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Exporting Employability: Evidence From Transnational Education Alumni

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ABSTRACT

Transnational education institutions promoting foreign curricula often claim to enhance international employability for local students, yet many assertions lack substantial evidence. This qualitative study investigates the study-to-work transitions of alumni from a binational university in Turkey, focusing on their motivations for selecting this university and their immediate labour market outcomes. The study introduces the concept of “exporting employability” through transnational education. The findings indicate that the extent to which transnational higher education institutions can “export” employability has limitations and largely depends on language skill development. Notably, nearly all graduates choose to work in their country of origin. By applying transnational social fields theory, this study illustrates how transnational education can offer a globally relevant yet locally applicable education, ultimately providing concrete evidence of transnational education’s role in enhancing alumni employability and contributing to their labour market outcomes.

1 | Introduction

Pursuing career opportunities often involves navigating geographical and linguistic boundaries. Transnational higher education (TNHE) allows students to obtain international qualifications without the need for travel, potentially enhancing their competitiveness across global labour markets. Unlike traditionally mobile students who physically relocate for their studies, TNHE can be described as the transfer of institutions and programmes from other nations to the countries where students reside (Knight and Liu 2019). This occurs when “learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based” (McBurnie and Ziguras 2007, p. 21). TNHE aims to provide students who stay in their home countries with access to education supported by foreign institutions and therefore emphasizes institutional mobility, exemplified by international branch campuses and international joint universities that confer degrees to students located in

different countries than the awarding institution (Shams and Huisman 2012).

The employability prospects of TNHE graduates are being increasingly debated in comparison to those of students who complete their degrees abroad (Tran et al. 2021). In TNHE, the role of the institution is central to alumni employability, yet the extent of the institutional role remains largely unexplored, making it challenging to assess whether and in what ways transnational education effectively supports graduates’ employability (Schueller 2023). Research on the experiences of TNHE alumni is limited (Bilsland et al. 2020; Brammar 2023; Rensimer 2021). And yet, many TNHE institutions promote the employability benefits of their programmes to local students, often lacking substantial evidence to support claims.

This study, therefore, aims to explore the role of TNHE in how graduates leverage their TNHE education and employability development to facilitate career transitions across borders.

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Qualitative interviews with 19 alumni of the Turkish–German University (TGU), a German TNHE institution in Turkey, form the data basis. By highlighting the alumni trajectories, this study illuminates how TNHE graduates receive a globally relevant education that enhances their outcomes in local labour markets.

1.1 | Literature Review

TNHE allows students to receive international curricula while remaining in their home countries, often through international branch campuses (McBurnie and Ziguras 2007). Traditionally, international higher education has focused on students who physically relocate for their studies (Di Pietro 2021; Netz and Cordua 2021; Liwiński 2019; Van Mol et al 2021). However, an increasing number of students are opting for TNHE programmes, which enable them to prepare for employment in two labour markets simultaneously (Li et al. 2021). Students at Germany's binational universities often choose these programmes for other reasons than exclusion from local education or financial constraints, as is common for students in other TNHE contexts (Waters and Leung 2012; Yao and Garcia 2018).

According to Van Harten et al. (2022), employability refers to an individual's potential in the labour market. Research on graduate employability and career outcomes in transnational education is limited (Jones 2019; Kosmützky and Putty 2016). The varying employability skills required across different countries complicate the interdisciplinary approach needed to address this topic (Pendse and Inman 2017). Studies have examined how educational institutions support graduates' career outcomes through the lenses of employability and career development (Healy et al. 2022), but there is a significant divide between these fields in the context of transnational education (Bailey and Ingmundardottir 2015).

Historically, studying for a full degree abroad has provided advantages for graduates seeking better job prospects at home and abroad. However, recent findings indicate that local employers are hesitant to hire internationally educated graduates due to their lack of local connections (Tran et al 2021). TNHE may offer a way to align with local employer expectations by enabling students to develop international capital while remaining in their home countries (Schueller and Keser Aschenberger 2023; Pham 2022). As Rensimer (2021) notes, while TNHE can enhance positional mobility and transnationality for graduates, it is essential to consider the positional value of TNHE providers within the global higher education hierarchy. Schueller's (2023) literature review highlights that TNHE graduates typically possess skills demanded by local employers, achieve high employment rates (> 90%), secure jobs within 6 months of graduation, earn higher salaries than local non-TNHE graduates, and acquire localized binational human capital. Language proficiency, a nation-specific network, knowledge and mobility are all components of binational human capital. These are further subdivided into skills such as bilingualism, the capacity to navigate the technical standards and norms of the host nation, and host-specific networking skills that enable alumni to establish employer-relevant professional connections in the host nation (Schueller and Keser Aschenberger 2023). TNHE supports the development of these skills through a focused educational environment in the host and home countries.

These positive outcomes are attributed to various factors such as career preparation programmes (Bilsland et al. 2020), soft skill development (Yao and Tulião 2019) and the inherent characteristics of TNHE institutions (Belderbos 2019; Yao and Garcia 2018). The “degree capital” acquired through TNHE enhances graduates' positioning in both local and global labour markets (Kohler 2019; Sin et al 2019; Waters and Leung 2012). Exploring graduate employability and career development together can provide a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences. On the basis of the available research, the TNHE degree seems to serve as a tool for improving employment prospects and overall employability in local labour markets.

1.2 | The Case Study

One often-overlooked aspect of THNE is the binational university (Lane and Schueller 2024). This institutional type and concept, prevalent in German-language literature, refers to universities partially funded by the German government (Kammüller et al. 2020). A binational university is established through collaboration between two nations, facilitating the exchange of educational practices and creating transnational learning environments (Kammüller et al. 2020). These institutions typically thrive on mutually beneficial partnerships (Kammüller et al. 2020; Knight and Liu 2019). Currently, there are around 10 Germany-led binational universities globally (Knight and Liu 2019).

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has partnered with various foreign governments to develop binational universities that integrate the academic traditions of both nations. One prominent example, and the case in this study, is the TGU in Istanbul, established through an intergovernmental agreement between Germany and Turkey. Officially opened in 2013 as a public Turkish university, TGU combines German and Turkish higher education components. Early enrolment was competitive, with some programmes admitting only students in the top 5% of national entrance exams (Backhaus et al. 2017). The DAAD aims to attract top Turkish students and those with connections to Germany, such as return migrants and students from German high schools in Turkey (Maleike 2008).

As of October 2020 when this study concluded, TGU offered 13 bachelor's programmes, six master's programmes and one PhD programme, enrolling 3036 students and graduating 116. Although some programmes are available in English, most require proficiency in German. Prospective students must complete a 1-year German preparatory course to secure admission into their chosen programmes and have the opportunity to attend a language school in Germany for 1 month.

TGU employs full-time Turkish academics alongside contingent faculty members from Germany and local German professors. The teaching model includes “flying faculty” who visit for block teaching sessions while Turkish faculty cover the remainder of the semester (Backhaus et al. 2017). This collaborative approach allows students to experience both academic traditions within the same courses and provides faculty with greater flexibility than typically found in German universities (Sokollu 2014).

Students at TGU also benefit from various funding programmes that support study abroad opportunities in Germany focused on language acquisition and work-based learning. These programmes are primarily available through partner universities within the

consortium. The international office and individual faculties assist students in securing internships at international companies in Germany and other training opportunities (Backhaus et al. 2017).

1.3 | Theoretical Framework

Binational universities merge and blend the boundaries of the nation-state, which traditionally has been the scope used to study international student mobility (Shahjahan and Grimm 2022). The uniquely transnational and local space, or transnational social fields (TSFs), that binational universities occupy, extends to the students who attend them. A TSF is an “unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations” (Fouon and Schiller 2001, p. 544). TSFs are “spaces for the exchange, organization, and transformation of ideas, practices, and social networks” that illuminate the ways and reasoning for international student sensemaking (Gargano 2009, p. 332). The concept of TSF provides a language for making sense of migration, im(mobility) and liminal spaces that are traversed within international higher education institutions (Schiller and Levitt 2006; Gargano 2009; Schiller and Fouon 1999). International students are inherently different from migrants, refugees and other border crossers, and within the international student community, there is also a range of identities and positionalities (Gargano 2009; Bista 2020; J. Lane and Farrugia 2022; Streitwieser 2019; Wolter 2020). Students at transnational education institutions remain rooted in their local societies and economies, which is markedly different from international students who cross physical borders to pursue a degree in a different geographical location (Waters 2012; J. Lane and Farrugia 2022; Cruz et al. 2023). This complexity can be addressed with TSF, which accounts for both mobile and immobile students but has rarely been used to theorize TNHE (Gargano 2009).

2 | Methods

This study is part of a larger mixed-methods project examining labour market outcomes in transnational education, focusing on the binational TGU (Schueller 2021). It explores the perceptions and expectations of students, alumni and stakeholders, with the main research question: What role do labour market outcomes play at TGU? The research design included a survey of students ($n = 507$) and alumni ($n = 64$), semistructured interviews with university stakeholders ($n = 6$), and interviews with 19 alumni recruited through the survey. This substudy specifically analyzes the experiences and expectations of these 19 alumni regarding labour market outcomes. The research questions guiding this substudy are as follows:

- What were the alumni motivations for attending the TGU?
- What were the patterns of alumni labour market outcomes during or shortly after graduation?
- How did the binational university as a TSF influence alumni career perceptions, expectations and outcomes (including where to seek employment—in Germany, Turkey or internationally)?

In TNHE research, studies often focus on one specific TNHE provision, such as one international branch campus case, due to

the importance of context and the “third space” in TNHE partnerships (Schueller et al. 2024). To better understand TNHE alumni experiences with career development and labour market outcomes, we chose the TGU case and employed a qualitative descriptive approach (Elliott and Timulak 2021). This method is suitable for exploring underinvestigated TNHE alumni transitions by focusing on the “who, what, and where” of experiences (Kim et al. 2017). The goal is to capture the essence of how a group experiences specific events or contexts.

Before beginning the study, the research team consulted with TGU for permission and visited the campus in Istanbul. TGU administrators and students provided feedback on survey and interview guides, ensuring that the project was designed collaboratively with the TGU community. All recruitment communications were sent directly to students and alumni via institutional emails in Turkish.

2.1 | Sample

As part of the larger research project, the survey of students and alumni included an option to provide contact information for follow-up interviews. At the moment of data collection, there were 116 alumni. Out of 64 alumni survey participants, 29 alumni (45%) left their contact details and were invited for interviews. Purposeful sampling was the primary method for accessing alumni, supplemented by snowball sampling through referrals. All alumni were included without exclusions based on age, gender, study programme or graduation year. Ultimately, 19 of the 29 volunteers (65%) participated in interviews. This number was sufficient to address the research questions and aligns with qualitative interviewing standards, given the richness of the data (Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

2.2 | Data Collection

Semistructured interviews with alumni from the TGU serve as the primary data collection method for this study. An interview guide was developed using insights from the literature review, theoretical framework, preliminary survey results and feedback from TGU administrators and students. It included 17 questions covering: (1) motivations and personal experiences, (2) the role of the binational university, (3) jobs and careers and (4) an open-ended conclusion. Probing questions were used to deepen the understanding of participants' experiences beyond the guide. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min and were conducted via MS Teams or Zoom due to COVID-19. To ensure a comfortable environment for respondents, interviews were conducted in English ($n = 8$, 42%) or German ($n = 11$, 58%), aligning with the researcher's language skills and the requirements of the participants' graduate programme. Most participants agreed to video interviews ($n = 16$, 84%), while three preferred written responses.

2.3 | Participant Characteristics

Interviews were conducted from August to October 2020. One interview included two alumni but was counted as separate due to individual responses. Table 1 presents participant characteristics, using pseudonyms and industry designations instead of occupation to secure anonymity.

TABLE 1 | Participant demographics.

Nr.	Interview language	Programme of study	Gender	Nationality	Industry	Location
1	English	Law	F	Turkish	Job-seeking	Turkey
2	German	Law; Master's in Private Law	M	Turkish	Law	Turkey
3	German	Intercultural Management	F	German	Nonprofit	Turkey
4	German	Law	F	Turkish	Job-seeking	Turkey
5	German	Intercultural Management	F	German	Law	Germany
6	English	Law	M	Turkish	Law	Turkey
7	English	Master's in European and International Affairs	M	Turkish	Business	Turkey
8	German	Intercultural Management	F	German	Government	Turkey
9	English	Industrial Engineering	F	Turkish	Business	Turkey
10	English	Business Administration	F	Turkish	Chemical	Turkey
11	English	Law	F	Turkish	Law	Turkey
12	German	Intercultural Management	F	Turkish	Government	Germany
13	German	Law	F	Turkish	Law	Turkey
14	German	Law	M	Turkish	Law	Turkey
15	German	Law	M	Turkish	Law	Turkey
16	German	Political Science	F	Turkish	Government	Turkey
17	German	Industrial Engineering	F	Turkish	Engineering	Turkey
18	English	Business Administration	F	Turkish	Publishing	Turkey
19	English	Law	F	Turkish	Law	Germany

Alumni self-identified as Turkish, German or German-Turkish (born in Germany). Among the 19 participants, 14 were female (74%) and 5 were male (26%). Most participants were Turkish nationals ($n = 16$, 84%), with a few German nationals ($n = 3$, 16%). The sample included a range of disciplines, with law alumni being the most represented ($n = 9$, 47%), followed by intercultural management ($n = 4$, 21%). Two alumni came from three additional fields: business administration, industrial engineering and political science ($n = 6$, 32%). All participants had completed a TGU degree programme by the interview date, with graduation years spanning from 2017 to 2020. Time since programme completion ranged from 1 month to 3 years.

2.4 | Data Analysis

Data analysis comprised three stages: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 11). First, transcripts were read multiple times and checked against recordings for accuracy, with all identifying participant information removed. Preliminary data reduction utilized codes (Miles et al. 2014). Researcher 1 developed a codebook with both deductive and inductive codes, which was reviewed by Researcher 2. They performed paired coding on two transcripts and revised the codebook through consensus. Both researchers then conducted pilot coding on two transcripts, resolving discrepancies. Finally, interviews were systematically coded deductively and inductively using MAXQDA, with discussions to mediate areas of overlap and divergence.

To organize the data display, the research team reviewed codes for internal consistency, refined them into smaller categories (fine coding) (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2020), and grouped them into four larger categories. This analytical approach facilitated comparisons of topics discussed by alumni (topic-oriented) and highlighted similarities and differences in individual experiences (case-oriented analysis) (Rädiker and Kuckartz 2020, p. 84). To draw conclusions and verify findings, each category was assessed for internal consistency, summarized and thematically aligned with associated quotes while checking for outliers or disconfirming evidence. Finally, themes were evaluated for cultural relevance by Researcher 2, who has extensive knowledge of the Turkish context.

2.5 | Trustworthiness and Rigour

To verify the findings, synthesized member checking was conducted by sending aggregate results to each participant for feedback on their correlation with lived experiences (Birt et al. 2016). No changes were needed after this process. Additionally, triangulation was employed to enhance rigour and trustworthiness, which involved comparing quantitative and qualitative data across the study.

2.6 | Ethics Statement

Participants provided written informed consent before the interview. To ensure confidentiality and uphold ethical qualitative standards, pseudonyms were used to protect participant

identities. The research plan received approval from the (Miami University) Research Ethics and Integrity Office.

2.6 | Limitations

This qualitative study does not aim to generalize findings due to its focus on a specific TNHE institution. All participants attended the same institution within a similar timeframe, primarily from the first cohort, with over-representation among law students and females. Consequently, their perspectives should not be viewed as representative of the institution, its programmes or TNHE as a whole.

3 | Results

We identified four overarching themes. The first two pertained to discovering the TGU and selecting it. The final two themes addressed the alumni's career expectations and actual outcomes, highlighting the connection between language learning and career expectations, and capturing interconnected yet contradictory career experiences among TGU alumni.

3.1 | Enrolled by Chance Encounter: “I Selected This University Just Trusting on My Chance”

The alumni primarily represent the first cohorts of TGU students. Many alumni discovered the TGU by chance, often through a newspaper article or television interview. Although the newness of the TGU as an untested institution entailed risks, alumni and their families trusted the TGU because of its affiliation with German universities. They were drawn to the opportunity for a unique education that bridged two cultures, particularly those with German–Turkish identities or significant international experiences. For some, the serendipitous discovery of the university made it an appealing choice for obtaining an international education at home. Alumni associated the university's novelty with the potential for a distinctive educational experience within the Turkish higher education landscape. To illustrate, one alumni noted:

It was a newly founded university. So we had no information about it. But I automatically thought that if it's a state university, and if it's a German–Turkish project, it could be qualified and provide us with many options, Germany and Turkey. [...].

The next alum comment exemplifies the cultural influence, serendipitous discovery of TGU and key motivations such as learning German, travelling to Germany and pursuing an international career:

My father used to live in Germany, he didn't graduate but he studied at the Technical University Berlin, ..., and he actually grew up with, we say in Turkey, ‘Alman Ekolü’, ‘German School’, it's a phrase [that represents] German principles, German punctuality, and German work ethic. And he grew up with that culture, so he was always researching about studying in Germany for me and that's why we knew about the TGU years before. [...] I selected this university just trusting on my chance, I didn't see the university, but I knew

the ‘German School’, the German culture, the possibilities of that university, and abilities of that university. [...] That's why I choose TGU, the opportunities that it could provide, actually.

The alumni's family backgrounds were crucial in their decision to attend TGU, with many citing their parents' roles in discovering or choosing the university.

3.2 | Motivated by Binational Career Possibilities: “I Wanted to Have Something Extra, Something Different”

Many alumni noted opportunities to study at top universities in Turkey or abroad, but TGU quickly became their first choice due to its numerous benefits: an international education at home, fully funded programmes for study in Germany, the chance to learn a second language, and inherently internationalized programmes, like, bilingual law and business administration. Most alumni identified the opportunity to learn German as a key motivator for choosing TGU. As one alumnus/a noted:

I always wanted to do something international, to do something different. And in Turkey? Everybody already has to know English to find a good job. And that was not something different, and I wanted to have something extra, something different. And when I heard about TGU, I heard *German*—that you can study German law in German, and Turkish law in Turkish.

Multiple alumni made comparisons to other universities, programmes or studying abroad when discussing their decision-making, as illustrated by one alum.

Actually, I wanted to go to Germany, I got accepted to a university, but then I learned about the TGU, and I started to think about this university, because it was also international, *and* I could stay here in Istanbul, *and* I could go to Germany from time to time, *and* I could have an opportunity to live and study in Germany. So I thought that it was perfect for me, and then I chose the TGU and stayed in Turkey.

Alumni from Turkey were particularly drawn to the option of staying close to friends and family while pursuing a high-quality international education. This is further reflected in their immediate plans and career aspirations, with many indicating a desire to integrate both countries into their future careers. Alumni were particularly drawn to the opportunity to learn German in a Turkish–German educational environment. They appreciated the support from Germany and the integration of German university structures and faculty, which created a “German-style” educational atmosphere within Turkey. Some alumni noted that the German education system enhanced specific aspects, such as engineering projects with companies and strong university–industry connections—areas where they felt Turkish universities were lacking.

3.3 | Linguistic Limitations to Employability: “I Want to Do Something International, But Probably I Can’t Do It in Germany Because I Can’t Speak German Well Enough”

Alumni consistently linked their German-language skills to their career expectations. While alumni nearly unanimously recognized that learning German, studying in German, and working in the German language motivated their decision to attend TGU, they perceived their language training as a barrier to career development. Despite a year-long language preparation course and studying in German for their degrees, many felt their language proficiency upon graduation was lower than expected, hindering job applications in German companies in Turkey and Germany.

Language proficiency at graduation was closely tied to the career choices alumni made. For some alumni, the perceived role of German in their careers was positive. However, many felt so insecure about their German skills—despite years of study—that they considered pursuing opportunities in other countries instead. As one alum explained, “I was thinking, I want to do something international, but probably I can’t do it in Germany because I can’t speak German well enough.” Many alumni lack confidence in their German-language abilities and prefer to stay in Turkey, utilizing their Turkish and English skills instead:

I never thought to go in Germany [after graduating]. I don’t trust my German and I think you have to be so confident in the language you will work. And here I work in English 50%, Turkish 50%, and I always know I can do better in English, and it’s easier for me, so I prefer to work here [in Turkey].

For engineers, the German-language training was sufficient “to be workers” but not to pursue further education, as one alum stated:

[It was] enough [German-language instruction] to work in a German company, but not enough to continue successfully in Germany for education. It is not enough to be successful in a master’s program in Germany, but it’s quite enough to be a worker.

Law alumni expressed concerns that their language skills were inadequate for employment in both Turkey and Germany, with some pursuing further education in Germany. The public perception of a binational education complicates this issue, as one alum noted the importance of English in Turkey and pointed out a mismatch between TGU education and employer needs: “Those who do not have internships in English do not even get interviews because HR thinks the student only knows German.” Alumni’s perceptions of international career opportunities were consistently framed by their language skills. For alumni working in Turkish-language roles, a lack of international career opportunities was common.

In addition to linking language skills to career expectations, alumni discussed their language use in current roles. Those in jobs utilizing their linguistic abilities often mentioned performing translations or participating in client meetings. Many emphasized the importance of maintaining contact with both English and German. In a notable case, one alum accepted a

position at a German company despite having other attractive offers from Turkish and multinational firms, motivated by a desire to stay connected to the German language. Overall, alumni felt that TGU should take greater responsibility for providing more comprehensive language education in German, Turkish and English.

3.4 | Binational Employability: “There Is Always a Possibility for Me to Work in Both Countries”

Most alumni initially found employment in Turkey. Many alumni expressed satisfaction with their international careers in Turkey, particularly in German companies, but still hoped for future international opportunities. Alumni made both short- and long-term career choices that combined two complementary yet contradictory paths: (1) pursuing international careers at home in Turkey, such as working for German firms, and (2) moving their careers to Germany or another country.

Although most alumni were satisfied with their international careers at home, the prospect of working in Germany remained part of their career planning. One alum explained: “I’m planning to go to Germany to work for some years. And then maybe come back to Turkey, or maybe stay in Germany”. Another alumni mentioned not wanting to live in Germany forever, but being interested in a binational career:

I think the mixture of Turkey and Germany makes it interesting. I don’t want to experience my whole life in Germany [...] But I want to be in both Turkey and Germany. Because I know the advantage that both countries give.

Many alumni envisioned moving back and forth between Germany and Turkey, as a means to use their binational knowledge, skills and network, such as in this alum’s case:

I always dreamt that after graduation I would work for several years in Turkey to strengthen my career, and then going to work in Germany for a while. I am doing the first step of my dream right now, I hope I will be able to complete my dream a few years from now.

Alumni were keenly aware of what each country could offer them professionally and the career limits based on their fields of study, with nearly all considering some form of binational career that combined the best of both countries. Most reported starting their careers “at home” in Turkey and expressed satisfaction with this choice. For many, moving to Germany for work was not a significant consideration in their career planning.

However, for others, the potential to transfer their careers across countries was a motivating factor for choosing the TGU. Alumni wanted to leverage their TGU degrees to maintain connections with both Germany and Turkey, feeling linked to both cultures and viewing their binational educational experience as a professional advantage. They recognized that TGU had shaped their careers, influencing their decision-making regarding professional opportunities, the content of their work and intentions to work in either Germany or Turkey.

4 | Discussion and Implications

By analyzing the interplay between institutional forms of internationalization and alumni experience, this study extends prior research on the experiences of students at binational universities (e.g., Yao and Tuliao 2019; Yao and Garcia 2018) and how addresses both individual and institutional factors influence employability (Dinh et al. 2022). The qualitative analysis provides insights into the career paths of transnational education alumni and positions binational universities within the broader transnational education landscape. Findings indicate that nearly all graduates leveraged their transnational education to secure local employment while maintaining a sense of agency over their socioprofessional identities. Some alumni migrated to Germany or other countries, while others pursued additional German or Turkish qualifications or ventured into entrepreneurship. Most found local jobs, often within binational or transnational contexts. Their career choices were shaped by their identities, reflecting a culturally informed understanding of their decisions. This aligns with Pham's (2023) findings that graduates' identity development is closely linked to their employability trajectories.

Further, binational universities can be viewed as TSFs. Alumni describe these institutions as spaces of possibility, progress, pitfalls and permeability, offering opportunities for personal, social and professional growth within an international context while remaining within a nationally situated framework. Students at binational universities navigate transnational social and educational fields that span multiple nations, shaping their understanding of personal histories, educational experiences and future career paths (Gargano 2009). Utilizing the TSF theory to conceptualize international student experiences that are both locally rooted and transcendent of nation-states enhances our understanding of complex international student identities. This historical perspective is particularly relevant in the German-Turkish transnational education context (Küppers et al. 2016). By examining the career decision-making of international alumni at a binational institution, this study counters the notion of international students as a homogeneous group undergoing similar educational experiences (Gargano 2009) and contributes to the conceptualization of TSF within specific educational institution types.

The themes suggest that employability should be viewed not only as an individual's assets, but also as a commodity that could be exported through specific institutional types. TNHE institutions facilitate this export by transferring their structures to foreign contexts, thereby creating a TSF that connects education to employment for TNHE graduates. The TGU case study therefore illustrates how TNHE serves as a means of "exporting employability", in a conditional and context-dependent manner. Particularly in the TGU case, alumni view employability as a resource that can be "obtained" locally, but is only "redeemable" in binational contexts, depending on whether sufficient linguistic skills are developed during the TNHE student experience. Consequently, the TGU, as a TNHE institution, does "export" employability alongside education, although the outcomes may differ depending on the students' lived experiences. The concept of binational employability, rooted in binational human capital, is therefore actively promoted by TNHE institutions and pursued by alumni in their career planning (Schueller and Keser Aschenberger 2023). For instance, a binational university fosters a TSF that enhances students' academic and professional development through targeted programmes.

Employability for a binational career path can thus be developed alongside a domestic trajectory through TNHE. Alumni indicate that these paths may involve spending several years in their home country, followed by time abroad, or maintaining a permanent position at home that requires regular collaboration and travel to the second country. However, many professions are specialized and often focus on specific market segments tied to a particular country or a population sharing a common language.

While most TGU graduates find employment in the local Turkish labour market, their higher-than-average employment rate at the time, compared with local graduates, highlights the value of holding a recognized German degree as an export of employability. Although the German-language skills acquired were often insufficient for immediate employment in Germany, the TGU offers a foundational preparation that can facilitate further studies or employment transitions to Germany, though this potential varies by field and individual language development. This foundation positions graduates significantly better for future opportunities in the German labour market than those without any German education or training, supporting our conclusion that TNHE effectively prepares students for engagement with both home and host labour markets.

5 | Conclusion

Universities are increasingly held accountable for preparing graduates for employment. The TGU case demonstrates that a model of higher education transferred from one country can yield comparable or even enhanced employment outcomes in another context, providing evidence for how TNHE can diversify higher education systems globally. Employability is not solely an individual pursuit; it can also be organized and exported by institutions in a structured model tailored for specific students within particular career ecosystems and labour markets. This shifts the responsibility for developing and maintaining employability from individuals to a shared responsibility among various actors in the career ecosystem, with universities playing a crucial role as connectors between education and employment. The potential for "exporting employability" through TNHE institutions represents an untapped opportunity in international education, especially as affordability and sustainability become more critical in the coming decades.

This qualitative study is significant for higher education and employability research as it emphasizes the institution's role in developing employability rather than individualizing these concerns. It explores the postcompletion perspectives of transnational education graduates, revealing a shift away from attributing employability solely to specific skills or competencies. Graduates highlighted the holistic influence of the TGU as a crucial factor in their career development. The TGU's mission and identity influenced students' enrolment decisions, identity formation during their studies, and career choices after graduation, aligning with the growing focus on higher education institutions' responsibilities in workforce preparation (Dinh et al. 2022).

At the time of the interviews, the TGU did not provide robust career services or systematic employability preparation. While alumni expressed a desire for better career support, they acknowledged the institution's overall role in preparing them for professional life. This

indicates that the TGU offers essential support, degree capital and institutional image for students pursuing internationally focused yet locally relevant careers. The combination of German-style education and Turkish higher education regulations at the TGU can be viewed as both an educational and an employability export. As a single-institution case study, these findings are context-specific. Future research can compare TNHE graduates across disciplines or national contexts to further test and refine the concept of exported employability.

The TSF occupied by the TGU provided alumni with advantages in developing employability within a diverse career ecosystem rooted in multiple work and education cultures. In this context, transnational education exports local employability alongside international education. Although this study focuses on one specific binational university, its implications extend beyond the Turkish-German TSF, offering insights into how transnational education institutions can integrate employability into their experiences, benefiting a wide range of students. The findings underscore the potential and long-term relevance of TNHE for sustainable and inclusive higher education, while highlighting the need for further research on different institutional types and their influence on employability.

Practitioners in transnational education can leverage these results to create marketing strategies that effectively highlight the role of transnational education in offering local career opportunities. They could also design recruitment strategies targeting students who may not identify with the specific binational or transnational context of the institution, fostering a more equitable, open and multicultural admission system. Policymakers, researchers and practitioners should explore the various forms of mutually beneficial TNHE to enhance understanding and implementation in this field.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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