
Institutional Reputation and Quality Architecture: Frameworks for Transparent Governance in Transnational Education

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Abstract

Transnational education separates the place where academic quality is produced from the place where institutional reputation was earned. Degrees are delivered through branch campuses, franchises, and partnerships in one country on the strength of a name built in another, and the governance structures that should hold the two together are strained by distance, regulatory plurality, and information asymmetry. This article develops a conceptual framework, the quality architecture, that specifies how internal quality production, external validation, transparency practices, and the reputational environment must connect for transnational provision to be governed credibly. The framework is built through a structured conceptual analysis of thirty verified peer-reviewed and seminal sources spanning research on transnational education governance, organisational legitimacy, quality assurance and quality culture, and university disclosure. Four components are specified: an internal quality core in which assurance routines and quality culture produce quality; an external validation ring of home, host, and international review; a transparency interface through which governance information reaches stakeholders; and a reputational environment in which rankings and

legitimacy judgments circulate. The framework's central claim is that the transparency interface is the load-bearing component in transnational settings: where it is thin, reputation decouples from quality, producing the legitimacy gaps documented in the empirical literature. Four propositions are derived for empirical testing, and implications are drawn for institutions designing cross-border governance, for regulators sequencing oversight, and for research on the reputation-quality relationship in globalised higher education.

Keywords: transnational education, institutional reputation, quality assurance, legitimacy, transparency, governance, international branch campuses

1. Introduction

Transnational education has made the university mobile. Programmes and providers now move to students rather than the reverse, through international branch campuses, franchised degrees, joint institutes, and distance provision (Knight, 2016). The scale of this movement has turned a once-marginal activity into a structural feature of global higher education, and with it has come a distinctive governance problem: the place where academic quality is produced is no longer the place where the institution's reputation was earned. A student in a host country enrolls on the strength of a name, a ranking, and an accreditation earned elsewhere; the teaching, assessment, staffing, and academic culture that will determine their actual education are produced locally, under conditions the home institution only partially controls (Healey, 2015; Lane et al., 2024).

The problem is not hypothetical. The sector's history includes host regimes that have closed large numbers of underperforming partnerships, providers that have withdrawn from ventures at reputational and financial cost, and recurring findings that the equivalence promised between home and offshore provision is difficult to deliver in staffing, resources,

and student experience (Tran et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2018). At the same time, the reputational instruments that carry cross-border enrolment, rankings and institutional names, are constructed almost entirely from home-campus research performance and sedimented prestige, and contain no information about offshore delivery at all (Selten et al., 2020). The student who chooses a branch campus on the strength of a global ranking is, in informational terms, choosing on evidence about a different campus.

The literatures that should illuminate this problem have developed apart. Research on quality assurance in transnational education documents regulatory diversity across host systems, uneven internal assurance, and persistent difficulty in delivering home-campus equivalence abroad (Coleman, 2003; Hou et al., 2018; Mok & Khai, 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Research on institutional reputation and rankings documents how reputational judgments form, circulate, and shape behaviour, largely without reference to cross-border provision (Miotto et al., 2020; Brankovic et al., 2023; Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025). Research on university transparency and disclosure examines what institutions reveal about their governance and performance, almost entirely in domestic settings (Ntim et al., 2017; Ramírez & Tejada, 2018). Each literature holds a piece of the transnational governance problem; none assembles them. There is currently no framework that specifies how quality production, external validation, transparency, and reputation are supposed to connect in transnational provision, and therefore no principled way to diagnose the failures that occur when they do not.

The stakes of this gap are practical as well as theoretical. Empirical work shows that students choosing transnational programmes rely heavily on rankings and institutional reputation (Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Soysal et al., 2024), while the systematic evidence shows that quality delivery in such programmes is the sector's most persistent challenge (Tran et al., 2023). When reputation carries the enrolment decision and quality varies beneath it, the

difference is absorbed by students, and eventually by the reputation itself, since reputational damage from failed ventures flows back to the home institution (Healey, 2015; Wilkins, 2017).

This article addresses the gap with a conceptual contribution. It asks three questions. First, what does the existing evidence establish about how quality is produced, validated, and communicated in transnational education? Second, how do reputation and legitimacy operate as governing forces on transnational providers? Third, how can these elements be integrated into a framework that both explains observed failures and guides transparent governance design? The answer is the quality architecture: a four-component framework, developed in Section 4, whose central claim is that transparency is the load-bearing connection between quality production and reputational judgment in cross-border settings. Section 2 reviews the contributing literatures, Section 3 describes the method, Section 5 discusses implications and limitations, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The governance problem of transnational education

Definitional work distinguishes collaborative transnational provision, delivered with local partners, from independent provision such as wholly owned branch campuses, and shows that governance obligations differ across the resulting forms (Knight, 2016). Systematic mapping of the field finds quality assurance the most researched topic, alongside policy, cultural difference, and student experience, but also finds the literature fragmented and often thin on comparative theory (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). The empirical record documents the governance problem from several directions. Early analysis of branch campuses in Southeast Asia described them as among the most intrusive yet least monitored

forms of cross-border provision and traced the first attempts of home-country agencies to extend oversight abroad (Coleman, 2003). Comparative study of host regulation in Malaysia, Singapore, China, and South Korea finds external quality assurance approaches ranging from exemption through reliance on home accreditation to full duplication, with regulatory liberalism and comprehensiveness varying by country (Hou et al., 2018). Reviews of Asian transnationalisation conclude that quality assurance practice is primarily shaped by host-country and provider policies rather than by any common standard (Mok & Khai, 2024). Host-country research in Ghana documents benefits in curriculum and pedagogy alongside challenges of unclear policy guidelines, resourcing, and curricular localisation (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). A systematic review across two decades of research identifies quality assurance, equivalence of student experience, staff preparedness, and local adaptation as the sector's central challenges, and a proper regulatory framework and global data collection as success conditions (Tran et al., 2023).

Two theoretical treatments sharpen the problem. A risk-based typology reframes transnational forms by the degree of reputational and operational risk they transfer to the home institution, arguing that activity-based classifications obscure what governance must actually manage (Healey, 2015). Principal-agent analysis of branch campuses in Malaysia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates models the home institution, host state, and campus as a governance triangle in which information asymmetry between principals and agents is the fundamental condition to be managed (Lane et al., 2024). Both treatments converge on the same insight: transnational governance is, at core, a problem of credible information across distance.

2.2 Reputation, rankings, and legitimacy

The second literature explains the forces that carry enrolment and standing. Legitimacy theory distinguishes pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy and analyses the

strategies by which organisations gain, maintain, and repair each (Suchman, 1995). Applied to higher education, survey evidence shows that reputation exerts a significant positive effect on legitimacy, and that both function as intangible assets underpinning competitive advantage (Miotto et al., 2020). Institutional theory explains branch campus establishment itself partly as legitimacy- and status-seeking behaviour (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), and case research on Chinese branch campuses in Southeast Asia shows providers actively constructing legitimacy through conformity, selective conformity, and creation strategies according to local dependence (He & Wilkins, 2018). Strategic-plan analysis across seventy-eight universities in thirty-three countries finds legitimacy-seeking stratified by status: high-ranked institutions emphasise global positioning while others anchor claims in local relevance (Stensaker et al., 2019).

Rankings are the most consequential reputational instrument. Longitudinal analysis shows the major global rankings reduce largely to two factors, research performance and reputation, and are stable over time (Selten et al., 2020); critical work shows ranking organisations managing their own legitimacy through principles that are decoupled from practice (Barron, 2017), and documents how rankings multiply and reshape reputational geographies rather than merely record quality (Collins & Park, 2016). The institutionalisation of rankings has proceeded through continuities, interdependencies, and the engagement of universities themselves (Brankovic et al., 2023). Crucially for transnational provision, evidence shows international student sorting is driven more by sedimented reputation than by year-to-year ranking movement (Soysal et al., 2024), and branch campus enrolment decisions lean on home-institution rankings and accreditations (Dowling-Hetherington, 2020), exposing providers to reputational risk they cannot fully control (Healey, 2015; Wilkins, 2017). Systematic reviews of university reputation conclude the construct remains fragmented and under-theorised relative to its strategic weight (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022; Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025).

2.3 Quality assurance and quality culture

The third literature concerns how quality is actually produced inside institutions. Evidence from accredited universities shows accreditation affecting performance substantially through the mediation of quality culture, the shared commitment that converts procedures into practice (Iqbal et al., 2024). Recent structural modelling finds internal and external assurance exerting direct effects on performance while quality culture functions as an enabling condition shaped by assurance routines (Ulkhay et al., 2026). For transnational settings, prospective models argue that quality management must be aligned with student expectations and experience from the design stage rather than audited retrospectively (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021). The implication that matters for the present framework is that quality is produced by the interaction of routines and culture at the point of delivery, which in transnational provision lies at the far end of the governance chain from the reputation that recruits students, and that assurance conducted at distance measures the routines more easily than the culture (Hou et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2023).

2.4 Transparency and disclosure

The final literature examines how governance information reaches stakeholders. Analysis of UK universities finds voluntary disclosure highly variable and overall low, with audit committee quality, board diversity, and governance committees associated with fuller disclosure, and concludes that accountability motives are weaker than legitimacy and resource motives (Ntim et al., 2017). Stakeholder research in Spain finds strong demand for disclosure of governance structures and processes as a condition of trust (Ramírez & Tejada, 2018). Studies of highly ranked universities link board structure and stakeholder participation to social-responsibility disclosure (Garde Sánchez et al., 2020), and evidence from Asian universities shows size and complexity predicting sustainability disclosure, interpreted through legitimacy theory (Raimo et al., 2025). Across this literature, disclosure functions

simultaneously as accountability and as legitimacy management, and the balance between the two is an empirical variable rather than a given.

What the disclosure literature has not yet examined is the transnational case, and the omission matters more than a simple gap in coverage. Every study cited above analyses institutions disclosing to audiences within a single accountability jurisdiction: the funders, regulators, and publics of one country. Transnational provision splits the audience. The stakeholders with the greatest informational need, students, employers, and regulators in host countries, are precisely those least served by home-country reporting conventions, and no reviewed study measures what such stakeholders can learn about an offshore operation from public sources. This unmeasured quantity is, on the argument developed below, the variable on which credible transnational governance turns.

Read together, the four literatures supply the components of an unassembled system: a governance problem defined by information asymmetry across borders, a reputational environment that carries decisions, a quality production process rooted in local routines and culture, and a disclosure practice that could connect them but is documented mainly as domestic and discretionary. The framework developed below assembles them.

3. Method

3.1 Design and rationale

The study is a conceptual paper built on a structured evidence base. The research questions require theory construction, specifying how constructs from separate literatures relate, rather than the aggregation of comparable empirical results, which rules out systematic review as the primary design; at the same time, the framework's claims are intended to be anchored in verifiable findings, which rules out unstructured essay. The method therefore

combines explicit source selection with a disciplined synthesis procedure, and states the framework's conceptual status openly.

3.2 Source identification and criteria

Sources were identified between June and August 2026 through structured queries of scholarly databases (Consensus, drawing on Semantic Scholar, Scopus, and related indexes), organised in four query families corresponding to the constructs in the title: transnational education governance and quality assurance; institutional reputation, rankings, and legitimacy; internal quality assurance and quality culture; and university transparency and disclosure. Inclusion criteria were: peer-reviewed publication or seminal theoretical standing; direct relevance to at least one construct; and confirmable bibliographic identity, with every source verified against its digital object identifier or publisher record before use. Exclusion criteria were: promotional literature, sources whose metadata could not be confirmed, and duplicative preprints of published work. Thirty sources satisfied all criteria; one earlier theoretical work (Suchman, 1995) was retained deliberately as the foundational statement of legitimacy theory on which the higher-education applications rest.

3.3 Analytical procedure

The synthesis proceeded in three steps. First, each literature was analysed for the function it assigns to its central construct: what quality assurance does, what reputation does, what disclosure does, and for whom. Second, a dependency analysis asked what each function presupposes from the others in a specifically transnational setting, where production, validation, and judgment are geographically and institutionally separated; this generated the four-component structure and identified the transparency interface as the component on which cross-border alignment depends. Third, the draft framework was tested against the empirical record: documented failure patterns in transnational provision were checked against the framework's predictions, and four propositions were formulated where the framework makes

claims the existing evidence can test but has not. Throughout, claims are attributed at the strength the underlying studies warrant, and framework-level statements are marked as conceptual.

3.4 Rigor and boundaries

Bias was limited by drawing on critical as well as managerial scholarship in each literature, by verifying every source against the original record, and by requiring that each framework component rest on multiple independent sources. The analysis is bounded in three ways: it synthesises published research rather than new fieldwork; the transnational evidence base is concentrated on branch campuses and Asian host systems, reflecting the field's own concentration (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016); and the framework is a set of theoretical claims whose empirical adequacy the propositions are designed to expose to testing. These boundaries are revisited in the Limitations subsection.

4. The Quality Architecture Framework

The framework models transparent governance in transnational education as an architecture of four connected components. Figure 1 presents the structure, and Table 1 specifies each component's function, mechanisms, and characteristic transnational risks. The subsections develop the components and then the alignment dynamics that constitute the framework's explanatory core.

4.1 The internal quality core

At the centre sits the process that actually produces educational quality: curriculum, teaching, assessment, staffing, and the assurance routines and quality culture in which they are embedded. The evidence is consistent that routines and culture interact, with culture converting procedure into practice (Iqbal et al., 2024) and assurance mechanisms shaping

culture over time (Ulkhag et al., 2026). In transnational provision this core is duplicated at distance: branch campuses and partners must reproduce not only the home institution's procedures but the practice-sustaining culture beneath them, under different staffing profiles and resource conditions, which the sector evidence identifies as its hardest problem (Tran et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2018). The core's characteristic transnational failure is hollow replication: procedures formally transplanted, culture not.

Why hollow replication is the default rather than the exception follows from the sector's operating conditions. Offshore operations rely more heavily on visiting, adjunct, and locally recruited staff whose induction into the home institution's academic culture is brief or absent; resource levels are typically thinner than at the home campus; and the practices that carry quality culture, moderation conversations, examiner networks, informal collegial scrutiny, do not travel in policy documents (Tran et al., 2023; Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020). Prospective quality models respond to exactly this condition by requiring alignment between quality management and the actual expectations and experience of offshore students from the design stage, rather than treating equivalence as something to be audited after the fact (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021). The framework adopts that prospective logic: the core is a system to be built deliberately in each location, not an inheritance that arrives with the brand.

4.2 The external validation ring

Around the core operates the ring of external validators: home-country agencies extending oversight abroad, host-country regulators, and international accreditors. The comparative record shows this ring is plural and uneven, spanning exemption, reliance on home accreditation, duplication, and international review (Hou et al., 2018), primarily shaped by host and provider policy rather than common standards (Mok & Khai, 2024), and historically lagging the expansion of provision itself (Coleman, 2003). Principal-agent

analysis explains the ring's structural weakness: each validator holds partial information about an agent whose principals sit in different jurisdictions, so validation fragments precisely where provision crosses borders (Lane et al., 2024). The ring's characteristic failure is the gap between overlapping mandates, in which no validator observes the whole operation.

4.3 The transparency interface

The third component is the framework's distinctive contribution: the set of practices through which the institution makes its quality production and validation visible to stakeholders, spanning governance disclosure, outcome reporting, and honest representation of the relationship between home and offshore provision. The domestic evidence shows such disclosure is discretionary, variable, and governance-dependent (Ntim et al., 2017; Garde Sánchez et al., 2020), demanded by stakeholders as a condition of trust (Ramírez & Tejada, 2018), and used by institutions as legitimacy management as much as accountability (Raimo et al., 2025). The framework's claim, developed from the dependency analysis, is that in transnational settings this interface is load-bearing: because students, employers, and regulators in the host country cannot observe the internal core directly and the validation ring is fragmented, disclosed information is the principal channel through which quality can discipline reputation. Where the interface is thin, reputational judgment forms on rankings and name alone, and the enrolment evidence shows it does (Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Soysal et al., 2024). This claim is conceptual, but it organises the observed pattern: the sector's documented failures concentrate where disclosure about offshore operations is weakest (Healey, 2015; Wilkins, 2017).

4.4 The reputational environment

The outer component is the environment in which reputational and legitimacy judgments circulate: rankings and their institutionalised infrastructure (Brankovic et al., 2023; Selten et al., 2020), stakeholder perception aggregated over time (Fernández-Gubieda &

Gutiérrez-García, 2025), and the legitimacy types through which audiences grant standing (Suchman, 1995; Miotto et al., 2020). Transnational providers both draw on this environment, borrowing home reputation to enter host markets (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012; He & Wilkins, 2018), and are exposed to it, since offshore failure flows back through the same channels (Healey, 2015). The environment's characteristic property is inertia: reputation is sedimented and moves slowly relative to quality (Soysal et al., 2024; Collins & Park, 2016), which is precisely what makes decoupling possible.

4.5 Alignment, decoupling, and four propositions

The framework's explanatory core is the relationship among components. When the four are aligned, quality produced in the core is validated by the ring, made visible through the interface, and reflected, with lag, in the environment; reputation then approximates a trailing indicator of quality. Decoupling occurs when the interface fails: quality and reputation cease to constrain one another, hollow replication in the core persists unobserved, and the legitimacy eventually granted or withdrawn is disconnected from educational reality.

The framework distinguishes two decoupling paths with different dynamics. Upward decoupling occurs when borrowed reputation exceeds delivered quality: enrolment and fees flow on the strength of the home name while the offshore core underperforms, a configuration that is privately stable for the provider in the short run and is therefore the one regulation must actively disturb. Downward decoupling occurs when delivered quality exceeds recognised reputation: a competent offshore operation is discounted because host stakeholders cannot verify what it does, a configuration that penalises exactly the providers investing most in the core. Both paths are failures of the same interface, which is why the framework treats disclosure as the single point of intervention that acts on both: richer disclosure erodes the private stability of upward decoupling and supplies the verification that resolves downward decoupling. The legitimacy literature adds a temporal asymmetry: legitimacy is slow to build,

faster to lose, and hardest to repair once audiences reclassify a provider from competent to untrustworthy (Suchman, 1995), which converts sustained upward decoupling into a stock of latent reputational liability rather than a maintainable equilibrium (He & Wilkins, 2018; Healey, 2015). Four propositions state the framework's testable content. First, transnational operations with richer public disclosure of offshore governance and outcomes will show smaller home-host differences in educational quality, because visibility disciplines replication. Second, the effect of external validation on offshore quality will be mediated by the local quality culture it induces rather than by compliance alone, extending the domestic mediation evidence (Iqbal et al., 2024; Ulkhaq et al., 2026) to cross-border settings. Third, reputational damage from offshore failure will be greater, and repair slower, for institutions whose prior disclosure was thin, because thin disclosure converts failure from a performance problem into a trust problem (Suchman, 1995; Ntim et al., 2017). Fourth, host-country regulatory regimes that mandate disclosure will produce convergence between reputation and quality faster than regimes that mandate validation alone (Hou et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2024).

Table 1

Components of the Quality Architecture: Functions, Mechanisms, and Transnational Risks

Component	Function	Principal mechanisms	Characteristic transnational risk	Key evidence
Internal quality core	Produces educational quality	Assurance routines; quality culture; staffing and assessment practice	Hollow replication: procedures transplanted without culture	Iqbal et al. (2024); Ulkhaq et al. (2026); Tran et al. (2023)
External validation ring	Certifies quality to outside audiences	Home-agency oversight; host regulation; international accreditation	Fragmented mandates; no validator sees the whole operation	Coleman (2003); Hou et al. (2018); Lane et al. (2024)
Transparency interface	Makes production and validation visible	Governance disclosure; outcome reporting; honest	Thin, discretionary disclosure; legitimacy management	Ntim et al. (2017); Ramírez & Tejada (2018); Raimo et al. (2025)

		representation of offshore provision	displacing accountability	
Reputational environment	Allocates standing and enrolment	Rankings; sedimented reputation; legitimacy judgments	Inertia enabling decoupling; borrowed reputation outrunning local quality	Selten et al. (2020); Soysal et al. (2024); Wilkins & Huisman (2012)

Note. Components are the author's synthesis of the reviewed literatures; the transnational risks column states the failure mode the framework predicts when the component operates without the support of the others. Full argument in Sections 4.1–4.5.

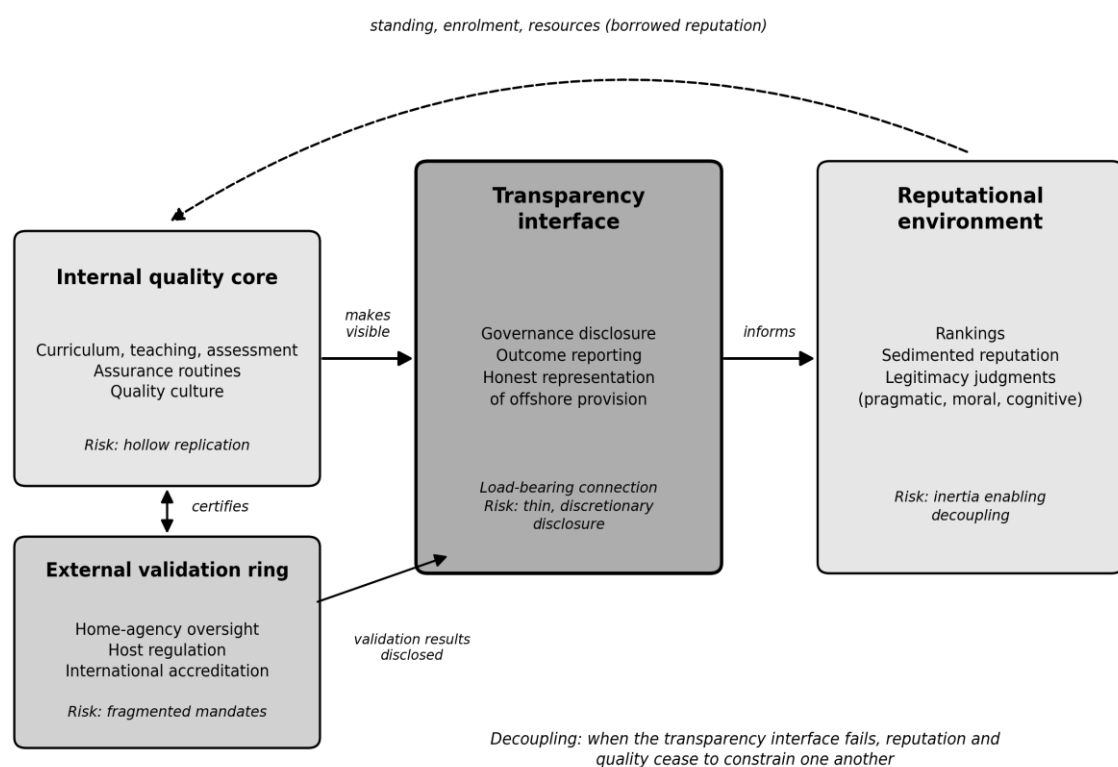


Figure 1. The quality architecture for transparent governance in transnational education. Quality is produced in the internal core, certified by the external validation ring, and made visible through the transparency interface to the reputational environment; the interface is the load-bearing connection, and its failure decouples reputation from quality. Source: author's elaboration based on the reviewed literature.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

The framework contributes to three conversations. To transnational education research, it supplies the integrating structure the field's own reviews call for (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Tran et al., 2023): quality assurance, risk typologies, and legitimacy strategies cease to be separate topics and become components whose interaction explains outcomes. The reframing also changes what counts as a finding. Studies that document regulatory diversity (Hou et al., 2018) or student reliance on rankings (Dowling-Hetherington, 2020) currently read as descriptions of separate phenomena; within the architecture they become measurements of particular components whose joint configuration, not their individual states, predicts whether provision is credibly governed. The principal-agent account of governance risk (Lane et al., 2024) is extended by specifying disclosure as the institutional answer to the information asymmetry that theory identifies: transparency is what converts an unobservable agent into a governable one. To legitimacy theory, the framework adds a boundary case with general interest: transnational provision separates the audience that grants legitimacy from the activity that should earn it, making the management of legitimacy through disclosure empirically distinguishable from the management of quality itself, a distinction that domestic settings blur (Suchman, 1995; Raimo et al., 2025). To reputation research, which its own reviews describe as fragmented (Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025), the framework offers a mechanism linking reputation to its supposed referent: reputation tracks quality only through the information that crosses the interface, which explains both the documented inertia of reputational judgment (Soysal et al., 2024) and the possibility of its decoupling.

The framework also speaks to an older question in institutional theory: when disclosure serves legitimacy management, does it inform or merely reassure (Ntim et al.,

2017; Raimo et al., 2025)? The transnational setting sharpens the question because the audiences are segmented. Disclosure aimed at home-country audiences, annual reports, sustainability statements, strategic plans, can legitimate without informing host-country stakeholders at all, since the information those stakeholders need concerns the offshore operation specifically. The framework therefore implies that the informativeness of disclosure must be assessed audience by audience, and predicts that providers under reputational pressure will disclose most where it legitimates and least where it informs, a prediction consistent with the domestic finding that accountability motives run weaker than legitimacy motives (Ntim et al., 2017).

5.2 Practical and policy implications

For institutions, the framework functions as a governance audit. A transnational operation can be examined component by component: whether quality culture, not merely procedure, has been reproduced offshore; whether any single validator observes the whole operation; what a host-country stakeholder can actually learn about the offshore operation from public sources; and how exposed the home reputation is to offshore failure. The framework implies that the cheapest robust investment is usually the interface: disclosure of offshore governance, staffing, and outcomes is within institutional control, unlike host regulation or ranking behaviour, and on the framework's first proposition it disciplines the core as a by-product. For regulators, the fourth proposition implies a sequencing: mandating disclosure may achieve more, sooner, than adding validation layers to an already fragmented ring (Hou et al., 2018). For students and their advisers, the framework identifies the questions that rankings do not answer and disclosure should: who teaches, who examines, and which quality regime actually governs the campus at which they will study (Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021).

The framework further suggests a minimum disclosure standard that institutions and quality agencies could adopt without new regulation. For each offshore operation it would cover the governance relationship between home and host entities; the proportion and status of home-appointed academic staff; which examinations and awards are subject to home-campus moderation; which external validator holds current oversight and when it last reviewed the operation; and comparable outcome indicators for home and offshore cohorts. Each element corresponds to a documented failure locus in the empirical record (Tran et al., 2023; Hou et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2024), and none exceeds what institutions already hold internally. Publishing such a standard would also give accreditors and ranking organisations a defensible way to incorporate transnational provision into instruments that currently ignore it, addressing a measurement blind spot the rankings literature has identified from within (Barron, 2017; Selten et al., 2020).

5.3 Limitations

Four limitations bound these claims. First, the framework is conceptual: its components are grounded in verified empirical literature, but their integration, and especially the load-bearing status of the transparency interface, is the author's theoretical construction, stated as propositions precisely because it awaits testing. Second, the evidence base inherits the field's concentration on branch campuses and Asian host systems; collaborative and franchise provision, where partner incentives differ, may stress the architecture differently. Third, the disclosure literature the interface rests on is domestic; transnational disclosure may face constraints, including host-country political sensitivity, that domestic studies do not capture (Wilkins, 2017). Fourth, the framework treats the reputational environment as exogenous inertia, whereas ranking organisations are themselves strategic actors (Barron, 2017); endogenising their behaviour is beyond this article's scope.

5.4 Future research

The propositions define the agenda. Testing the first requires paired measurement of disclosure richness and home-host quality differences across transnational operations, feasible through document analysis combined with the quality data that some host regulators already collect (Hou et al., 2018). The second extends established mediation designs (Iqbal et al., 2024; Ulkhaq et al., 2026) to offshore campuses. The third invites event-study methods around documented offshore failures, relating reputational impact to prior disclosure. The fourth calls for comparative regulatory analysis across host systems with different disclosure mandates. Beyond the propositions, qualitative work on how offshore staff experience the tension between representing quality and producing it would illuminate the interface from inside, and extension of the framework to collaborative provision and to emerging host regions would test its generality (Owusu-Agyeman & Amoakohene, 2020; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This article set out to connect what research on transnational education has kept apart: the production of quality, its validation, its communication, and the reputational judgments that carry cross-border enrolment. The quality architecture framework specifies four components and locates the decisive connection in the transparency interface, through which alone quality can discipline reputation across borders. The framework explains the sector's documented failure patterns as decoupling phenomena, yields four testable propositions, and converts abstract calls for accountability into a specific design claim: in transnational education, transparent governance is not a virtue appended to quality management but the structural condition under which reputation and quality remain connected at all. As provision continues to globalise, the institutions and regulators that treat disclosure as infrastructure,

rather than as discretionary communication, will be the ones whose reputations remain worth borrowing.

Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement. This study is a conceptual analysis of published literature and involved no human participants, personal data, or animal subjects; ethical approval was therefore not required.

Data Availability. No new data were created or analysed in this study. All sources reviewed are publicly available through the references listed.

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