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Measuring institutions' country brand authenticity in transnational higher education

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ABSTRACT

When higher education students choose to enrol at a transnational education (TNE) or country-branded institution, they may want, and probably expect, an authentic 'foreign' educational experience. Most of the existing authenticity frameworks are not concerned with the contributory factors, and they are generic rather than industry or sector-specific. Hence, the aim of this research is to develop a measurement scale for country brand authenticity, specifically for use in transnational higher education settings. Researchers can use the scale to further explore antecedents and consequences of country brand authenticity. Also, a measurement scale for country brand authenticity enables institutions to map their existing performance against the key indicators, set clear targets and assess improvements in authenticity performance. The research built upon a conceptual framework adopted from the literature, and involved four phases of primary data collection: one with senior management expert informants and three with undergraduate students studying at American, British and Canadian affiliated universities in Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates. The data for the research were collected using a deductive qualitative written questionnaire, one focus group, and two online quantitative survey questionnaires. The research results in a robust 29-item measurement scale for country brand authenticity in TNE.

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Transnational education; country-branded university; brand authenticity; brand credibility; scale development

Introduction

In many countries, a foreign or international higher education is valued by students, parents and employers as something different and special (Cai et al., 2024). It is widely perceived that graduates who achieve a foreign or international degree may have

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developed an international outlook, superior problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills, and the ability to work independently and creatively. Students who want an international education have two main options: they can either travel abroad as an international student or enrol in a transnational education (TNE) programme in their home country. TNE has traditionally been recognised as education that is delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based (Universities UK, 2022). TNE is most commonly delivered at international branch campuses (IBCs), international study centres, and independent universities, colleges and institutes. These institutions may deliver their own locally accredited programmes or those of foreign institutions, including joint/double degrees.

Country-branded universities (CBUs) are a common form of higher education provider, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. The names of CBUs include a country, such as *The American University in Cairo* and *Vietnam-Japan University*. In these examples, the institutions are located in Egypt and Vietnam respectively, and are affiliated with the United States (US) and Japan. CBUs are usually established as independent, locally owned private institutions that receive academic and organisational support from one or more foreign universities or organisations. Although CBUs operate in markets serving students who desire a foreign or international education, these institutions do not fit with the universally accepted definitions of TNE, which require that a programme/s or institution has crossed national borders (Knight, 2016).

CBUs have not crossed national borders, but they do ‘borrow’ or transfer elements of the higher education system of the affiliated country, which may include curriculum models, pedagogy, academic staff, and national cultures and values. In practice, many students and parents do not distinguish between a ‘foreign’ education that is delivered by a foreign university (e.g., an IBC) or a local university that delivers an international education that is modelled on the higher education system of a particular country (i.e., a CBU) (Wilkins & Huisman, 2024). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the branding discourses of IBCs and CBUs are in fact quite similar (Juusola et al., 2023).

In this research, we use the term ‘TNE’ to include both institutions that have crossed borders (such as IBCs) and CBUs, because both types of institution may display similar national characteristics and features, and in both cases students may expect the institution to offer an authentic foreign education. Country of origin or affiliation are often strong predictors of students’ perceptions of institution quality (Chee et al., 2016; Wilkins et al., 2024b). Global university rankings promote such beliefs, which particularly benefits Western universities. Although institutions that are affiliated to Western countries – such as Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and US – are most commonly associated with high quality education, it should be noted that in Central Asia similar perceptions may be held about Russian universities (cf. Khaydarov, 2023).

Previous research has found that students desire authentic experiences and relationships (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). From a student’s perspective, when they enrol at a TNE institution, they may want, and probably expect, an authentic ‘foreign’ education that is comparable to what they would receive in the country where the institution is based or the country with which the institution is affiliated (Smail & Silvera, 2018). For example, the American curriculum is broad and students usually specialise later in their programmes, so a student may expect any American-branded institution to offer such a curriculum (Wilkins, 2013). Students often choose a foreign education to

experience different teaching, learning and assessment methods and to develop foreign language and intercultural competence, which are increasingly seen as important in achieving a successful career in international companies and settings (Cai et al., 2024). The American University of Beirut, a private independent university located in Lebanon, offers the American-style liberal arts model of higher education using a teaching-centred research approach, and supports American values such as freedom of thought and expression, personal integrity and civic responsibility (AUB, 2024). All of these things may contribute to the institution being perceived by students and parents as an authentic American institution.

Once a student decides that they want an international education, they will only consider those institutions that they perceive offer this type of education. Then, the actual choice of institution tends to be determined by institution rankings, accreditations, local reputation, entry requirements, tuition fees and scholarships, campus infrastructure and facilities, as well as campus location (Cai et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2024; Wilkins, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2024a). Wilkins et al. (2024b) found that an institution's country of origin influences both students' institution choices and students' overall satisfaction with their institution. Also, Chee et al. (2016) concluded that an institution from a developed country (the UK) was perceived by prospective students in Malaysia as having a superior image, reputation and quality compared to an institution from a developing country (India).

Most IBCs claim to deliver programmes that are identical to the main 'home' campus and that a student's overall experience at the branch is comparable to that they would have received at the main campus (Wilkins, 2020). In effect, IBCs claim to offer indexical authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), where the education and student experience at the branch is like the original, genuine thing at the main campus. Often, these offshore campuses signal authenticity by awarding degrees from the university's 'home' campus. In contrast, CBUs generally offer iconic authenticity, because while they cannot claim to be the original, genuine thing, they do nevertheless aim to offer an education and student experience that is typical in the affiliated country, hence an 'authentic reproduction' (Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 298). In particular, the success of the American economy and American universities during the last few decades has promoted the Americanisation of higher education globally (Juusola et al., 2015), to the extent that independent, privately owned institutions worldwide consider it advantageous to brand themselves as American.

When students perceive an institution as authentic, they may also perceive it as credible. However, Napoli et al. (2014) argue that authenticity and credibility are conceptually distinct. Brand credibility is related specifically to an individual's belief that the institution will deliver what it promises. It has similarities with brand trustworthiness (Morhart et al., 2015), and it is also related to brand quality, as students may assume that a credible brand will deliver a high quality service that fulfils their expectations. We suggest that perceived credibility may also be related to perceived authenticity, and we test this relationship in the final stage of this research (Test Study 2).

From a marketing perspective, it is clear that an institution's brand authenticity is very important in TNE. Although the concept of country brand authenticity applies to both CBUs and IBCs, it may be more important to CBUs because IBCs are more likely to benefit from the rankings and reputations of their main campuses in the countries where they are based. This fact provides the rationale for focusing on CBUs in

this research, as CBUs need to emphasise their country brand authenticity more convincingly, to promote perceptions of high education quality among stakeholders.

Brand authenticity may be regarded as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true towards itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202). For example, students that opt for an international education often want to be perceived as global citizens. Most authors accept that brand authenticity is a multidimensional construct that encapsulates concepts such as quality, excellence, heritage, honesty, integrity and values (Södergren, 2021). Wilkins and Huisman (2024) observed that most of the existing authenticity frameworks are concerned with classifying the different forms of authenticity rather than focusing on its contributory factors, and they are generic rather than industry or sector-specific (e.g., Akbar & Wymer, 2017; Moulard et al., 2021).

To overcome the constraints of generic frameworks, Wilkins and Huisman (2024) developed an authenticity framework that identifies the key dimensions of country brand authenticity specifically for TNE contexts. The four dimensions are specified as affiliated country connections (e.g., foreign partner support and accreditation), teaching and learning (e.g., curricula, pedagogy and language of instruction), governance and human resources (e.g., citizens of the affiliated country in academic and management positions), and student experience and development (e.g., student support, extra-curricular activities and national values).

The aim of this research is to develop a measurement scale for country brand authenticity, for use by researchers and practitioners in TNE settings. Institutions may use our measurement scale to quantify their existing performance against the key indicators, set clear targets and assess improvements in authenticity performance.

Method

The method employed to develop a measurement scale for country brand authenticity in TNE contexts was guided by the literature, which included both review and ‘how to’ papers on scale development (e.g., Carpenter, 2018; Hinkin, 1995), as well as studies concerned specifically with the measurement of brand authenticity (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Girardin et al.’s (2024) study on the brand authenticity of higher education institutions also provided useful contextual information related to brand authenticity in higher education settings.

As with all scale development processes, there are three distinct stages, namely item generation, scale development and scale evaluation (Hinkin, 1995). Within these three stages, we followed twelve distinct steps in order to develop our final proposed scale, which are detailed in Table 1. The research involved four phases of primary data collection: one with senior management expert informants and three with TNE undergraduate students studying at American, British and Canadian affiliated universities in Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates. The data for the research were collected using a deductive qualitative written questionnaire, one focus group, and two online quantitative survey questionnaires. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of The British University in Dubai on 27th November 2023 (Approval number: BUS047). At each stage of the study, every participant gave their informed consent in writing.

Table 1. Steps in the development of a measurement scale for country brand authenticity in transnational higher education^a.

Step	Purpose	Technique	Sample
1	Understand the concept of brand authenticity, including its dimensions and possible indicators	Literature review	–
2	Identify the key dimensions of country brand authenticity in TNE Identify/develop possible items for each dimension	Adopted from Wilkins and Huisman (2024): Inductive survey using an online questionnaire with mainly open questions	15 expert informants in 9 countries worldwide, who held a senior management position in a TNE institution
3	Item refinement, Development of a draft measurement scale	Online questionnaire using the Delphi survey approach	6 expert informants in 5 countries worldwide, who held a senior management position in a TNE institution
4	User feedback to refine scale, Confirm items for scale testing 1	Student focus group	12 undergraduate business students at a British affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates
5	Measurement scale testing 1	Survey 1 – online questionnaire completed by students in class	310 undergraduate students at an American affiliated university in Bangladesh and a British affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates
6	Verify the factorability of the data	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < .05$), Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy ($> .07$), Correlation matrix ($> .30$)	–
7	Determine the factor structure	Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis extraction and oblimin rotation	–
8	Factor and item evaluation	Cronbach's alpha ($> .70$), Eigenvalues > 1.0 , Factor communalities $> 60\%$ variance explained, Factor loadings > 0.45 , No cross-loadings > 0.30	–
9	Assess construct validity	Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), Common method bias Convergent validity Discriminant validity	–
10	Assess model fit	Comparative fit index (CFI) $> .90$, Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) $> .90$, Root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) $< .08$	–
11	Measurement scale testing 2	Survey 2 – online questionnaire completed by students in class	343 undergraduate students at a Canadian affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates
12	Assess measurement scale and predictive ability	Multiple regression analysis, Variance explained (Adjusted $R^2 > 0.50$), Contribution of each dimension (coefficients and p values compared)	–
13	Proposed measurement scale	Presented in Appendix 2	–

^aThis table uses the term 'TNE' to include both international branch campuses/international study centres and independent, locally owned country-branded universities (CBUs).

Item generation

As the point of departure for this study, we utilised the conceptual framework for TNE country brand authenticity developed by Wilkins and Huisman (2024). In that research, 15 senior TNE managers in nine countries worldwide completed an online questionnaire in which questions were answered in relation to the participant's institution. Inductive, open-ended questions were used to obtain rich context-specific responses from the

expert management informants. The survey questions used to generate possible scale items were developed by the authors based on common themes and issues identified in the TNE literature (e.g., Knight, 2016; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2011). The questions covered topics such as curricula, teaching, student life, selection of academic staff, and institution values that are aligned with the values of the institution's affiliated country.

For the items on values, we particularly made use of the work of Wilkins (2017) and Shams and Huisman (2012) which dwelled extensively on cultural/value issues. We are aware that specific issues are dependent on context, but our reading of the literature leads us to capture the issues under the headings of diversity, global citizenship, freedom of speech (including academic freedom) and discrimination. Step 2 in this study refers to the procedure and findings published by Wilkins and Huisman (2024). The framework for TNE country brand authenticity presented in that paper identified the dimensions of country brand authenticity, from which we could extract items for possible inclusion in our measurement scale.

Scale development

Step 3 in our research process was concerned with scale development and refinement. Six of the expert informants who had been involved in the research that developed the conceptual framework for TNE country brand authenticity (Wilkins & Huisman, 2024) agreed to participate in a second follow-up study to develop a measurement scale for country brand authenticity. All of the participants held senior management positions in a CBU located in Bangladesh, Egypt, Vietnam or the United Arab Emirates, with job titles such as President, Registrar, Dean and Head of Student Affairs. The institutions were affiliated with Germany, Russia, the UK and the US.

The data collection adopted a Delphi-type survey approach (Green, 2014), in which the experts used online questionnaires to provide information, feedback and suggestions in two rounds. A deductive research approach was appropriate in this stage of our research process because the participants were tasked with evaluating each item associated with the existing conceptual framework for country brand authenticity. An online questionnaire was suitable for the purpose of generating items because participants had time to think about and check facts, clarify their thoughts and opinions, and consider what information they wanted to put into the public domain. Also, not being constrained by time, they could provide their detailed responses in multiple sittings. The two Delphi rounds were used to achieve consensus on the most appropriate items to measure each of the agreed dimensions of brand authenticity, as well as the exact phrasing of each item. The six Delphi participants each approved the draft measurement scale presented by the authors.

In Step 3 of our research process, the qualitative data were analysed using a broad descriptive-interpretative qualitative research approach (Elliott & Timulak, 2021), which incorporated aspects of qualitative content analysis as well as thematic analysis. Kahlke (2014) argues that a generic approach to qualitative research may be suitable for applied research that seeks to gain a deep understanding of a relatively non-complex subject. Such a research approach is also appropriate because our research context, i.e., branding in TNE, has few theories and empirical studies. Using the descriptive-interpretative method, the study's research questions are answered through a

systematic process of description and interpretation, which involved some initial qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content approach helped organise understandings into clusters of similar observations and experiences, which could then be developed and recognised as themes.

Before testing the scale to determine the factor structure, construct validity and model fit, using a focus group format, the draft scale was presented to twelve undergraduate business students at a British affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates (Step 4). The focus group used a convenience sample consisting of one class taught by one of the coauthors. Each participant completed the questionnaire, which consisted of the proposed scale items. The process of completing the questionnaire enabled the participants to identify possible problems and issues with the proposed items. Following this, the students offered their feedback and suggestions in a discussion lasting about 30 min. During the session, the researcher made notes of the participants' contributions, and the meeting ended when all of the participants agreed with the final list of items.

Scale evaluation

Testing and evaluation of the proposed measurement scale was undertaken using two quantitative surveys. The student samples in these surveys consisted of self-selected volunteers, with most of the questionnaires completed during lessons. The participants were undergraduate students who were enrolled at the campus where they completed the questionnaire. Study abroad students were excluded, as their views of authenticity would likely be different to the students who were not from the affiliated country, which is the focus of this research. An attempt was made to achieve broadly representative samples in terms of student nationalities and subjects studied. The data for both of the quantitative surveys were collected using online questionnaires that were prepared using Google Forms for Test Study 1 and Microsoft Forms for Test Study 2.

Test Study 1, covering steps 5–10 in our research process, was intended to determine the factor structure, and assess the construct validity and model fit of the proposed scale. This survey involved a total of 310 students at an American affiliated university in Bangladesh ($n = 185$) and a British affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates ($n = 125$). Of all respondents, 34.8% were female and 65.2% male; 37.1% studied computer science, 36.5% studied a business subject (including accounting and finance, marketing etc.), and the remainder studied a range of subjects that included English, engineering, law and pharmacy; 22.6% were in Year 1, 32.3% in Year 2, 25.2% in Year 3, 17.7% in Year 4 and 2.3% in Year 5. At the American affiliated university in Bangladesh, all students were Bangladeshi citizens, while at the British affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates more than 95% of the students were either Emirati or the citizens of other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The data in Test Study 1 were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

To further validate our proposed measurement scale and to assess the overall effect of the four brand authenticity dimensions on perceived brand credibility, as well as the relative importance of each individual dimension, a second quantitative study with a student sample was undertaken. Brand credibility was measured using five items adapted from Perera et al. (2020). The scale items are shown in Appendix 1.

The data for Test Study 2 (Steps 11 and 12) were obtained from 343 undergraduate students at a Canadian affiliated university in the United Arab Emirates. Of all respondents, 50.7% were female and 49.3% male; 35.9% studied a business subject (including accounting and finance, marketing etc.), 16.6% computer science, 10.2% psychology, 9.9% public health, and the remainder studied a range of subjects that included architecture, communication, creative industries, engineering and environmental health management; 40.2% were in Year 1, 26.5% in Year 2, 16.0% in Year 3 and 17.2% in Year 4. The sample was broadly representative of the institution's diverse student population, which has more than 100 nationalities represented. About 60% of the students may be classified as Emirati or Middle Eastern (nationals of countries like Egypt, Iran, Jordan and Syria), and about 10% of the students are Indian. All of the non-Emirati students are mainly the children of expatriate families living in the United Arab Emirates. The data in Test Study 2 were analysed using multiple regression analysis, where the four dimensions of brand authenticity were the independent variables, and brand credibility was the dependent variable being predicted. All of the quantitative data analysis was performed using Jamovi software v2.3.28 (available at <http://www.jamovi.org>).

Findings

Item generation

First, the conceptual framework developed by Wilkins and Huisman (2024) was examined. The framework has eleven themes that are grouped into four dimensions, which relate to affiliated country connections (e.g., foreign partners and foreign accreditation); teaching and learning (e.g., curriculum structure and content that is the same as in the affiliated country); governance and human resources (e.g., the employment of affiliated country nationals and citizens as trustees/board members, academics and managers); and student experience and development, which includes the promotion of the affiliated country's culture and values. These four dimensions provide the framework for our proposed scale. As a starting point for the scale development process, 38 items were taken from the conceptual framework developed by Wilkins and Huisman (2024). Many of the items are related to curricula, pedagogy/didactics and foreign accreditation.

Scale development

Assuming that the items obtained from Wilkins and Huisman's (2024) framework had achieved face validity, we proceeded in Step 3 of our research process to establish the scale's content validity. The first task presented to the expert Delphi participants was to approve and/or provide feedback on the appropriateness of the four dimensions specified and the list of items that were grouped within each dimension, i.e., the first-attempt draft measurement scales. For the Wilkins and Huisman (2024) framework, participants were asked to suggest items that applied specifically to their own institution, but as we wanted to develop items that would be generalisable across all TNE institutions regardless of their type (e.g., IBC or CBU) or geographic location, participants were asked to use their knowledge and experience to judge whether each item might be generalisable to *any* TNE institution.

The Delphi participants each agreed with the four suggested dimensions of country brand authenticity in transnational higher education, although one individual suggested that it may not be necessary to include governance with the human resource theme. Each of the draft measurement scales relating to the four dimensions achieved between 66.6% and 83.3% approval. Key issues that emerged include: CBUs that operate more independently will have weaker affiliated country connections compared to the CBUs that receive stronger support from foreign partners; in some institutions compulsory periods of study abroad and/or internship in a company in the affiliated country are programme requirements (particularly in German-branded universities) while other institutions do not require either; and variation in the requirement to take language courses or achieve certain levels of proficiency in the affiliated country language if this is not English.

One participant mentioned that in some locations it is more practical or necessary (because of local regulations) to adopt host country accreditation rather than accreditation from the affiliated country. Another participant informed that the composition of their trustee board is determined not wholly by the institution but also by regulations in the host country. Finally, one individual noted that while their institution may claim that discrimination does not exist and is not tolerated anywhere in the university, in practice, management decisions may not always be transparent, which sometimes leads to the decisions being perceived as unfair.

In the first round of scale refinement, the participants were presented with 38 items and asked to state whether they thought each individual item was essential, very desirable, likely appropriate, easily omitted or unsuitable. Using the feedback from the first round, in the second round, the researchers presented the participants with revised lists of items for each dimension. After the second round, the original list of 38 items was reduced to 31 items. The six expert informants perceived that these 31 items would likely apply to the brand authenticity of any TNE institution, including IBCs and independent CBUs. Minor rephrasing of 14 items was undertaken to enable generalisation across institutions and institution types, or to improve readability and/or user (student) understanding. For example, 'office for student affairs' was added to the item about having an active student council that can influence management decisions. Finally, all six Delphi participants approved the dimensions and items of the proposed measurement scale, as well as the phrasing of each item.

Before the proposed scale was used in a survey, it was pretested with twelve undergraduate students at a British-branded university in the United Arab Emirates. The students completed the draft questionnaire and then participated in a focus group discussion, in which they shared their comments and suggestions. In general, the students' feedback was positive and there appeared to be few issues with the proposed scale or its individual items. However, most of the students reported that they did not know who served as the board members or trustees of their institution, so they could not say whether these individuals were nationals or citizens of the affiliated country. Therefore, the item related to board members and trustees was removed from the Governance and Human Resources dimension and the dimension was renamed 'Human Resources'.

A couple of students reported that they were not one hundred per cent sure of the meaning of some of the specialist/technical words, like curricula/curriculum, or about things like credit transfer in the affiliated country. However, these students suggested

that the items could remain as they were, because the examples given for curricula and curriculum offered sufficient 'clues' about the information being sought, and the other questions could still be reasonably interpreted. At the end of the 30-minute focus group session, each of the 12 participants approved the revised measurement scale consisting of 30 items. It was noted that the item TLG4 'English is the only or main language of instruction' would only be included in the scale if the institution is from, or affiliated with, an anglophone country.

The procedures and outcomes of our consultation with expert professionals and students ensured the content validity of our proposed scale. We then proceeded to Step 5 in our research process, which represented the start of our scale testing and evaluation. As all of the institutions used in Test Studies 1 and 2 are affiliated with anglophone countries, we tested the full 30-item scale that included item TLG4 'English is the only or main language of instruction'. Our Delphi study included participants from German and Russian affiliated institutions, and they agreed that apart from TLG4 all of the other items might reasonably apply to any TNE institution regardless of their country affiliation.

Scale evaluation

Test study 1

First, some preliminary analysis of our data was undertaken. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy produced a value of .955, far higher than the cut-off point of .70, which indicates that the sample size of 310 was excellent. Also, the Bartlett Test of Sphericity result ($p < .001$) suggests that the data have a high enough degree of correlation to justify using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The lowest inter-factor correlation between any two variables is 0.399, higher than the $>.30$ cut value.

Exploratory factor analysis was then conducted using principal axis extraction and oblimin rotation. Using the Eigenvalues > 1 criterion yielded three factors, which did not fit with our proposed conceptual model. However, when four factors were specified, an acceptable solution was delivered. The scree plot supports the extraction of four factors. Factor loadings below 0.45 were discarded, which resulted in the deletion of only one item (TLG3 – Students may participate in study abroad in the affiliated country). As our respondents in Test Study 1 were drawn from only two institutions, it is possible that study abroad, for whatever reason, is not common in these two institutions. This finding highlights the diversity that exists among TNE institutions, but it may also be partially explained by the fact that students and experts (institution managers) likely have different perceptions and levels of knowledge.

There were no items with significant loadings on more than one factor. The Cronbach's alpha value for each factor ranged from 0.87 to 0.95, which indicates that each factor possesses sufficient internal reliability. Four factors were identified, namely Student Experience and Development (SED), Teaching and Learning (TLG), Affiliated Country Connections (ACC), and Human Resources (HRS). Together, these four factors explain 66.4% of total variance (Table 2).

To assess construct validity and the model fit, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken. The measurement model consisted of four variables (SED, TLG, ACC and HRS) and a total of 29 indicators. The results indicate that the data has a good fit with

Table 2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) results.

	SED	TLG	ACC	HRS
SED4 The university prepares students as leaders and citizens of the world	.867			
SED1 Students have access to a wide range of extracurricular activities, clubs, teams and associations	.839			
SED2 The university possesses facilities for student participation in sports and the arts, e.g., outdoor fields/pitches, multi-purpose sports halls, gym, theatre, student radio	.826			
SED6 The university provides careers advice and support	.732			
SED3 The university has an active student council/office of student affairs that can influence the management's decisions	.727			
SED5 The university supports the intellectual advancement and personal growth of students and employees	.696			
SED9 The university supports free expression and academic freedom	.683			
SED8 The university provides counselling services for academic and non-academic support	.673			
SED7 Some graduates of the university obtain jobs in the affiliated country	.645			
SED10 The university shows respect for individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures	.557			
SED11 No form of discrimination is tolerated anywhere in the university	.511			
TLG7 Students are expected to demonstrate independent learning		.908		
TLG8 Students are expected to develop and demonstrate critical thinking skills		.747		
TLG1 The university's curriculum structure is the same as in the affiliated country, e.g., programme length, semester structure		.727		
TLG6 Students are expected to demonstrate at least basic competency in the language of the affiliated country		.646		
TLG2 The programme content is similar to programme content in the affiliated country		.638		
TLG9 Teaching is mostly student centred, with interactive learning		.565		
TLG10 Diverse teaching and learning methods are used, including technology-enhanced learning		.504		
TLG4 The programme design and content allow student exchange and credit transfer in the affiliated country		.499		
TLG5 English is the only or main language of instruction		.482		
ACC3 Partner institutions in the affiliated country contribute to joint programmes/courses			.714	
ACC5 Incoming study abroad students come from partner institutions or institutions in the affiliated country			.643	
ACC2 Curricula (courses of study) are based on the curricula of affiliated country partner institutions			.625	
ACC1 The university and/or its programmes are accredited in the affiliated country			.579	
ACC4 Partner institutions or institutions in the affiliated country provide short-term visiting professors			.575	
HRS2 Some academic staff are nationals or citizens of the affiliated country				.769
HRS4 Some academic staff have previously taught in the affiliated country				.635
HRS1 Some senior management positions are held by individuals from the affiliated country				.570
HRS3 Some academic staff achieved their doctorate in the affiliated country				.537
Variance (%)	25.8	18.1	11.3	11.3
Cumulative variance (%)	25.8	43.9	55.2	66.4
Cronbach's alpha	.95	.93	.91	.87

Notes: SED = Student experience and development, TLG = Teaching and learning, ACC = Affiliated country connections, HRS = Human resources.

the model: $\chi^2 = 1006.00$ ($df = 380$, $p < 0.01$); comparative fit index (CFI) = .925; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .915; and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .072.

The values of all standardised estimates are $>.60$ (except TLG5 = .57) and significant ($p < .001$), and the scores for composite reliability are all considerably above the cut value of 0.70 (Table 3). The highest variance explained by one variable is 25.8%, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to be an issue with the data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The average variance extracted (AVE) for each variable is $>.50$, indicating satisfactory convergent

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results.

Variable	Item	Standardised estimate	Z	<i>p</i>	CR	AVE
Student experience development	SED1	.805	17.0	<.001	.96	.662
	SED2	.742	15.1	<.001		
	SED3	.775	16.1	<.001		
	SED4	.884	19.7	<.001		
	SED5	.861	18.9	<.001		
	SED6	.854	18.6	<.001		
	SED7	.806	17.1	<.001		
	SED8	.831	17.8	<.001		
	SED9	.889	19.9	<.001		
	SED10	.749	15.3	<.001		
	SED11	.740	15.0	<.001		
Teaching and Learning	TLG1	.786	16.2	<.001	.95	.560
	TLG2	.760	15.3	<.001		
	TLG4	.884	16.0	<.001		
	TLG5	.574	10.4	<.001		
	TLG6	.717	14.2	<.001		
	TLG7	.728	14.3	<.001		
	TLG8	.789	16.2	<.001		
	TLG9	.791	16.2	<.001		
	TLG10	.787	16.1	<.001		
Affiliated country connections	ACC1	.841	18.0	<.001	.92	.687
	ACC2	.898	20.0	<.001		
	ACC3	.887	19.6	<.001		
	ACC4	.750	15.2	<.001		
	ACC5	.758	15.4	<.001		
Human Resources	HRS1	.737	14.3	<.001	.89	.615
	HRS2	.776	15.5	<.001		
	HRS3	.809	16.5	<.001		
	HRS4	.813	16.6	<.001		

validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Also, the square root of the AVE for each variable is larger than the correlation between the variable and every other variable, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (Table 4).

Test study 2

The Test Study 2 measurement model consisted of the same four variables (SED, TLG, ACC and HRS) and 29 indicators used in Test Study 1. The Test Study 2 model fit results are slightly weaker than those obtained in Test Study 1, but they are acceptable, which suggests that our measurement scale for country brand authenticity is quite robust: $\chi^2 = 1128.00$ ($df = 388$, $p < 0.01$); comparative fit index (CFI) = .904; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .892; and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .074. The values of all standardised estimates are $>.60$ and significant ($p < .001$), and the scores for composite reliability are all considerably above the cut value of 0.70.

Marketing and branding research suggests a positive relationship between brand authenticity and brand credibility (Guillotini & Mangematin, 2018; Napoli et al., 2014).

Table 4. Construct correlations.

	SED	TLG	ACC	HRS
Student experience and development (SED)	<i>.813</i>			
Teaching and learning (TLG)	<i>.549</i>	<i>.748</i>		
Affiliated country connections (ACC)	<i>.504</i>	<i>.399</i>	<i>.829</i>	
Human resources (HRS)	<i>.587</i>	<i>.541</i>	<i>.401</i>	<i>.784</i>

Note: The figures in italics on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variance extracted.

Multiple linear regression was used to assess how well our proposed brand authenticity scale predicts brand credibility, and to assess the contribution of each dimension of brand authenticity in this relationship. This analysis offers support for criterion validity, i.e., the extent to which the scale is able to predict a certain outcome.

First, the Durbin-Watson test result of 2.23 confirmed the independence of the residuals (observations). Next, the variance inflation factor (VIF) scores of 2.68 to 3.58 for the four independent variables indicate that multicollinearity is not present in the data (Welc & Esquerdo, 2018). The Q-Q Plot suggests that the residuals are approximately normally distributed. Finally, all of the Cook's distance values are far smaller than 1.0, indicating that there is not a problem with outliers in the data.

Our model for country brand authenticity explains 66% of the variance in brand credibility ($R^2 = .663$, Adjusted $R^2 = .659$), which is considered a strong result. SED and TLG are both significant predictors of brand credibility ($p < .001$), but ACC and HRS are non-significant (Table 5).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to develop a measurement scale for country brand authenticity, for use in TNE settings. The confirmatory factor analysis results in Test Studies 1 and 2 both indicate that it is reasonable to conceptualise country brand authenticity as a construct with four dimensions, namely student experience and development; teaching and learning; affiliated country connections; and human resources. However, while the results of the multiple regression analysis in Test Study 2 confirm student experience and development, and teaching and learning, as significant predictors of brand credibility, the results suggest that affiliated country connections and human resources are non-significant. These results may point at a lack of criterion validity of the scale, but there are two important qualifications.

First, the results were perhaps unsurprising, as students likely focussed on those aspects of their institution and its service provision that directly impact upon them and with which they are most familiar, i.e., teaching and learning, and student experience and development. This is also supported by the finding that students in the focus group were not very knowledgeable about the governance arrangements at their institution. Second, it is important to consider that in this particular study, less weight should be attached to criterion validity, as the other reliability and validity measures strongly support the scale qualities. Therefore, following the advice of our expert informants and the positive results of our confirmatory factor analysis, we decided that it is conceptually appropriate to retain the measurement scale as a construct with four dimensions. The 29 items (or 28, if TLG4 is excluded for institutions not from, or affiliated with, an anglo-phone country) of our final measurement scale for country brand authenticity, for use in

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analysis.

Dimension of Country Brand Authenticity	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Student experience and development (SED)	.484	.065	.443	7.423	<.001
Teaching and learning (TLG)	.378	.072	.310	5.254	<.001
Affiliated country connections (ACC)	.046	.056	.044	0.833	.406
Human Resources (HRS)	.083	.053	.081	1.565	.119

Notes: $R^2 = .663$, Adjusted $R^2 = .659$

TNE settings, are shown in Appendix 2. Our items use the term ‘university’, since the vast majority of TNE institutions with degree awarding powers are universities, but the scale may also be used with other types of higher education institution in TNE settings.

From a practical perspective, there are two implications of our findings. First, institutions may improve their communications with students about the institution’s authenticity and connections with the affiliated country. For example, students should understand possible progression routes for further study in the affiliated country, and be aware of opportunities to undertake study abroad or internships in the affiliated country as part of their programme. Second, if institutions refer to authenticity in their marketing activities, they should perhaps focus on those aspects that directly impact upon students, which may be the things that students are most interested in, such as teaching and learning methods, student experience and the institution’s culture and values.

Although we implemented a rigorous scale development process that comprised of twelve distinct steps, we acknowledge that the student data were obtained from only three institutions in two countries. Given the diversity of institutions that exist globally in TNE, replication studies using different samples are required to further validate our proposed measurement scale. We are aware of the potential sampling and country context biases in our surveys and focus group. However, we preferred to develop a valid and reliable scale with scope for further refinement above a broader sampling approach. Future research could use participants from IBCs and other types of TNE provider in addition to CBUs, and institutions that are not affiliated with anglophone countries. Future research could also further investigate the antecedents and outcomes of country brand authenticity (Girardin et al., 2024), such as how perceived country brand authenticity impacts upon students’ institution choices, study experiences and satisfaction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix 1. Measurement scale for Perceived Brand Credibility (adapted from Perera et al., 2020).

This university does exactly what it promises

The quality promoted by this university is trustworthy

I can count on the brand of this university

This university is competent to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills

This university does not make claims about quality that are false

Appendix 2. Proposed measurement scale for country brand authenticity in transnational higher education

Item	Dimension
SED1 Students have access to a wide range of extracurricular activities, clubs, teams and associations	Student experience and development
SED2 The university possesses facilities for student participation in sports and the arts, e.g., outdoor fields/pitches, multi-purpose sports halls, gym, theatre, student radio	
SED3 The university has an active student council/office of student affairs that can influence the management's decisions	
SED4 The university prepares students as leaders and citizens of the world	
SED5 The university supports the intellectual advancement and personal growth of students and employees	
SED6 The university provides careers advice and support	
SED7 Some graduates of the university obtain jobs in the affiliated country	
SED8 The university provides counselling services for academic and non-academic support	
SED9 The university supports free expression and academic freedom	
SED10 The university shows respect for individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures	
SED11 No form of discrimination is tolerated anywhere in the university	
TLG1 The university's curriculum structure is the same as in the affiliated country, e.g., programme length, semester structure	Teaching and learning ^a
TLG2 The programme content is similar to programme content in the affiliated country	
TLG3 The programme design and content allow student exchange and credit transfer in the affiliated country	
TLG4 ^b English is the only or main language of instruction	
TLG5 Students are expected to demonstrate at least basic competency in the language of the affiliated country	
TLG6 Students are expected to demonstrate independent learning	
TLG7 Students are expected to develop and demonstrate critical thinking skills	
TLG8 Teaching is mostly student centred, with interactive learning	
TLG9 Diverse teaching and learning methods are used, including technology-enhanced learning	
ACC1 The university and/or its programmes are accredited in the affiliated country	Affiliated country connections
ACC2 Curricula (courses of study) are based on the curricula of affiliated country partner institutions	
ACC3 Partner institutions in the affiliated country contribute to joint programmes/courses	
ACC4 Partner institutions or institutions in the affiliated country provide short-term visiting professors	
ACC5 Incoming study abroad students come from partner institutions or institutions in the affiliated country	
HRS1 Some senior management positions are held by individuals from the affiliated country	Human resources
HRS2 Some academic staff are nationals or citizens of the affiliated country	
HRS3 Some academic staff achieved their doctorate in the affiliated country	
HRS4 Some academic staff have previously taught in the affiliated country	

^aAfter the deletion of the item 'Students may participate in study abroad in the affiliated country' from the Teaching and Learning dimension, most of the items in this dimension were recoded.

^bTLG4 'English is the only or main language of instruction' is only included in the scale if the institution is from, or affiliated with, an anglophone country.