University
XJTLU	2006	University of Liverpool	Xi’an Jiaotong University

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, teaching and learning in global higher education have been heavily affected. Conventional overseas study has proven especially vulnerable, owing to the difficulties of visa issuance and campus lockdown during the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of TNE has also been investigated in [14–17], which highlights that the emergency utilisation of virtual classrooms, to replace the traditional on-site ones, may raise some intractable challenges for pedagogy, but that TNE can serve as a cornerstone in rebuilding the post-COVID-19 higher education system. All stakeholders, such as students and their families, academics, universities, experts, enterprises and policymakers, should collaborate closely to foster inclusive and interactive learning environments. At the same time, the pandemic may strengthen the capacity of universities, in terms of preparedness for future emergencies [17]. However, research on the post-COVID-19 development of TNE in China remains scarce. Working as university lecturers, the authors delivered TNE activities in China during the pandemic, and encountered a series of challenges and difficulties in teaching and learning activities. The challenges and difficulties resulting from the pandemic required thorough reflection, based on which the authors envisioned the potential challenges and opportunities for the post-COVID-19 development of TNE in China, which prompted the present reflective case study. In this paper, the post-COVID-19 development of TNE in China is comprehensively analysed, with the potential challenges and opportunities carefully discussed, based on TNE teaching and learning at a Sino-Foreign cooperative university—Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU).

2. TNE Delivery at XJTLU

2.1. Background of XJTLU

XJTLU is a Sino-British joint-venture university in China, being a partnership between a British public university—the University of Liverpool—and a Chinese public university—Xi’an Jiaotong University. The degree programmes provided by XJTLU are aligned with those offered by the University of Liverpool, and many of them receive accreditation from both the Chinese government and the corresponding UK professional body. There are two

study routes available to students at the undergraduate level: the so-called “4 + 0” and “2 + 2” routes. Students on the “4 + 0” route study for four years at XJTU, while their counterparts who choose the “2 + 2” route study for the first two years at XJTU, and then transfer to the UK, where they study for the remaining two years at the University of Liverpool. Upon completion of undergraduate study, students are awarded a ‘Double Degree’—an XJTU degree from the Chinese Ministry of Education, and a globally recognised degree from the University of Liverpool. At postgraduate level, students study at XJTU, and are awarded solely by the University of Liverpool. Based on the aforementioned schemes and systems, XJTU demonstrably has a high level of TNE. This, in turn, has significantly contributed to the rapid development of XJTU in recent years.

2.2. TNE Delivery Modes at XJTU

A variety of teaching and learning modes have been adopted at XJTU for the delivery of TNE. The majority of TNE activities are in the form of local delivery. The University of Liverpool authorises XJTU to deliver programmes and courses, in which all the teaching, learning and assessment activities comply with the policies and regulations set out by both the Ministry of Education in China and the University of Liverpool. For example, the exam papers and coursework need to be well-moderated by the academic staff at the University of Liverpool. It is worth noting that most of the programmes and courses at XJTU are accredited by professional bodies, with a high degree of quality assurance; for instance, the XJTU Department of Civil Engineering has received full accreditation for all its programmes by the Joint Board of Moderators (JBM) in the UK, which enables Civil Engineering students to become chartered engineers recognised worldwide. In addition, distance education and collaborative provision are also delivered at XJTU; for postgraduate students who pursue their PhD degrees at XJTU, at least one of the supervision team members should be University of Liverpool staff. The blended education modes adopted at XJTU provide a flexible and inclusive platform for TNE delivery, with due consideration of critical factors regarding country, culture, policies, students and partnership.

3. Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced TNE delivery at XJTU. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, more Chinese students have enrolled in XJTU for undergraduate and postgraduate study. They had intended to study abroad, but the terrible overseas situation caused them depression and anxiety [18]. Consequently, they searched for alternatives, and undoubtedly XJTU was a good alternative for them, as they could receive a British qualification without leaving China and exposing themselves to high-risk situations in terms of infection rates. In this regard, the development of TNE seems to have been an effective way to cope with the pandemic, and to minimise its impact on higher education. However, the increasing number of students has also had a negative impact on learning and teaching activities in a transnational context. Teachers have had to adjust or change their pedagogic strategies, as the original small class sizes turned into large class sizes. Maintaining teaching quality at the same level has been a challenging issue, along with other issues such as insufficient teaching facilities. For example, Year 3 Civil Engineering students at XJTU need to attend a series of laboratory sessions to apply their subject knowledge, and to learn more about the subject. Previously there were sufficient experiment facilities in the XJTU Civil Engineering laboratory for the students to individually carry out experiments and analyse the obtained results, as 70% of the Year 3 Civil Engineering students were on the “2 + 2” study route and went to the University of Liverpool, while only 30% stayed at XJTU on the “4 + 0” study route. However, during the pandemic, most of the Civil Engineering students on the “2 + 2” study route chose to stay at XJTU instead of going to Liverpool, resulting in a situation in which two or three students had to share one experimental facility. This may have affected the students’ engagement in this hands-on learning activity. The health and safety issues resulting from

the pandemic also led to reductions in laboratory group sizes, owing to the practice of social distancing. To address these issues during the pandemic, repeated sessions for the same laboratory experiment were delivered, and students were able to select their preferred slot. Some PhD students were recruited as teaching assistants, and were trained to assist in the delivery of the laboratory sessions. To improve this situation, additional facilities could be purchased, and more technician staff could be recruited. Moreover, the quality of the student recruitment may also have been challenged. This was taken into account by XJTLU, which has set out a policy for students who do not attend “Gaokao” (i.e., the Chinese college entrance examination), whereby only those who have an offer from a university ranked in the top 150 can enrol in XJTLU, so as to avoid the enrolment of unqualified students.

4. Benefits and Challenges for TNE after COVID-19

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is still raging in some regions, TNE has exhibited its resilience against the impact of COVID-19, and has been continuously developing in China. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the benefits and challenges of TNE development after COVID-19. Different stakeholders involved in TNE delivery in higher education may find different benefits and challenges. Three main stakeholders are considered herein: students, teaching staff, and universities. The corresponding benefits and challenges for these three stakeholders are described in detail in the following sub-sections.

4.1. Benefits and Challenges for Students

TNE provides a new learning environment and educational experience for students, and allows them to pursue higher education from a different country without having to relocate to that country [19]. In this way, TNE promotes participation in higher education, and equality of opportunity for students. Chinese students at XJTLU study well-designed programmes, which are acknowledged by the relevant institutes and faculties within the prestigious UK higher education framework; however, the students do not need to relocate to the UK. Upon graduation, they are expected to be well prepared for overseas study, and to be able easily to get used to foreign education systems. There are also substantial economic and practical grounds for the students to stay in China for higher education, as the cost of living in China is considerably lower than that in the UK [20]. Moreover, given that TNE, by its nature, involves cultural communication, it enables students to gain cross-cultural experience [21]. Staff and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds work and study at XJTLU, creating a diverse and inclusive campus. While the official language at XJTLU is English, and all the teaching and administrative activities are delivered in English, several language-teaching courses, such as Spanish and Japanese, are provided at XJTLU. Students are exposed to various lifestyles, cultures, and languages. This exposure to diversity helps them to embrace differences, and to understand things from multiple points of view, which is an essential part of critical thinking.

However, every coin has two sides. The implementation of TNE is also accompanied by challenges for students. One of the significant challenges is the linguistic challenge. Theoretically, if studying at an institute that has adopted English as its official language, the students should be able to use English language proficiently in their learning activities. Unfortunately, a number of students at XJTLU have difficulties using the English language [22]. Year 1 learning activities for the undergraduate students principally consist of English language training. These learning activities are delivered to students to improve their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Terminology relevant to their discipline is also introduced, to prepare them for study of the subject. Despite the delivery of these systematic English learning activities in Year 1, some undergraduate students moving to Year 2 study still have little understanding of the English language. For example, the Department of Civil Engineering requires students to do extensive laboratory experiments, and to submit laboratory reports. Many students draft their report in Chinese, and then use Google Translate to translate the draft into English. Students cannot enhance their English writing skills by this method: the translated reports generated by Google

Translate generally contain sentences whose meanings are not precise, and which have various grammar and spelling errors. Some students struggle with English throughout their undergraduate study, as can be seen from their poor performance in their final year projects. Every year, some students fail, due to poorly written reports or unsatisfactorily delivered presentations. The situation of the postgraduate students at XJTLU may be even worse, in terms of English proficiency, as most of them receive their undergraduate education within the Chinese education framework, in which all the learning activities are delivered in the Chinese language.

Moreover, most Chinese students become very shy and unconfident when speaking English [23]. On most occasions, they are silent in class, even if they have questions, which they will put to the Chinese teaching assistants instead, or discuss with each other in Chinese during tutorials. In addition to the linguistic challenge, it can also be challenging for students to adapt to the British pedagogy, at least initially, as this is fundamentally different from the Chinese pedagogy to which they are accustomed [24]. Chinese pedagogy emphasises conventional teacher-centred teaching, and adopts memorisation techniques for students; students are not allowed to challenge their teachers in class, as such behaviour is regarded as disrespectful in Chinese culture. On the other hand, British pedagogy advocates student-centred teaching, and encourages students to develop critical thinking. As a result, students need time, at the outset of their studies, to reshape their way of thinking.

4.2. Benefits and Challenges for Staff

TNE can also be beneficial for the career development of teaching staff [2]. The education system of XJTLU is highly similar to that of the UK, in terms of the curricula, standards, strategies and policies. Therefore, employment at XJTLU, for an early-career academic, can serve as a passport to future employment by other universities which have adopted the British education system. The transnational feature of XJTLU is also appealing to experienced academics, as they can easily adapt it into their academic life [25]. Working at XJTLU can well-prepare the teaching staff to become global citizens, with the requisite skills to work internationally and become qualified for a wide range of career opportunities, owing to the prestige of the UK-style experience that they have acquired at XJTLU. There are also various professional development opportunities in learning and teaching related to TNE. For example, the PGCert programme provides training activities for the XJTLU teaching staff about teaching in higher education, and helps them to improve their teaching skills in this regard. The programme is accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and successful completion results in both Fellowship of the HEA and a Postgraduate Certificate from the University of Liverpool. These professional development opportunities can also lead to cross-institutional scholarship opportunities, providing useful training for staff from other institutes, and in turn the teaching staff at XJTLU can gain access to a broader range of professional development programmes offered by other institutes. Furthermore, the rapid development of China has brought about the possibilities of developing research partnerships, and of potential professional opportunities in academic careers [26,27].

There are also several challenges stemming from TNE, for teaching staff. A number of the XJTLU teaching staff are not Chinese nationals, and have relocated to Suzhou from their home countries. At first, they need to adapt to the new environment, and to a culture which is fundamentally different to their own. They may experience culture shock [28], which refers to the transitional phenomenological experience of individuals who have difficulties using familiar cultural references to understand the central aspects of a new culture. Some teaching staff members' families do not move to Suzhou with them, and therefore cannot help them. Moreover, the teaching staff at XJTLU may find unexpected differences in student-teacher interactions, and in the quality assurance mechanisms and processes [29]. The linguistic challenge can present challenges for teaching staff, as well as students. When delivering subject modules to Year 2 Civil Engineering students, some teaching staff noticed that the student attendance gradually declined as the lecture sessions

proceeded. Furthermore, the students who were present generally displayed a lack of engagement and a low level of participation in the learning activities. The low attendance and lack of engagement may have been because more and more terminological expressions were involved in the lecture sessions, which the students had difficulties comprehending; this language barrier may have reduced students' ability to concentrate on the subject. If students are not engaged in the teaching and learning activities, it is difficult for the teaching staff to assess progress and to identify weak points, and accordingly to adjust their teaching pace and materials. Moreover, the implementation of advanced teaching methods, underpinned by student-teacher interactions, cannot be easily achieved: for example, the constructivist inductive approaches [29]. As a result, XJTLU teaching staff may have to utilise traditional approaches, such as the conventional teacher-centred teaching style with the simple presentation of teaching materials.

4.3. Benefits and Challenges for Universities

In addition to students and teaching staff, TNE universities face challenges along with benefits. At the university level, the main benefit for institutes with transnational contexts is that there are considerably fewer competitors, as TNE is a relatively new phenomenon that is not available in every university [30]. Therefore, the transnational feature of XJTLU is attractive to local students who intend to pursue a prestigious UK degree with quality assurance; in other words, TNE can greatly contribute to the student recruitment of XJTLU, and can therefore indirectly provide financial support for the development of the university. Moreover, TNE can enrich the cultural diversity on campus, and foster cross-cultural communications [31,32]. These benefits, however, are also good reasons for other universities to initiate transnational education. Therefore, XJTLU must establish a high reputation, to ensure its ongoing success. To this end, the challenges of TNE must be taken into due consideration. In China, most students, and their parents, prefer the traditional Chinese public universities, as these institutes are financially supported by the Chinese government, and are well recognised throughout Chinese society. Given that the XJTLU education system is fundamentally different to that of the Chinese public universities, it is proving rather difficult for XJTLU to gain wide recognition by the public [33]. In addition, XJTLU needs to satisfy different sets of regulations, including Chinese government regulations, and the requirements of UK educational bodies: for example, the quality assurance and curriculum framework prescribed by the University of Liverpool.

5. Discussions and Suggestions

The challenges mentioned above, for students, teaching staff and universities, may hinder the further promotion of TNE after COVID-19. On the other hand, the broader application of TNE can be achieved if these challenges can be addressed effectively. In this section, some discussions and suggestions are provided for the post-COVID-19 development of TNE at XJTLU and in China. The main challenge of TNE delivery for students at XJTLU is the linguistic challenge, which could be addressed effectively by utilising the flipped-classroom teaching approach, as illustrated in Figure 3. Specifically, the flipped-classroom approach enables the students to watch pre-recorded online lectures, look through relevant teaching materials and participate in online discussion at home, flexibly [34]. As a result, the students have enough time to become familiar with critical knowledge, especially the terminology broadly used in the discipline. They can also summarise the questions and problems they encounter, and consider how to communicate effectively in English with instructors in class. Chinese students at XJTLU normally do not have enough time to do these things in a traditional teacher-centred model, as they need to listen to the introduction, note down the highlights and consider the questions in English contexts; the flipped classrooms, however, afford the Chinese students sufficient time to complete these learning activities at their own pace, which enables them to overcome the language barriers. As the students are introduced to new topics outside the university, classroom time is freed up for teachers to highlight the key points, explore the topics in greater depth and provide timely

feedback to students based on their questions. The teachers can also group the students and engage them in group discussions. Through discussions in English with their peers and teachers, the Chinese students can improve their listening and speaking skills, and enhance their critical thinking. In a flipped classroom, the teacher's interaction with students can be rather personalised, with less didactic activities [35,36]. Students are liberated, while teachers become facilitators. This approach can motivate students to actively engage in knowledge construction and application in the transnational context. This accords with the learning theory of humanism [37,38]. On the other hand, the flipped classroom approach can also help the teaching staff to enhance interactions with students, as the language barriers in the transnational context, that hinder student-teacher communications, have been eliminated. Once the student-teacher interactions are improved, teachers can conduct a variety of teaching activities, such as laboratory structural experiments and hands-on bridge fabrication, to achieve a better delivery to students. Moreover, the flipped classroom teaching approach can effectively engage students in large classes, and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. In large classes, it is rather challenging for instructors to engage their students together, even more so when using traditional teacher-centred teaching [39]. Implementing a flipped classroom for a large class size can engage students effectively, as it enables more focused teaching and learning to take place in the classroom, regardless of the class size [34]. Active learning activities, such as small group discussions and peer learning, can be conducted in the flipped classrooms. Therefore, the flipped classroom approach enables instructors to effectively manage large classes.

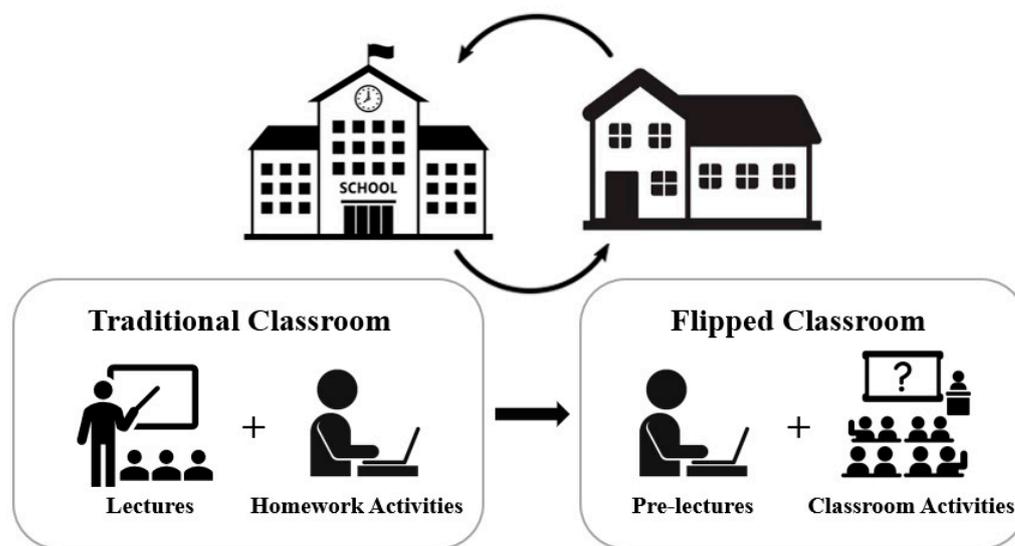


Figure 3. Comparison of traditional classroom and flipped classroom.

In addition to the implementation of the flipped classroom approach in TNE learning and teaching activities, TNE universities should focus on developing more connections with world-renowned institutions and industrial companies, other than their partner universities. Collaborative activities should be encouraged by TNE universities, such as collaborative research projects, joint teaching programmes, exchange programmes, cross-institutional scholarship projects and college-enterprise cooperative education and research programmes. These collaborative activities enable the TNE universities not only to enhance their profiles and popularity, but also to improve TNE quality, by learning lessons and strategies from other parties. On the other hand, TNE universities may enhance their capacity for risk management, by development of management skills and strategies for reputational, academic, financial and market risks [5]. Risks need to be taken into due consideration at all levels of the institute, from basic module level to senior governance level. These considerations need to be articulated, in order to form a coherent process. Following the assessment of risk levels, corresponding strategies should be proposed and

carried out, to prevent the occurrence of the risks or to mitigate the risk effects to an acceptable level [5].

6. Conclusions

The opportunities and challenges for the post-COVID-19 development of TNE in China have been comprehensively discussed and analysed in this paper, underpinned by observations on TNE delivery at a Sino-Foreign cooperative university—XJTLU. As TNE has exhibited its resilience against the COVID-19 pandemic, and has been continuously expanding in China, further development of TNE after COVID-19 is expected to take place in China, which may bring opportunities and challenges for different stakeholders, such as students, teaching staff and universities. The challenges need to be addressed effectively, for the wider application of TNE delivery in higher education. One of the most effective methods may be the flipped classroom approach, which enables students to become familiar with the teaching materials, preparing them for the linguistic challenges. Furthermore, a high degree of engagement and interaction can be achieved in flipped classrooms, liberating teachers from traditional lecture-style presentations, and inspiring them to deliver various teaching activities in a transnational context. At the institutional level, TNE universities should prompt collaborative activities with world-renowned institutions and industrial companies, and improve their ability to risk manage. Overall, the post-COVID-19 development of TNE in China is a complex and evolving phenomenon, which requires that educators seek to continuously improve themselves through learning and reflection. Much effort is still needed, in order to respond effectively to the challenges, and to further improve TNE after the pandemic.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.S. and L.W.; Funding acquisition, Y.S.; Investigation, Y.S. and L.W.; Methodology, Y.S., N.L., J.L.H., L.D.S. and L.W.; Project administration, Y.S.; Supervision, Y.S. and L.W.; Visualization, Y.S. and L.W.; Writing—original draft, Y.S.; Writing—review & editing, N.L., L.D.S. and L.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University Academic Enhancement Fund on Engineering Education Research (grant number: DES-AEF-20220523001).

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (Ref. No.: ER-DES-11000037820220326204535, 5 April 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: This work is financially supported by the Academic Enhancement Fund on Engineering Education Research from Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. The first author is grateful to his research assistant Yinying Tao for her assistance in the coordination work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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