



Department  
for Education

# The wider benefits of Transnational Education to the UK

Research report

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Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC)  
Ltd



## **The wider benefits of transnational education to the UK**

**Prepared by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd**

### **About CRAC**

The Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) is a limited company established in 1964 and registered as a charity. We provide research, expertise and innovation to all those who support career development at all ages and across all sectors.

Our main business activities are:

- Provision of research, evaluation, consultancy and innovation relating to career development, with a focus on higher education and graduate employability;
- Leadership and co-development/co-delivery with the UK higher education sector of the national Vitae programme to enhance the personal, professional and career development of researchers within higher education;
- Sharing of information and best practice for careers advisers and others supporting career decision-making, including the national 'Decisions at 18' conference.

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## Contents

Executive summary	6
Research aims and method	6
Transnational programme students and their experiences	6
Benefits to participants	8
Benefits to UK institutions	9
Benefits to the UK	9
Benefits to students' home countries	10
Recommendations	10
Chapter 1 Aims and background	12
Objectives	12
Background	13
Transnational education provision	13
Benefits and impact from internationalisation of higher education	14
Chapter 2 Methodology and sample	16
Research approaches	16
Definitions and terminology	17
Primary research methodology	18
Interview structure	18
Sample design and stratification	19
Attraction, engagement and participation	22
Definitions and terminology in practice	23
Interview sample achieved	24
Chapter 3 Institutional perspectives	26
Increased international student numbers	26
Other financial benefits	28
Chapter 4 Impact and wider benefits	29
Impact on the participant	30
Career or employment-related impacts	30
English language proficiency	34
Intercultural sensitivity or cosmopolitanism	35

Personal growth and wider experiences	36
Social benefits and networks	39
Comparisons with international study	41
Wider benefits to the UK	42
Impacts for UK HE institutions	42
Indirect economic benefits	43
Benefits of influence	45
Benefits to participants' countries of origin	49
Economic and workforce benefits	49
Capacity building	49
Chapter 5 Insights into study experiences	52
Motivations – why undertake UK transnational education?	52
Why study through transnational education?	53
Why select a UK programme?	56
Study experiences	57
Distance learning	58
Partnership and branch campus programmes	59
Perceptions of overall quality	70
Chapter 6 Summary of findings and recommendations	72
Key findings	72
Transnational education students and their experiences	72
Benefits to participants	74
Benefits to UK higher education institutions	75
Benefits to the UK	76
Comparisons between transnational and international study	76
Recommendations	77
Relationships with alumni	77
Learning and other student support services	78
Contact with and understanding of the UK	78
Marketing and related activities	78
Further research	79



## **Executive summary**

### **Research aims and method**

The UK is a leading provider of transnational education (TNE) programmes, offered by a wide range of higher education institutions using a variety of delivery models. The range, extent and economic value of this activity by UK higher education institutions have been addressed in recent research. This project was designed to identify wider benefits of transnational education provision to the UK, partly through understanding its impact on participants.

The methodology used was in-depth interviews with a stratified sample of alumni who had studied UK transnational programmes, reflecting the range of types of delivery, subjects and levels of study, and markets worldwide. This was similar to the methodology used in a recent study of wider benefits of international higher education study in the UK, based on the experiences of alumni who had studied in the UK, potentially enabling comparisons to be made. Interviewees were identified using UK institutions' alumni records, where they existed, and mostly via delivery partner organisations. Engaging alumni of transnational programmes in the research proved to be much harder than engaging those who had studied in the UK as international students. Analysis was undertaken using a simplified range of delivery types: distance learning, collaborative provision, and international branch campus.

This study provides valuable new empirical insights into student experiences and outcomes of UK transnational programmes based on evidence from the alumni, from which inferences can be made about wider benefits to institutions and to the UK arising from this form of higher education provision to overseas students.

### **Transnational programme students and their experiences**

The overwhelming majority of alumni had chosen a transnational education programme based on the basis of general, rather than specific, career-related motivations, and very pragmatically. Although they saw potential study of a UK programme in the UK as a more prestigious option, for many that was unachievable financially and/or within the practical constraints of their life. In contrast, a transnational education programme offered an achievable means to participate in UK higher education and obtain a UK degree qualification. They expected this to be of higher value to them (and their future employers) than many local alternatives.

Their programme choices tended to reflect a general perception of high overall quality of the UK's provision, rather than being based on a detailed assessment of course content or pedagogy, or of the particular UK institution. The programmes reported demonstrated UK higher education's ability to develop a wide range of provision to meet different student needs and circumstances, in terms of cost as well as location and flexibility of delivery.

In many cases, the alumni had had to fit their study flexibly around the personal constraints of their working lives, as they needed to remain in employment to fund

their programme, and many studied part-time for this reason. The profile of transnational education students appeared to be quite distinct for this reason.

### **Overall satisfaction**

- Most alumni related positive experiences of their programme and would recommend similar study to others.
- The perceptions from those who studied through distance learning and at international branch campuses were consistently very positive and satisfaction levels high.
- There was greater variation in the perceptions of those who studied collaborative or partnership programmes, amongst whom a small but significant minority, particularly at undergraduate level, reported a negative experience.
- Overall, the level of perceived satisfaction was positive, albeit lower than has been reported by international graduates who have studied in the UK.
- While many had found part-time programmes challenging, in terms of fitting their studies around their (often full-time) employment and other personal commitments in life, the very flexible delivery of programmes had enabled them to cope and succeed in completing and obtaining the qualification.

### **Teaching and facilities**

- The content of distance learning courses was particularly highly regarded, as were both the content and the facilities utilised in international campus provision.
- The facilities and environments in which collaborative programmes took place were very variable, from well-appointed university campuses to a humble building attached to a school or urban office settings.
- The facilities and learning environment could impact on the overall learning experience, particularly in terms of limiting the range of extra-curricular activities available and opportunities for potential personal development. Admittedly the profile of many transnational students was such that they had not sought some of these wider experiences and developmental opportunities.
- Perceptions of the quality of teaching within collaborative programmes were mixed, from highly professional to very poor, although the median position was broadly positive.
- The direct involvement of UK staff in many collaborative arrangements was limited, which was disappointing to many students.

### **Co-curricular support and extra-curricular provision**

- The experiences of those who studied at international branch campuses were almost universally positive, in terms of provision of co-curricular support such as careers advice and opportunities for extra-curricular activities which enhance employability development, much as on UK campuses.
- Unsupported distance learners were able to access particular forms of developmental support, such as online modules, although their overall

experiences were necessarily narrower than those studying other types of programme.

- Careers advice and employability development (including engagement with employers or work placement opportunities) were rarely reported for collaborative programmes, other than where the partner was itself an established university or similar institution.
- Participation in extra-curricular activities such as student societies, and especially volunteering, was also very rare in most collaborative programmes.
- The distinctive profile of transnational education students (many of whom are mature and employed, and study part-time) could account for why many may not have sought the wide range of support and experiences that are typically available to full-time students on a UK campus. This could be because their motivations were different, i.e. they were more narrowly focused on obtaining the qualification, and/or because they had little need for or understanding of the benefits of wider developmental activities beyond the qualification, or because their circumstances were such that their access to these activities was limited. These differences should be borne in mind when making comparisons of these aspects of provision.
- The vast majority had studied their programme in their home country and had little interaction with international students, which limited opportunities for intercultural learning. Few developed international networks of contacts (except in cases where they had studied outside their home countries or at an educational hub), and where they did exist there were few UK nationals in these networks.

## Benefits to participants

Most alumni reported a broadly positive impact of undertaking their UK transnational education programme and obtaining a UK degree qualification, in relation to their rather general career-related motivations. This was the key impact for many.

- Many had successfully obtained their first job or experienced career progression, which they believed was at least partly contingent on achievement of their UK degree qualification.
- A small minority reported transformational outcomes in terms of enabling dramatic shifts in career, but this was much rarer than has been reported amongst graduates who have undertaken UK degrees through international mobility.
- Most alumni reported an improvement in their English skills as a key outcome, although for some this was largely written rather than spoken English as their programmes had been delivered in their local language.
- The extent to which alumni perceived personal development benefits (such as increased resilience, confidence, self-esteem and maturity) varied greatly, with the greatest gains reported by those who had studied their programme abroad or been able to take part in extra- or co-curricular activities.
- Relatively few alumni were active within international networks, either informally with their former peers or formally through an alumni body, or professionally.



Development of social contacts did not appear to be a priority for many of them while students.

## Benefits to UK institutions

A linked study (Mellors-Bourne et. al., 2014) has suggested that provision of transnational programmes benefits UK institutions in a number of ways:

- In addition to fee income, economic benefits include increased enrolments of international students resulting from the institution's in-country presence. This can be in the form of articulation arrangements or simply an enhanced profile which results in more enrolments at the UK campus as international students. Research with the alumni confirmed that recommendations are made by transnational education students and alumni to others, both to participate in transnational programmes and to study in the UK as an international student.
- A modest number of alumni engage with their institution beyond the compulsory aspects of their programme, attending optional activities such as summer schools and their graduation ceremony. These may bring additional revenues to and short-term cultural benefits to the UK institution.
- Levels of engagement of transnational education alumni with their UK institution, through formal alumni networks or informally, were in most cases low (although with some exceptions), from which it is inferred that long-term engagement is unlikely and few will become future donors philanthropically.

## Benefits to the UK

A number of economic and wider benefits arise as a result of UK institutions' delivery of transnational education programmes, beyond the fee income that comes to the UK directly through certain types of programme (i.e. distance learning) or more indirectly (from collaborative arrangements).

- Alumni confirmed that their recommendations lead not only to further participation in similar transnational programmes but also in additional enrolments of international students at UK campuses. This reinforces recent research findings that the UK's profile as a higher education provider is increased in countries where it runs transnational programmes.
- Modest additional economic benefits to the UK ensue in the form of additional travel to the UK by the alumni when students relating to their transnational programmes (for summer schools, or to graduation ceremonies) and also subsequently as tourists, prompted by these programme-related visits or other interest in the UK developed during their programme.
- As these transnational alumni had spent little or no time in the UK as students they had not built up a strong allegiance to the UK, or its brands, and so little additional consumer trade could result.
- Relatively few transnational programme alumni were engaged in international networks with fellow alumni, and where they did exist they tended not to include

UK nationals. In some countries restrictions on social media may also limit the potential of social networks.

- The last two issues combine to limit the UK's ability to leverage potential connections with transnational education alumni which could result in future UK influence and soft power as they progress into senior positions in business or politics. The potential soft power impact appears to be markedly lower than may be achieved from international alumni who have studied in the UK.

## Benefits to students' home countries

The positive impacts perceived by transnational education graduates in relation to their largely career- and employment-related motivations are reflected in a number of benefits to their home countries.

- The majority did report successful entry to employment or progression in their careers, so an element of economic benefit takes place through providing these countries with a more skilled workforce, and 'trickle-down' societal and other effects from their employment.
- As a number of the alumni were studying healthcare-, development-, science- and engineering-related and education programmes, capacity-building could take place in their countries after they obtained these skills and qualifications and passed them on to others as professionals or educators.
- There is a direct financial contribution from students paying fees for programmes where there is an in-country host or partner (although to some extent this may displace potential fee revenues from local programmes).
- Local partner institutions develop educational capabilities through their engagement with UK institutions during collaborative programme delivery, evidenced by the observation that direct UK staff involvement decreases with maturity of a programme.

## Recommendations

### Relationships with alumni

**Recommendation:** UK universities should seek to build better contacts and long-term relationships with their transnational programme alumni, including those who studied through partnership programmes. The sector could seek to share good practice from institutions that appear to be more proactive and effective in terms of maintaining relations with alumni from their partnership programmes.

### Learning and other student support services

**Recommendation:** UK universities need to review critically the full mix of support that they (and their partners) offer to students undertaking transnational programmes. It would not be realistic to expect UK providers to aim for full comparability between transnational education and UK study experiences, as provision will take account of the local context and students' needs and expectations.

They should consider the extent to which there is, and should be, comparability in relation to a number of learning and support services offered, potentially including:

- Access to the virtual learning platform (VLE), particularly for those on distance learning programmes;
- Co-curricular support and extra-curricular opportunities provided by local partners, particularly in relation to strategies for employability development;
- Provision of some in-country teaching by UK staff, perhaps combined with the regular visits to review quality assurance compliance;
- Access to other student services and activities, e.g. Student Union (as far as is practically possible), accessing work placements or volunteering opportunities;
- Consider running student satisfaction or experience surveys amongst students on their partnership programmes, as a means to provide further feedback on experiences, needs and outcomes in relation to student demands.

### **Contact with and understanding of the UK**

**Recommendation:** The sector generally needs to foster amongst transnational programme students and alumni a greater understanding of the UK and to maximise relationships with UK nationals (both overseas and within the UK). This should be a role for both institutions and government agencies working in cooperation. Some of the other measures recommended in this study would contribute to this. There would also be clear benefit in having more options available to transnational students to participate in programmes with some presence at the UK university, for example residential programmes or credit-bearing periods of attendance on equivalent programmes offered in the UK.

### **Marketing and related activities**

**Recommendation:** Marketing and communication activities to support transnational education programme recruitment need further to be improved. Institutions should review the marketing of their programmes by and with their collaborating delivery partners, to ensure fair representation of issues such as the potential acceptability of the qualification in certain professions and regions, and clear understanding of the nature of teaching, learning and other experiences to be expected.

# Chapter 1 Aims and background

## Objectives

The UK is a leading provider of higher education internationally in an expanding global market for tertiary education and is one of the world's leaders in delivery of transnational education (TNE). A diverse and complex range of transnational education programmes are delivered by a wide range of higher education institutions in the UK using a variety of delivery models.

The UK Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) sought to improve its understanding of the range, extent and value of transnational education activities delivered by UK higher education institutions. This would help to inform future policy development in relation to international higher education and this aspect of the UK's Industrial Strategy.

The range, extent and economic value of transnational education activity by UK higher education institutions have been addressed in a recent research study also led by CRAC (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). In parallel, BIS explicitly sought to develop a greater understanding of the wider benefits of transnational education provision (i.e. beyond direct financial benefit), and that is the overriding aim of this project.

Accordingly, the project was conceived with the following objectives:

- To identify the potential or realised benefits to UK higher education institutions of provision of transnational education;
- To identify the range of impacts personally for participants (students) who undertake transnational education with UK institutions;
- To identify or infer the range and extent of wider benefits or impact for the UK as a nation from transnational education, through its higher education institutions and/or through the activities or attitudes of individual participants.

The key aims of this project were to identify, understand and illustrate the 'wider' benefits that ensue to the UK through its provision of transnational education. Within this, more specific research themes included:

- Developing a comprehensive understanding of the range of academic, social, political or cultural benefits that accrue to the UK as a result of transnational education activity, including those that potentially relate to 'soft power' influence;
- Understanding the nature and potential scale of any indirect economic benefits that are known to or could develop for the UK;
- Establishing an understanding of the experiences of international graduates who have participated in transnational education provided by UK institutions, including

their perceptions of the benefits they have derived personally and from this to make inferences about benefits to their country of origin;

- Considering the extent to which participant experiences, and also identified or inferred 'wider' benefits, vary with different forms of transnational education and with the characteristics of the provider and participant;
- Considering how such benefits might be supported or maximised by the higher education institutions or others in the international education sector.

## Background

### Transnational education provision

Internationalisation has become a high strategic priority for many higher education institutions. A prominent aspect has been the recent increase in the number and range of programmes delivered 'offshore' either through partner institutions or directly through distance learning or, for a growing minority of institutions, development of their own international branch campuses.

After strong growth over the past decade, this transnational education (TNE) activity by UK institutions has recently been estimated to incorporate over 335,000 active students and result in a cumulative fee income of almost £500 million annually (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). According to O'Mahoney (2014), over three quarters of UK higher education providers deliver some form of transnational education, mostly to students outside the European Union. These recent studies show that collaborative or partnership arrangements are dominant in terms of delivery, but that distance learning provision has grown strongly and generates more income for the UK per student. Postgraduate taught programmes are a particularly important aspect of transnational education provision, especially in business and management. There are strong regional international variations and trends in delivery arrangements, and subjects of study, although recent growth in distance learning and international branch campus development are resulting in a wider spread of disciplinary coverage.

Despite that increasing prominence, the existing literature contains little evidence of graduate outcomes or experiences of study for those on transnational education programmes. O'Mahoney (2014) found that the literature relating to transnational education has mainly focused on globalisation, trade, quality and regulation, and to a much lesser extent on teaching and learning issues. Hoare (2012) has pointed out that students' voices are rarely heard:

*"We know little about their preferences, even less about the outcomes that they attribute to their TNE experience and nothing in any depth about their longer term career and life trajectories."* (Hoare, 2012, p.272)

In relation to the value of transnational education to participants, McNamara and Knight have reported students' belief that employers perceive an overseas degree achieved to be advantageous in relation to a local degree, but Robertson et al.

(2011) reported some negative perceptions associated with Australian transnational education graduates in comparison with others who studied in parts of South East Asia. What appears to emerge is some variation internationally in perceptions of the relative prestige of different types of degree qualifications from different countries, and in particular the perception of transnational education degrees in comparison with other local study options.

This new study offers an opportunity to add significantly to what has been reported in relation to student experiences and graduate outcomes from transnational education programmes, in addition to its main focus on wider benefits.

## **Benefits and impact from internationalisation of higher education**

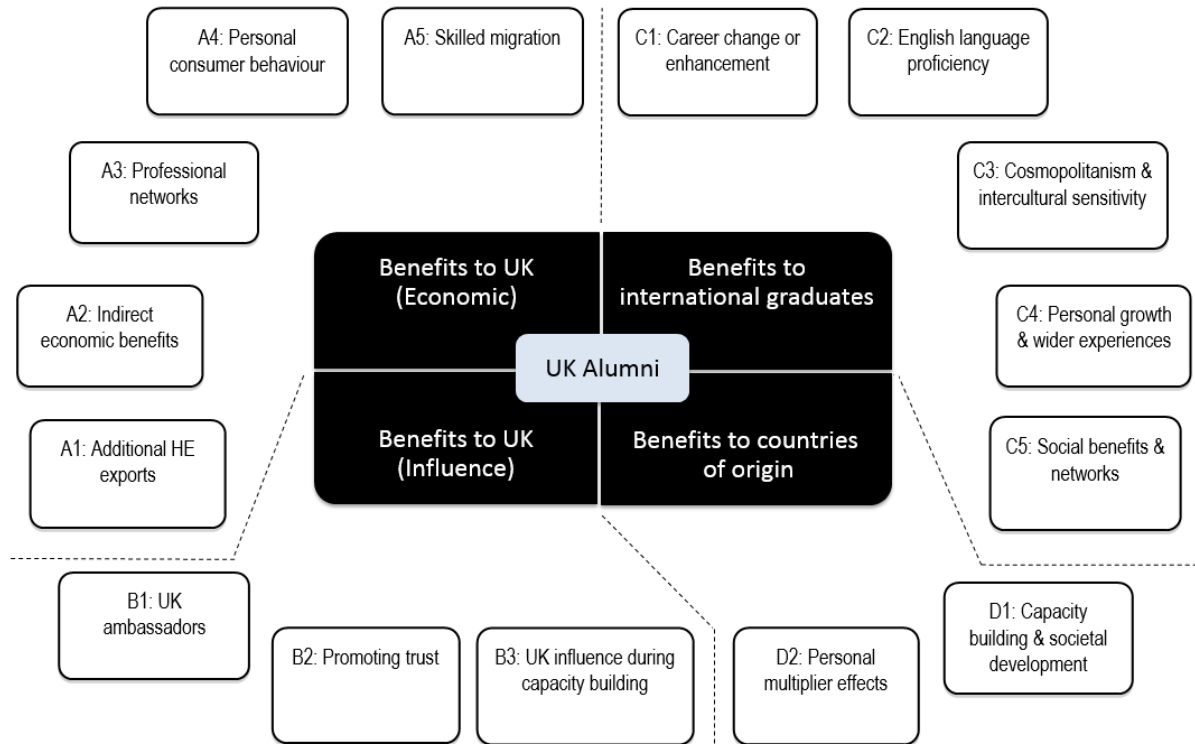
A growing amount of knowledge has been established about international student mobility and its benefits and impact. The most obvious beneficiary is the internationally mobile student (e.g. Fielden et al., 2007) although he or she is likely to be embedded in social networks who will receive related benefits, including the student's immediate family. There are beneficiaries in the student's home country, potentially including those who sponsor mobility and those who employ or engage with the student when they return from mobility (including their future employers). If the student becomes a mobile graduate, parties in other countries may benefit. For the host country, such as the UK, in which the mobile student studies, there are benefits to the host institution, both economically and culturally, and also wider impacts that can accrue from the student's presence in the country.

De Wit (2002) described four 'rationales for international higher education' which he classified as economic, academic, socio-cultural, and political. These informed a recent exploration of the wider benefits of international higher education study to the UK (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). In this, economic benefits were re-categorised as either financial (direct fee income and associated accommodation and living costs paid by international students) or wider economic benefits. As the direct financial impact has been quite widely investigated, our 2013 study of wider benefits focused on the wider economic benefits to the UK, as well as other impacts including socio-economic and political benefits such as contribution to what is increasingly known as 'soft power' (Nye, 1991). In relation to international higher education, mobile students gain exposure to another country (for example, the UK), have positive experiences there, develop friendships and networks, and then return as alumni to their home countries where they can act as unofficial ambassadors for the country in which they studied, i.e. the UK. The values and beliefs they carry with them, shaped by their experiences while studying and engaging with the UK, can reinforce the UK's international relations agenda or strategies. The British Council has recently demonstrated examples of such soft power influence in terms of building trust (British Council, 2012) and of increased positive perceptions amongst international citizens through engagements in culture and education (British Council, 2014).

Fifteen benefit types were identified or inferred, grouped by principal beneficiary (the UK, the participant and their country of origin), by Mellors-Bourne et al. (2013) and are shown in Figure 2.1. These are potentially pertinent to this new study as the methodology adopted was similar.

Thus one of the aims of this new study was to consider the extent to which the benefits of international student mobility – to mobile students and also to other parties – are also available or realised through students who undertake transnational education programmes rather than international mobility.

Figure 2.1 Benefit types identified from interviews with UK international alumni (from Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013)



## Chapter 2 Methodology and sample

### Research approaches

A number of perspectives on the benefits of providing transnational education were obtained during research linked to this project conducted into the extent and financial value to the UK of transnational education (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). In this current study of the wider benefits, the main investigation work was with alumni of UK transnational education programmes, who related their experiences and perceptions, from which a range of benefits could be identified or inferred. Use of this method could also provide some measure of comparability with the wider benefits of international study in the UK, seen through the experiences of alumni who attended UK higher education programmes as international students (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013).

The primary research would therefore seek to provide:

- Reflections on international alumni's personal study experiences of studying through UK transnational education programmes, in the context of their individual, motivations, constraints and career trajectories;
- Alumni's perceptions of the benefits and impact that have ensued to them in their own careers and wider lives to date, and future expectations, if possible identifying particular experiences that have led to demonstrable impacts;
- Alumni's subsequent involvement in networks and linkages of different kinds with individuals and organisations in the UK, including academic/educational, business/trade, political and social/cultural interactions, and the extent to which these were developed during their transnational education experience;
- Their perceptions of any tangible or potential value of these interactions or networks, to themselves or to the UK;
- Their understanding and perceptions of any other wider benefits to either the UK or their home country from transnational education;
- How these issues might vary with individual differences, including participants' circumstances and country of origin, as well as with study characteristics including type of transnational education, level and subject of study, or institution type or location.



## Definitions and terminology

The working definition for transnational education (TNE) adopted was that used in our recent study of its extent and economic value:

*“The provision of education for students based in a country other than that within which the awarding institution is located.”*

Thus transnational education (TNE) is a strategy adopted by higher education institutions to deliver programmes and associated qualifications to students who are wholly or partly located outside the country within which the provision originates. UK higher education institutions offer such opportunities through face-to-face delivery in other countries and regions, in many cases through partner institutions and organisations, as well as directly through online or other distance learning, and blends of these approaches. Transnational education complements UK higher education study and awards that are available to international students who study within the UK’s borders, making UK higher education provision more accessible to a wider variety of students, often in their local context.

The UK transnational education covered was restricted to that involving programmes through which students could study towards higher education qualifications awarded by UK recognised bodies (which are covered by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the UK’s qualifications frameworks). These institutions are known as the UK’s ‘recognised bodies’ (i.e. institutions with degree-awarding powers).

The three broad types of transnational education delivery distinguished were:

1. **International branch campuses** where there is physical presence overseas of the UK recognised body (which may be in the form of an overseas institution based on a joint venture agreement);
2. **Distance/online learning** provision (either unsupported or supported by an overseas partner).
3. **Collaborative (or partnership) provision** offered in partnership with an overseas partner institution (whether students are registered with the UK or the overseas partner).

There was also a deliberate focus on transnational programmes studied wholly, or almost entirely, overseas, for simplicity, although programmes such as articulation that are studied partly in the UK constitute an important part of transnational provision.

A review of the activities of UK higher education institutions providing transnational education can be found in Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014). A conclusion of that research was that the terminology relating to transnational education is not used consistently by institutions within the UK, nor internationally, which leads to some limitations in data currently published about provision such as HESA’s Aggregate Offshore Record.

## Primary research methodology

From the outset it was recognised that seeking evidence on the desired themes from alumni who have undertaken UK transnational education programmes could be challenging. Comparatively little research has been published hitherto which is based on the experiences of transnational education students or alumni (Hoare, 2012). The lack of previous research with transnational education alumni meant that the project carried a number of inherent uncertainties, not the least of which was how readily such alumni could be engaged in the research in the first place.

It was anticipated that few transnational programme alumni would be included within UK higher education institution alumni databases, so potential contact with other alumni could be dependent on partner organisation data, which itself might be of low quality or not kept up-to-date, even if it was available to us.

Further, for many of the alumni, English would not be their first language, which could be problematic as the research would seek insights into motivations and perceptions about impact that could be complex and at times subtle. On the other hand our earlier study of the wider benefits of international higher education (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013) had shown research with alumni to be feasible as a research process with international graduates who had studied in the UK.

A qualitative research method was chosen in order to obtain information about the alumni's experiences and perceptions of impact, which are situated in the context of their personal backgrounds, career trajectories and circumstances. So as to understand those issues of context, in-depth interviews were undertaken, conducted by interviewers with expertise both in facilitating career conversations and in international higher education. Given that the graduates would be located, literally, worldwide, the interviews had to be conducted by telephone and/or Skype.

### Interview structure

The telephone interviews were lightly structured but designed to obtain:

- Confirmation of details of the programme studied and alumni's characteristics;
- Alumni's backgrounds and motivations for study through transnational education;
- Details about their programme of study, in order to define the delivery model and understand the level of engagement with the UK higher education institution;
- Reflections on their experiences of study, including how positively they now viewed it and their perception of its value to them;
- Their current employment circumstances and perceived impact of their study programme on their career progression;
- Any other personal impacts perceived by the alumni;
- Extent of their involvement in professional and personal networks, internationally but especially those involving the UK, in particular networks arising from their transnational education experience;

- Any broader changes to their understanding of or attitude towards the UK.

Those responding to the request for participation (i.e. volunteers) did so by completing a short online questionnaire, through which they provided contact details and basic personal and study characteristics. This included questions about their nationality, the location and type of their transnational programme and initial indications of their perceptions of impact and linkage with the UK and with other alumni. Analysis of this information enabled a target sample of interviewees to be identified from the volunteers received.

The interview style and structure were designed in order to understand the alumni as individuals, identifying some of the key 'human' circumstances that shape career and personal learning decisions, activities and resulting benefits. It was important to understand an interviewee's career trajectory, as the point and circumstances at which they undertook UK transnational education could vary (such as whether or not they were working while studying), with a corresponding range of motivations and potential benefits or impact. Personal issues such as whether they had a spouse/partner or dependents, and their family background circumstances and schooling, could also be important in framing their experience of transnational education. This personal information provided deep understanding of the context for the motivations, experiences and benefits perceived by the alumni, as well adding richness to their stories.

On completion of each interview, a proforma interview report was completed. In some cases further exchanges by e-mail were necessary for clarification (some interviewees' spoken English was relatively poor) or to provide additional information. In some cases follow-up was initiated by the interviewee, reporting that they had found the interview thought-provoking and actually beneficial as an opportunity to reflect on their own career and personal development.

## **Sample design and stratification**

An original target of 100 interviews was agreed, although with an understanding that this might need to be reviewed depending on how easy or difficult it turned out to be to engage transnational education alumni in practice. It was considered likely that they would be relatively less positively engaged with their respective UK higher education institutions than international alumni who had physically studied at the UK campus, which could result in them being harder to reach or engage in the research.

Such a number of interviews cannot statistically represent the wide range of graduates of UK transnational education, in terms of their personal characteristics and parameters of study, so the target interview sample was designed as a purposive sample to reflect a range of variables. In consultation with the project Steering Group, the key variables were agreed to be:

- Country of study (grouped into broad regions, using the groupings of HESA's Aggregate Offshore Record which were used in the linked 'value' research);
- Broad type or model of transnational education;

- Broad type of UK provider of transnational education (in terms of both type of institution but also extent of its transnational education provision);
- Level of study;
- Broad subject of study;
- Gender.

As noted earlier, the study was also restricted to those who had studied wholly overseas, in order to simplify the study and avoid any need to have to distinguish benefits resulting from periods studied overseas and any periods in the UK.

In addition it was felt important to try to include alumni with differing levels of positive (and negative) experiences, and different extents of linkage with fellow alumni and the UK, in order to avoid any potential bias in the sample towards those more closely connected with the UK and with positive experiences.

It was agreed with the Steering Group at the outset that the target for interviews should be graduates of transnational education programmes (i.e. alumni) rather than current students. Our experience of interviewing international alumni who had studied in the UK about wider benefits targeted those who had graduated 5-7 years previously (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013), on the basis that such a period would allow the alumni to have progressed somewhat in their careers and enable certain impacts to develop. Although it would be ideal in this project (for comparability with that study) also to interview alumni at a similar point in their careers, i.e. 5-7 years after they graduated from their transnational education programme, it was anticipated that the sample might need practically to encompass a wider range of periods since graduation. This was due to the expectation that transnational education alumni would be harder to engage than those who had studied in the UK, and also because many transnational education programmes have only been offered in recent years. Therefore the 'time since graduation' target was left relatively flexible.

Practically it was necessary to group very broadly some of these characteristics, in order to reduce the granularity of sampling required. This resulted in compromises being made (which were agreed by the project Steering Group), such as very broad groupings of country of study, institution type, subject of study and delivery model of transnational education. It would nonetheless still not be feasible within 100 interviews to represent every possible permutation of the key variables, so pragmatic selections had to be made and volunteers selected for interview who would display different combinations of variables. Through such a purposive process it was hoped to provide interviewees who reflected the spectrum of characteristics of those undertaking UK transnational education, although the final target achieved would also be heavily dependent on the willingness and physical availability of volunteers.

Different proportions (of the proposed 100 interviews) were agreed for the main variables (and/or groups relating to each) on the basis of either rough approximation to their distribution in the overall cohort of UK transnational education students or particular groupings expected to be of interest in the BIS project (Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1** Interview sample characteristics: target and achieved proportions

Variable	Rationale for grouping	Grouping	% Proportion of interviews	
			Target	Achieved
Country of study, by region	Regions used in HESA Aggregate Offshore Record	Africa	15	9
		Americas	10	8
		Asia	40	45
		European Union	15	14
		Middle East	10	6
		Other Europe	10	18
Type of TNE delivery	Simplified categorisation	Distance learning	20	18
		International branch campus	10	17
		Partnership	70	65
Institution type	Comparability with previous wider benefits study	Post-1992	50	45
		Research-intensive	25	18
		Other	25	37*
Relative extent of TNE activity by institution	Based on extent recorded in Aggregate Offshore Record	'Big player'	35	30
		'Top 40' in AOR	40	48
		Other	25	22
Level of study		Undergraduate	40	56
		Postgraduate taught	40	42
		Postgraduate research	10	0
		Other	10	3
Subject of study	Comparability with previous wider benefits study	Arts & humanities	15	5
		Business/management	40	45
		Social sciences	15	18
		STEM (inc. medicine)	20	30
		Other	10	5
Gender		Female	50	55
		Male	50	45

\*Note: Proportions of 'other' and 'research-intensive' institutions are dependent on how graduates of University of London International Programmes are categorised

## Attraction, engagement and participation

Potential volunteers were invited through a range of attraction methods, although this relied heavily on assistance from UK institutions as there was no central source of transnational education alumni contacts as a group. Using contacts forged during our recent transnational education census (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014), institutions were contacted for assistance with promotion of the project. A senior or known contact involved in international partnership work and/or transnational education provision was approached first. Each was asked to assist by forwarding an e-mail invitation (to potential relevant participants) either directly if such alumni contacts were held in the UK, or via international partners who delivered the programmes. At times this required contact with numerous different individuals in the UK institutions, as many of those originally contacted had no access to the right contacts or partners. These individuals were often in academic departments, as opposed to international or partnership offices, reflecting the individual origin of many partnership programmes.

A small number of institutions were able to issue invitations to participate directly to alumni who had studied their transnational programmes, but this appeared to be relatively rare. In the majority of cases the UK institution did not have access to those contact details but passed the request for assistance to a selection of their delivery partner organisations, which should hold details of their alumni. This longer 'chain' was necessary to try to reach the alumni but was inherently weaker; the UK institutions did not offer us direct contact with their partners, and so the process was entirely reliant on the goodwill of partners in responding to the institutions' requests, and direct chasing actions could not be instigated. As a result, the extent to which international partners had actually issued invitations to their alumni was never clear, unless volunteers emerged. In practice, the volunteers that did emerge tended to do so in small groups from particular institutions or programmes, and somewhat sporadically in relation to our original promotional efforts.

The process of promotion was highly iterative, with close attention to the characteristics of the volunteers obtained, so that effort was continually refocused to target alumni with the key variables sought, based on analysis of those who had been engaged and/or interviewed at that point.

In practice, a significant proportion (around half) of those who volunteered did not participate in an interview. In some cases this was because, on the basis of the information received, they turned out to be ineligible as they were current transnational students or else graduates who had studied in the UK (and had misunderstood the target for the research). There was also a relative oversupply of volunteers comprising one or two types of alumni, in particular a large number of distance learners studying law and economics, which would have unbalanced the sample had they all been interviewed. A further significant proportion simply proved impossible to contact despite having provided their contact details. The 'loss' of these volunteers within the process contributed to the difficulty of building an achieved sample which had the desired stratification, and ultimately the number of interviews achieved in total.

The number of requests for assistance to institutions, via a wide range of types of staff, together with reminders and chasing actions, was in the end very large in

relation to the actual number of volunteers obtained. This could partly have resulted from low-quality contacts data being held by the partners, or data that were not up-to-date, or that partners did not prioritise the assistance requested by the UK institution (i.e. did not actually circulate the invitation).

One immediate conclusion from the research method was that UK transnational education alumni are harder to engage in research from the UK, on a consistent basis, than those who have undergone mobility and studied in the UK. This perhaps partly reflects the observation by Hoare (2012) that relatively little information is held by institutions in relation to the alumni of their collaborative programmes.

## **Definitions and terminology in practice**

The approach taken was to maintain the definitions and terminology established in the linked research (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014) but to use only very broad groupings. For example, it was not feasible to distinguish between the many different forms of collaborative or partnership activity.

Within the interviews, it quickly became clear that alumni (i.e. previous participants in transnational education programmes) had no awareness or understanding of the terminology used within the sector. Many considered that they were distance learners as they were clearly 'distant' from the UK institution and at least some of their learning was conducted online rather than face-to-face, even though they had physically enrolled and studied at a partner institution's premises.

Some who had studied at a local institution (through a partnership arrangement), assumed that this was a branch or campus of the UK institution. The definition of an international branch campus is currently in some debate, and tends to include its organisational structure and ownership, which may well be unknown to its students. Some of the partnership institutions at which alumni had studied were hard to distinguish from branch campuses without undertaking research into their ownership arrangements.

It was also not possible to distinguish between distance learning programmes with support from a local partner and other collaborative delivery models with a local partner. This probably reflects that there is a genuine continuum between these delivery types as much as limitation in understanding by the participants.

As a result, when considering the type or model of delivery of programme, the only three categories used were international branch campus, unsupported distance learning and partnership (or collaborative) delivery. Any programme that could not clearly be distinguished as a 'genuine' international branch campus or as unsupported distance learning was allocated to the broad 'partnership' category. At times, quite detailed questioning was required during an interview to obtain sufficient information to identify the type of programme in which the alumni had participated. This is one aspect of the study experiences reported in the findings that follow.

## Interview sample achieved

A total of 66 interviews with relevant alumni was achieved, and the analysis that follows is based upon that sample. Table 3.1 illustrates the 'shape' of the achieved sample in terms of the key variables, as percentages, in comparison with the target sample.

The interview sample achieved conformed quite well to the target 'shape' in some respects and less well in others. The shape of the achieved sample was strongly impacted by the volunteers that could be identified and engaged practically, despite the intensive and iterative attraction process.

In practice, it proved harder to attract volunteers who had studied in certain regions, such as the Middle East, whereas more volunteers than could be accommodated emerged in some other regions. However, some interviewees were obtained in all the main regions and key markets for UK transnational education.

The study focused on those who had studied at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level, and did not engage any postgraduate research graduates. All the targeted broad groups of subject of study were represented, although it was particularly hard to find alumni who had studied arts and humanities courses (which comprise a minority of transnational programmes). Our recent research on extent and value of transnational education provision by the UK revealed complex trends and inter-relationships between market region, type of provision and subject of study (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014), not all of which had been understood when the target sample shape for the current project was originally designed.

In terms of transnational programme delivery model or type, as noted, the fieldwork revealed that it was impossible to distinguish those who had undertaken 'supported distance learning' courses from those who studied through other partnership arrangements, so this was dropped as a specific target group. However, alumni were interviewed who had studied through a wide variety of different forms of partnership arrangement, as well as at three different international branch campuses, and through unsupported distance learning. Those who had studied at international branch campuses, and unsupported distance learners, were somewhat more easily engaged, perhaps because there was no reliance in the attraction method on an international partner, or because they had greater affinity with their UK institution.

In total, the alumni interviewed had studied for awards from twenty different UK higher education institutions, including post-1992, research-intensive and other institutions. The pattern of UK provision of transnational education is currently a small number of very large providers and many others which operate at a variety of smaller scales. Interviews were conducted with alumni who had studied in all three of our groupings of extent of provision: 'very large'; 'Top 40' in terms of extent reported in HESA's Aggregate Offshore Record (which we took to be above 1500 transnational students); and other 'smaller providers'.

In relation to participants' personal characteristics and issues, a good gender split was achieved, and the sample included significant numbers of alumni with more and less positive experiences, and with and without links to the UK, so the risk of bias



towards those with positive stories and/or well-connected to the UK was reduced. It was not possible to limit tightly the period since graduation, due to the somewhat unpredictable flow of volunteers; most interviewees had graduated 3-5 years ago, although there was a small proportion who had graduated between 5 and 10 years ago. The sample interviewed was limited to graduates, i.e. any current students who volunteered were considered ineligible.

Overall, although the interview sample obtained did not match all aspects of the target sample shape, it contained a good variety of alumni who reflected the desired range of experiences and characteristics. This sample was achieved on the basis of very considerable efforts to contact alumni via a large number of relevant UK HE institutions, and via many different people in differing roles and locations in relation to transnational education and alumni. Their effort and assistance with the project is gratefully acknowledged, but an unavoidable conclusion is that transnational education alumni are currently hard to reach and engage, from the UK, and markedly harder to reach than those who have studied physically in the UK.

Analysis and coding of the information obtained in the interviews was undertaken using a subset of the variables identified in our previous study with international alumni that were relevant here (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013), but also on a grounded theory basis in order to allow new themes to emerge.

## Chapter 3 Institutional perspectives

This chapter summarises a variety of perspectives related by informants in UK higher education institutions about the benefits of their transnational education activity, other than direct fee income. These were chiefly obtained during the qualitative research phase (through interviews) carried out by our project team in the linked study on extent and value of UK transnational education (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014).

Strategic and tactical aims reported for transnational education activity, that were not directly financial, varied widely amongst the institutions visited and/or interviewed, including:

- To diversify the institution's offer internationally and thereby reduce exposure to reliance on direct recruitment of international students to the UK campus;
- Through a range of partnerships in selected countries and/or international branch campuses, to build the university's international reputation and aid future recruitment of international students to the UK campus;
- To enter new markets in emerging economies;
- Through presence in other countries, to extend the university's international reputation and increase its international research activity and collaborations;
- To increase its international presence and potential global links with business and industry;
- To enhance the quality of the learning experience of students at its home campus (or international branch campus) by enabling mobility between them or to partner institutions;
- To support and stimulate staff development and new approaches to delivery within the university (particularly in relation to developing online, distance learning courses).

Evidence was not always available to assess the extent of realisation of these aims or benefits, many of which are strategic and may only deliver impact over long periods of time and could be hard to quantify. However, estimates were possible for the value to the UK in relation to some of the economic benefits.

### Increased international student numbers

In our linked study on UK transnational education value (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014), we suggested that UK institutions with international branch campuses derive associated revenues and benefits from an increase in the number of students from the country of the branch campus who study at the institution's UK campus (where the students pay international student fees, and bring the other benefits attributed to an international mix of students). To varying extents, this may also occur where there is transnational education activity of other forms with a local presence, such as collaborative provision.

These associated benefits could be either:

- Direct – in the form of students on agreed articulation or twinning programmes; or
- Indirect – the impact we named the ‘halo effect’, whereby transnational education activities in a country raise the profile of the institution in that country, resulting in an enhanced flow of students enrolling at its UK campus as international students.

Either way, the transnational education presence acts to promote the university’s image and reputation in that country, and directly or indirectly results in a greater number of enrolments from that country at its UK campus as international students. It could potentially instead result in students enrolling at other UK universities, as the more general profile of the UK could have been raised.

The total financial impact of this type on UK institutions has been estimated to be very large for articulation programmes (HEFCE, 2014). An approximate estimate has been made for total course fee revenues and other remittances of over £300m per year, together with derived expenditure by these international students of a further £400m (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). Most of this is thought to relate to articulation to undergraduate programmes by non-European Union students, with a very high dependence (over half in total value terms) on articulation arrangements with Chinese institutions. These students will be included in the HESA Student Record which means their total fees and other expenditure are included within that of students ‘studying in the UK’ in previous studies of the value of UK education exports, and would not have been identified as a separate entity or associated with transnational education arrangements. Should these estimates be correct, they exceed current estimates of the direct fee income to the UK from transnational programmes (just under £500m per year, Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014).

Some UK institutions with international branch campuses state that their business model, at least in part, is based on the transfer of students to their programmes in the UK in this way. However, there was no evidence that any UK university had fully quantified the indirect ‘halo effect’ impact. Several institutions reported that they had experienced significant upturns in numbers of students from the countries involved joining their programmes in the UK. One suggested that this might result in an extra 300 students on its UK campus from the country in which its branch campus operates. By comparing transnational education and ‘in-UK’ enrolment patterns for selected countries, for several universities with international branch campuses, a cautious estimate was made of a total value of £40m per annum (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). Even if the halo effect is relatively small per institution, it could be significant in terms of total UK enrolments. If it increased UK campus enrolments by perhaps 1% from the leading transnational education countries, this would result in an additional 2,000 international students in the UK.

The extent of the halo effect is likely to vary according to the mode of transnational education delivery, country and level of programme and the UK institution involved. There did not seem to be a strong correlation between the extent of transnational education activity by a particular institution and its international UK campus enrolments. However, many leading transnational education markets for UK institutions are also the main source countries for international students in the UK (including China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Nigeria and India), which could

indicate a broad dynamic mutual benefit between transnational education provision and international student recruitment, and vice versa.

It is generally accepted in the sector that the UK's two main international higher education student markets (i.e. transnational education and recruiting to UK campus) operate in parallel. The prevailing view also appears to be that students consider either one mode or the other, not both, in their choice of study. The interviews with transnational education alumni offered an opportunity to provide direct insight into whether this assumption is correct.

## **Other financial benefits**

In the research on the financial value of UK transnational education, we came across limited evidence for other financial benefits associated with transnational education activity by UK institutions, although a few reported the 'sale' of consultancy services, publications or other materials (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014).

Validation fees are reported by several UK institutions (as opposed to fee income from those on validated programmes), including the Open University which provides services through an operating company. Income from its validation service was £2.9m in 2012/13, from its published accounts, although this could include some UK revenue. Middlesex University reported such activities of £5.1m in 2013. These modest income streams could also apply to other institutions. Some universities report that they charge their partner institutions a fee for an initial validation visit when they agree a collaborative relationship.

A variety of other financial benefits were identified:

- New research income from the host countries for their international campuses, including the University of Nottingham in Malaysia and China;
- Expenditure (and/or fees) in the UK due to transnational education students' attendance on residential programmes and other study or research visits to the UK campus (particularly by those on distance learning programmes). These are relatively common optional elements to programmes, but there was insufficient evidence available to make an estimate of the total value of this activity;
- Purchases from the institution of publications and resources, by students on transnational education programmes. Although fees for distance learning programmes may include access to all necessary resources online, further reading is commonly recommended. It was not possible to derive estimates for the value of this additional trade.

## Chapter 4 Impact and wider benefits

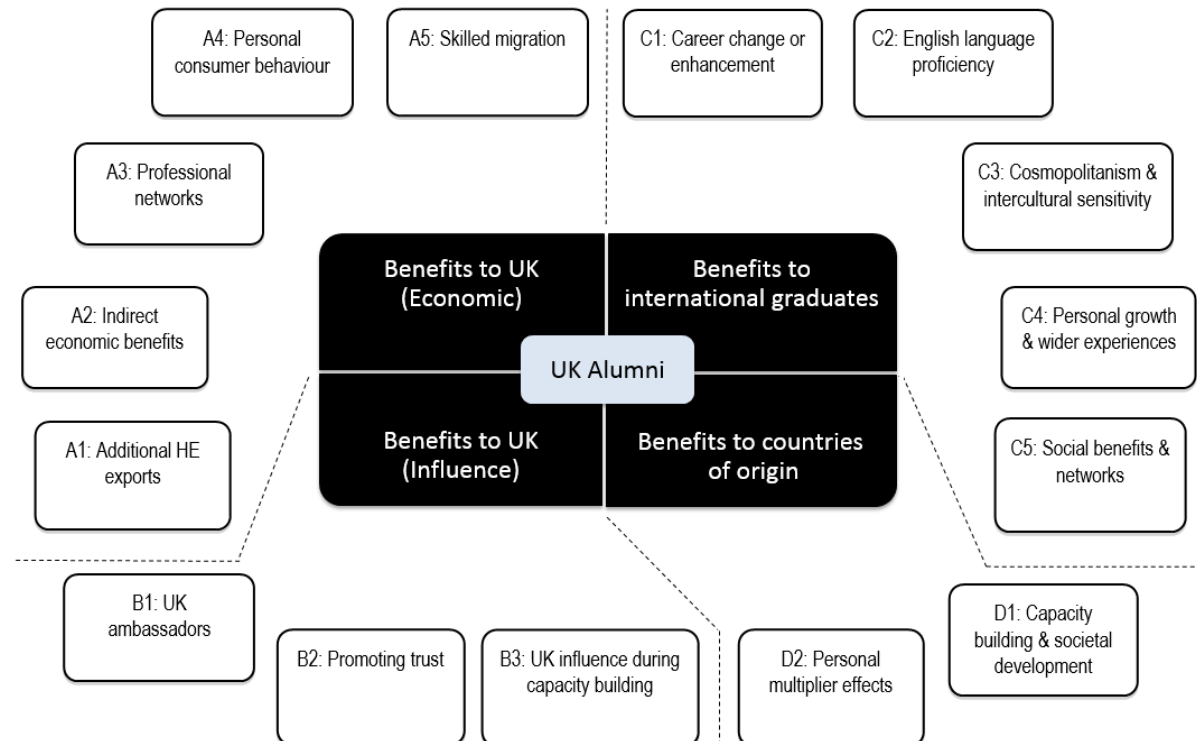
This chapter presents evidence from new primary research into the impact and wider benefits of transnational education, identified from the reported experiences and perceptions of alumni. These include impacts for the participants and inferred benefits for other groups, including for the UK. Other findings from the interviews with alumni, relating to their motivations to undertake transnational education and a variety of their study experiences, are reported in Chapter 6.

In our study of the wider benefits of international higher education in the UK (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013), we identified fifteen benefit types which were grouped at high level by beneficiary (as shown in Figure 5.1):

- Impact on the participants (i.e. the graduates themselves, now alumni);
- Benefits to the UK;
- Benefits to countries of origin and/or in which they studied.

Here we use the same structure to report findings from our interviews with alumni who have undertaken UK transnational education programmes.

**Figure 5.1** Benefit types identified from interviews with international alumni (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013)



## Impact on the participant

### Career or employment-related impacts

Career-related benefits to the participant were investigated in detail given that the main motivation for the overwhelming majority of participants in transnational education relates to their career or personal progression (see also section 6.1). It was important to assess the extent to which the alumni felt that those motivations had been fulfilled by their programme experience and qualification. In other words, had they obtained a satisfactory career- or employment-related outcome? This is also likely to feature strongly in any perception of overall satisfaction by them. It is noteworthy that previous research with international graduates tends to have focused on short-term employment outcomes, not longer-term career impact (Robertson et al., 2011).

These issues were considered in relation to short-term and, where possible, longer-term impacts; for example, whether the alumni believed that they had obtained an immediate or near-immediate benefit in terms of finding a job or enhancing their existing employment, or progressing to further study, but also whether they had experience or expectation of longer-term career enhancement. The extent to which the programme or qualification had been chosen in order to facilitate any desired specific career enhancement, such as entry to a particular career or a major change in career direction, and/or had done so, was also queried.

### Immediate employment impacts

Around 7 in 10 interviewees either reported some immediate or short-term progression after their transnational programme which was career-related, in the form of gaining a first job or an enhanced role, or (almost as commonly) through progression to a further qualification.

T6 (BA, partnership in India) thought her outlook and understanding of business had been completely changed by the course. Her first job after graduation was in logistics in a haulage company; she was quickly promoted and then switched to another division. She felt she would not have obtained this progression without the degree because "*It has made me who I am*" and that she had been selected over other applicants with local Masters degrees.

T20 (LLB, partnership in Pakistan) had obtained an offer of a Masters in the UK after her degree but could not go because her parents wanted to support her brother doing a similar first degree and could not afford to support both of them. Instead she obtained a job in Pakistan for an international charity doing research, which she felt had only been open to her with a UK first degree whereas others were required to have a postgraduate local degree.

T37 (MSc, distance learning, Zambia) felt that her qualification in sustainable development was "*the one everyone is after – the qualification commands a great deal of respect.*" She applied for and obtained a very good job two months after finishing the course, with greater responsibility and salary, and

had since gone to a director-level job, a level she felt she could not have accessed without the UK degree. When interviewed, she was hoping that her daughter would apply for a Commonwealth Scholarship and study in the UK.

T88 (BA, partnership in Uzbekistan): *“For sure I would not have got the job at Nestle without my degree”* where he was a brand manager. *“[But] what I am really dreaming is forming an organisation which will help people to learn to do business and to do things right.”*

T94 (MBA, partnership in Russia): *“[I] wanted to change my life”* in order to move ‘up’ from administrative roles into management and HR. With the MBA she became part of her company’s business group and was moved to a start-up venture abroad, and then a senior role in HR. When interviewed she was Head of HR for a large foundation *“earning ten times what I did as an executive PA.”*

T103 (BA, branch campus, China) did not want to return home to work in his father’s business: *“I wanted to do something more than that – I wanted to go out in the world and see more. I wanted to see more possibilities and more potential in myself. If I had gone to a Chinese university, it would have been totally different, I wouldn’t have thought about going abroad.”* After his degree he worked in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Tibet, then in Pakistan, and then in Russia for an internet start-up, before returning to China to work for a British company.

## Further study

Up to one third of the interviewees had progressed to further higher education study (after their transnational programme) by the time they were interviewed. This included interviewees who had had prior intentions to progress to postgraduate study as part of a deliberate career plan and also some who found no immediate success in entering employment and so sought further study instead.

T21 (BSc, partnership in India) was disappointed with her course as she found she was at a disadvantage compared with students who had studied US external degrees or even local degrees, because she had no presentation skills or experience of practical or project work. She felt the course *“was just not good enough”* with poor lecturers using dry, textbook-based content. However, it did enable her to study a Masters at a university in Pakistan and she was about to start a new job when interviewed.

T86 (BSc, partnership in Uzbekistan) had taken some time after his degree to explore possibilities. He decided to pursue a Masters and found his degree was *“very useful”* in gaining a Masters scholarship in Korea. *“It was a British degree, they verified it and that was that.”*

T10 (PGCE, partnership in Oman) had managed to undertake a transnational PGCE degree through teaching placements in the Middle East but found this did not give her the UK Qualified Teacher Status that she (as a UK citizen) desired. She subsequently enrolled in a specialised Masters with a US university: *“One opportunity leads to another opportunity.”*

T40 (BSc Economics, partnership, Turkey) was the first member of her family to attend higher education, and having gained her first degree had progressed to a Masters in Italy with a Government scholarship.

It is perhaps notable that the further study to which interviewees had progressed was in almost all cases in the form of either local provision or as an internationally mobile student, rather than another transnational programme (with the exception of a few serial distance learners).

### Longer-term career enhancement

The proportion of interviewees who felt that they had already experienced some extent of longer-term career progression as a result of their programme or qualification, or were confident that they would do so, was similar to the proportion who perceived a positive short-term outcome (around 7 in 10) or even higher. However, the extent of this change was not always dramatic, and in many cases it reflected an aspiration for a change in level in their current career sector rather than entry to a different career sector. For others it was more about potential enhancement in their existing role.

T8 (MSc, distance learning, Nigeria) had worked in banking for over 10 years when he undertook an online course over a period of 3 years. Afterwards he felt his contribution to his company improved through his deeper and up-to-date knowledge, which was noticed by his managers who retrospectively agreed to pay his course expenses, as well as awarding him a pay rise.

T82 (BSc Economics, partnership in Uzbekistan) believed that finding her first job was down to her mother “*not my degree*”. However, in two years she grew to be a senior specialist – “*The team grew from two people to six – this was the result of the degree. It was a tough road because nobody wanted to listen to a woman in the beginning.*”

Trainee teacher T66 (PGCE, supported distance learning, Oman) related the impact it had on her current students: “*It has not only transformed the way we teach but we look at the students’ experience of our teaching. [The feedback] has definitely changed – they look forward to new style lectures and come to us with suggestions.*”

The majority of those who reported neither an immediate employment impact nor progression to further study had been studying postgraduate programmes, mostly from an existing position of employment. For many of them, investment in the programme had been a somewhat longer term investment anyway, so the lack of an immediate impact had not necessarily been disappointing to them.

T30 (MSc, distance learning, Cameroon) had not been promoted since her course but felt that this would happen and that she was now more employable: “*I feel I have more choices as reference is always made to my [UK university] degree. With my qualification I feel I can fit in anywhere in the world because it is recognised worldwide.*”



T69 (MSc, branch campus, Australia): *“In terms of my professional advancement, I wouldn’t say that it has been particularly helpful, but it hasn’t been unhelpful. It’s helped me to a greater level of interconnectedness.”* Her company subsequently sponsored her to undertake a 1-year leadership course.

T96 (MSc, partnership in Greece) studied while working full-time in order to build his long-term prospects. He was clear when interviewed that there was no chance of immediate promotion within the current Greek economic climate, but thought the qualification would be an asset in the longer term that future potential employers would respect, particularly being a UK degree.

## Negative outcomes

There was a group of (mostly) first degree graduates who had sought work after their degree but failed to enter employment (one or two of whom have been noted earlier). Some of this minority felt their programme had been a waste of time and effort, including a distinct and fairly vocal sub-group who had found that the qualification they had obtained was not accepted in their respective local labour market – this seemed particularly acute in relation to law qualifications. Several of these had not verified in advance whether it would be accepted, suggesting a potential lack of research and/or some naivety on their behalf. A number had failed to enter employment seemingly due to other personal reasons, while there were other examples where they had resorted to low-level work having failed to find the calibre of employment they had originally been seeking.

T4 (BSc, partnership, China) found that his course was not accepted by the Chinese government, when he tried to work in the public sector after realising that computing was not the industry for him. Having failed to find any other suitable work, he had to endure two years of ‘lowest level’ work while studying a further evening course through which he obtained another degree that was accepted and could enter graduate-level employment.

T83 (BA in Law, partnership in Uzbekistan) went back to work at her mother’s chemical factory after her degree but hated it as she could not find a law-related job. She was taken on for two months at a multinational because she could speak English but left because the pay was so low. When interviewed she was working as a waitress in the UAE in order to earn money to pay back her debts.

T13 (LLB, partnership, Jamaica) had chosen a UK degree because it enabled her to study part-time, unlike local alternatives. She then moved to the USA with her husband and family and found that her degree was not accepted. She studied a paralegal certificate remotely with a US institution to offset this but then found out that it too was not accepted. She tried more than once to contact her UK university for advice and support but had received no reply. When interviewed, she was working as a healthcare assistant. She regretted the absence of any career guidance before or during her course and the lack of information she had about the international validity of the qualification.

T28 (LLB, distance learning, Jamaica) had entered law school locally and then worked as an attorney. She now wanted to work in the USA and had tried to take bar exams there, but found that for several of the key exams her qualification was not accepted.

In summary, the majority of interviewees reported positive perceptions of career-related value of their transnational education programme, which in some cases were very positive outcomes, while a small minority reported a negative outcome.

## English language proficiency

The majority of the interviewees were not native English speakers and their level of competency in spoken English was variable. Some language problems were encountered – i.e. there was some limitation to the information that could be obtained in practice during the interview – in perhaps 1 in 5 of the interviews with those for whom English was not their first or working language, suggesting that some UK transnational programme participants have not attained high-level spoken English language skills. In one such case, the interviewer reported: “*This interview was painful. Language and comprehension skills were very limited.*”

It is likely that the voluntary basis of obtaining interviewees will have introduced some bias towards those with more confidence in their spoken English, so the level of English of the ‘average’ transnational participant could be lower than that of the average interviewee.

Although a number of cases were noted where lectures (and other teaching and learning aspects of the programme) were in a local language and not English, in all cases examinations and assessed assignments were reported to have to be in English. It is assumed that interviewees’ levels of skill in written English were likely to have been higher than the level of their spoken English as experienced through the telephone interview.

As reported in the consideration of motivations (section 6.1), the potential for improved English language skills had been seen by many as at least a subsidiary rationale in their selection of a UK transnational programme and for a few was the foremost rationale. Around half of the interviewees reported that their English had improved as a result of their programme, although it is likely that this under-represents the position and that all graduates will have improved to some extent. That confidence may have been reflected in their willingness to undertake an interview.

In an increasingly mobile labour market, the facility to communicate in English fluently and skilfully is seen by many internationally-active employers as a major asset, if not a requirement, of their graduate-level employees. A small number of the interviewees had found that their improved English was a significant asset in entering the labour market and especially joining companies that were operating internationally.

T22 (BA, partnership, Spain) found that her qualification had little currency with SME employers in Spain, although she noticed that they did place value

on her English as they believed: “*a British degree must indicate good language skills.*”

## **Intercultural sensitivity or cosmopolitanism**

One of the key findings of the research with international alumni who had studied in the UK was the ‘cosmopolitanism’ that many gained due to the presence of students of multiple nationalities within their international student cohort on the UK campus (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). This has also been described as the development of intercultural competence or sensitivity (Deardorff and Jones, 2012) and is considered to be of value both in the general formation of the student (Webb, 2005) and to some employers (Archer and Davison, 2008; Jones, 2013).

Analysis of this aspect of the interview evidence was undertaken on the basis of whether the alumni interviewed reported that they had developed personally in this way, but also the extent to which their student cohort had been international as opposed to local (where that information was available). As with several of the issues investigated, the focus was on those who studied through partnership or branch campus arrangements, as this potential development was much less likely to apply to distance learners.

Fewer than ten of the 66 interviewees reported that their programme cohorts had been significantly international in composition, and most that it had been entirely local. In only a very few cases was the international composition of the students highlighted as a feature of their study experience, which suggests that for most students the opportunities for intercultural interactions were limited.

Almost all the alumni who did report cosmopolitan cohorts had studied at what could be identified as international hubs, within which either their international branch campus or institutional partner had been located (e.g. Dubai, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia). By inference, in the majority of cases where the graduate studied in a standalone partner institution, their cohort had either been local or national, or at least any international dimension to it was unremarkable.

It should be added that not all of these alumni who studied in an international cohort reported that they had developed intercultural sensitivity (through studying alongside students of other nationalities), but some certainly reported this benefit:

T69 (MSc, branch campus, Australia): “*It was great for my confidence and my ability to communicate to a wide range of people.*”

T98 (BEng, branch campus, Dubai), who was Indian: *“Others were from Dubai, Pakistan, Nigeria and one from the UK. This gave me an international outlook – I am more open to different ideas and wider options. I have a bigger picture of possible futures.”*

T107 (BA, branch campus, China) was an unusual interviewee in being a German national who had studied in China, and hence his experience was that of an international student: *“I grew up in a village and everything was small. But now my outlook is more international. I have a broader understanding of what is happening from a cultural, political and economic perspective. Four years ago I was a little boy who had a very narrow point of view.”* Interestingly he now lived and worked in another country and reported that he was *“very open-minded about my future – what I do and where I work.”*

T108 (BA, branch campus, China): *“By making friends from different countries I broadened my view. I became a global student.”*

It seems clear, from the evidence of these alumni, that development of greater cosmopolitanism or intercultural sensitivity amongst transnational education students is limited unless they study their programme overseas (which was rare amongst this group). Where a transnational programme in the student's own country had involved a range of nationalities, the intercultural impact on the student appeared to be less than would be experienced through the immersion in a mix of nationalities thrown together in a 'foreign' environment, as occurs with international mobility. A number of studies in the literature have identified the importance of mobility in developing intercultural sensitivity, including Robertson et al. (2011) who also noted differences between international and transnational cohorts.

## **Personal growth and wider experiences**

A variety of beneficial broader personal experiences have been reported by international alumni who studied in the UK, many of which relate to overcoming the challenges inherent in moving to a new country and living and studying there, as well as their cultural and other learning (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). For those who study transnational education programmes in their own country, which was the majority of the interviewees, there had not been mobility of this type and so many of these opportunities simply had not arisen.

However, some transnational education alumni reported other aspects of personal growth, generally manifested now as increased confidence. Frequently this was articulated as a rise in confidence due to their experience of overcoming certain challenges. One such challenge was coming to terms with a different style of education, which is discussed in the next chapter (in relation to the existence of a distinctive UK pedagogy). There were also a number of cases where the alumni had some retrospective satisfaction that they had overcome the physical and mental challenges of undertaking a higher education programme whilst also working full- or part-time.

T76 (BA, partnership, Singapore): *“During the study, I don’t get much sleep. After work, I attended the night class, I have to do my assignment until 2am and then get up early to go to work again. It was not easy but I have come through it.”*

T28 (LLB, distance learning, Jamaica): *“It was hard work, it required you to be very structured and organised. I studied from 5am on Saturday mornings until 11pm at night. If you didn’t want it badly enough you would quit.”*

T30 (MSc, distance learning, Cameroon): *“Very difficult and challenging. It was difficult to keep up with studies, work and family. So I had to discipline myself in order to keep up with the study schedule, and often I had to over strain myself during assignments and exams.”*

Many alumni did report greater self-confidence as individuals after their programme, but as this would presumably be expected from anyone graduating from a higher education programme these are not reported in detail. Instead the focus here is on areas where the transnational programme appeared to have led to a different level of development compared with what might be expected from undertaking any degree.

A prominent feature of UK higher education is the extent to which students take part in extra-curricular activity, through student societies, sports and other activities, but also volunteering off-campus and/or undertaking work placements or part-time work. A more recent development has been formal recognition of some of these activities, reflecting that they are useful in building a wider range of skills, many of which contribute to enhanced employability. Such recognition can take form of a university award or the more generic Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).

Overall, most transnational education interviewees reported little involvement in these types of activities, almost certainly less than is typically the case for either UK home students or international students in the UK, to the point that it was notable when they were mentioned. Of course, the context of their programme is highly relevant to this, as extra-curricular degree-related opportunities are inherently more likely to be available for those physically present at an institution, than during study through distance learning, for example. In addition, the mode of study and profile of the student will constrain this – both the motivation for and opportunity to take part in extra-curricular activity will tend to be lower where a student is working full-time and fitting their study around that. Being in a position of employment while studying could also obviate much of the potential benefit of undertaking a work placement or similar developmental opportunities as part of a degree programme.

That said, even amongst those who had studied at a partner institution or branch campus, only a minority spoke of memorable extra-curricular activity or resultant benefit from it. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it was those who had studied at an international campus, or a partner that was itself a university or similar institution, who reported that they had been part of student societies, or (very rarely) had taken part in sport, or had participated in other campus-based social activities.

A handful of the alumni had been elected as student representatives during their time at the branch campus or local institution, and these reported the developmental

benefits typically attributed to such activity. It is likely that this had also contributed to their allegiance to their institution, and was almost certainly a factor in their positive response to an invitation to take part in an interview.

Nonetheless, a few of the transnational alumni interviewed had gained hugely from their involvement in student activities, including:

T82 (BSc, partnership in Uzbekistan) had been a student union representative and held an education welfare post: *“That was an incredible experience in terms of teamwork, leadership, organisational skills so I think that it gave me more of a real life experience than the academic experience. It helped me recognise my weaknesses and strong points. It helped me get a job. When you leave university there is always Google to find things ... you have forgotten. But there is no Google when it comes to negotiation, communicating with co-workers. My experience in the [student union] was the determining factor of my success.”*

T98 (BEng, branch campus, Dubai) was Student President and a student representative on the institution’s council for several years, which opened up contacts with Government officials and as a result was now very well connected socially and professionally. Interestingly, she had become chair of its alumni association when interviewed.

T67 (BSc, partnership, Oman): *“There were limited sports and social facilities but compared to other institutions in Oman, they were good. The student council promoted clubs and activities.”*

What this seems to show is that some individuals did take advantage of opportunities that were available in some study environments, where they resembled a traditional ‘UK’ campus setting, but for many students and settings this had not been the case. It seems likely that this reflects the mode of study and the study environment, as well as the nature of the student.

Student volunteering is common at UK universities but was conspicuous in its almost complete absence in the experiences reported by the interviewees. Only two of the alumni reported volunteering during their programme, one case of which was voluntary teaching of junior students in the same institution. The other had participated through an international branch campus in China in a scheme working with children in poverty in rural China. Only two graduates reported taking part in an institution’s award scheme to recognise extra-curricular activity.

It was hard in the interviews to distinguish between work placements or internships that were integral to a graduate’s programme and those which were entirely extra-curricular. In all, only a handful of interviewees reported that they had undertaken an internship or work placement which was facilitated by the local institution. One interviewee reported that their course had been promoted on the basis of an integrated placement with a relevant employer, but in reality no placements had been available. It should be noted that he did say that the following year this feature of the course had been removed from the marketing.

However, there were a handful of graduates who had undertaken an internship successfully, linked in some way either to their programme or their institution. There were also one or two instances where a student had organised their own placement (or it had been facilitated by their parents' local contacts) in the absence of support from the institution. Although the evidence is somewhat limited, provision of opportunities for work experience or support in finding them will be highly dependent on the local partner and, as such, may be largely outside the influence of the UK institution.

A possible inference is that such reliance on local partners is not currently resulting in widespread provision of these types of extra-curricular activity. The exceptions appear to be where the setting is a branch campus (i.e. where the UK institution has strong influence) or a partner which is an established university or institution and might already have this experience or capability.

These observations on extra-curricular benefits, and their rarity, should be seen in the context that many of these transnational programme students, particularly those on postgraduate programmes, had been in full-time or part-time employment while studying. The need and opportunity for development through these broader experiences, as part of a student's formation during higher education, were likely to have been lower for such students. Their motivations may also have been somewhat distinct from other types of student. However, the observation of restricted participation in extra-curricular activities also held amongst those on full-time first degree programmes, who presumably would have benefited more from such activities, and this may be a weakness of some of the study environments in current transnational education activity. This is potentially important as these activities are widely recognised to contribute significantly to the development of transferable skills and employability (and are increasingly recognised formally within UK higher education) as part of a graduate's formation.

## **Social benefits and networks**

Positive social experiences are often reported as a highlight of higher education participation. Amongst international alumni, many have reported that friendships made with international peers while studying in the UK have persisted to become lifelong friendships and networks. Alumni perceive that particularly strong bonds develop with fellow students while overcoming the challenges of studying abroad (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013).

Similar experiences were reported by some transnational education alumni, especially amongst those studying undergraduate programmes at an international branch campus or in a similar environment. These alumni related experiences very similar to those one would expect from an international student on campus, although the composition of the cohort of students tended to be much less cosmopolitan than might be the case for international students in the UK.

T75 (BSc, partnership, Sri Lanka) when on campus met female adults outside his family for the first time: "*it made me into a different person ... it was a totally different life for me.*" He said that before the course: "*I would not have been able to talk to you like this.*"

T82 (BSc, partnership, Uzbekistan): *“The programme was good but the social encounters and university life was a life-changing experience for me.”*

Even amongst those who had studied purely through distance learning programmes, there were also some instances where graduates reported positive interactions with fellow students during their programme:

T30 (MSc, Cameroon): *“[in touch with] other students online through live chats, web boards and web conferences.”*

T37 (MSc, Zambia): *“a very strong network of students who supported each other by e-mail.”*

However, overall, the majority of the transnational education alumni did not report that social interactions with other students had been a highlight of their experiences. While most had gained a few additional friends, in some cases the relationships they maintained were more with academic staff than their peers:

T24 (MSc, distance learning, France): *“My main emotional tie was to the tutors; they pushed me and helped me to get to where I need to go.”*

When they considered social networks persisting after graduation, relatively few alumni had maintained significant contact with fellow students once the course was finished. There were cases where interviewees reported that they had kept contact with selected peers as friends or, more rarely, as professional contacts (the case for some MBA graduates, as might be expected), but these were relatively rare. A substantial proportion appeared to have no contact whatsoever with any of their fellow course alumni at the point of interview. However, it should be borne in mind that many of the transnational alumni interviewees had had principally career-related motivations rather than socially-related aspirations, and being part-time students while in employment may well not have sought new social relationships with fellow students.

Many of the interviewees had been contacted for our research through alumni networks, held directly by the UK institution or (much more commonly) by the respective local partner institution, although it was not always possible to know which. They were questioned about any continuing links with their UK institution, with other contacts in the UK or fellow alumni. Only a minority mentioned that they were part of a formalised alumni network relating to their UK institution, and in most cases this appeared to be a passive relationship, i.e. they simply “received” e-mails or newsletters.

Interviewee T15 (MSc, distance learning, Portugal) felt that the alumni association principally worked for those who had attended the university, as the newsletter focused on happenings on campus: *“they are family and the rest [of us] are just distant relatives.”*



T0 (BA, partnership, Czech Republic) claimed that after her programme she had applied to join the alumni organisation of the UK university that issued her degree but had been turned down.

On the other hand a minority of the interviewees did regularly attend alumni body events. A conspicuous subset within these had undertaken partnership programmes from a single UK institution (in different countries), and attended events organised by a branch of its alumni organisation held at the respective UK embassies. One interviewee, from a branch campus programme, was currently chair of her local alumni association when interviewed.

It is known that social media are increasingly used as a means to engage alumni. A number of the students from one partnership institution seemed to be actively engaged in an informal alumni network run by a longstanding UK staff member there, maintained using LinkedIn. Interestingly, one of the Chinese interviewees mentioned that the fact that Facebook was banned in China prevented that method of networking, and reduced the ability of the alumni to stay in contact.

## Comparisons with international study

There were clear and strong actual or perceived career-related benefits for many transnational education graduates although, viewed overall, they were arguably less transformational than was the case for many international graduates (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). It was notable that a relatively high proportion of international alumni in that study had made marked changes in career direction or level as a result of their degree, while this was less common amongst transnational education interviewees.

Apparent differences in the extent of career-related impact from the two styles of education could result from differences in perceived value of the qualification in the eyes of employers (as has been reported in several studies), or differences in the type of candidates and their education experiences. It should be noted that a relatively high proportion of international students come from comparative 'social elites', almost certainly higher than amongst transnational education students, which may also impact on impact levels.

Those who undertake international mobility have also invested very highly personally in their higher education, which may reflect a strong motivation for major career change or development. A (relatively) more modest investment is made, financially and perhaps personally, by those undertaking transnational education, so it may be unsurprising that perceived impacts are less transformational.

In relation to personal and social benefits, transnational alumni reported lower extents of impact than international students. This is likely to relate to the motivations and context for their study which may be distinct for many transnational students, with a narrower focus on gaining the qualification through part-time study fitted around an existing adult working life. For such students, there may not be the desire, need or opportunity for a wider formative social experience:

T20 (LLB, Pakistan): *"You simply come for the study, and then go home."*

Some transnational study contexts do therefore limit the potential for personal development in comparison with that available from a full-time degree involving physical mobility, but potentially this may be appropriate given the balance of motivations held by many transnational education students. Nonetheless, these differences do need to be borne in mind in terms of potential impacts for the UK institutions and the UK.

## Wider benefits to the UK

### Impacts for UK HE institutions

Chapter 3 presented some institutional perspectives on perceived and potential impacts of transnational education activity, in particular the indirect economic impact of presence in a country through a 'halo effect' resulting in increased numbers studying at its UK campus (including through articulation arrangements). In this section the focus is on evidence from the alumni interviews that demonstrates these or other related impacts on UK institutions.

When questioned whether they had recommended, and/or would recommend, to others a UK transnational programme or experience similar to their own, around three quarters said that they would potentially recommend such an experience to others. This is a relatively strong positive endorsement of their overall experience.

This included instances where such a recommendation for similar study had been made and where an identifiable additional 'UK education export' had arisen or was likely to arise as a result of the interviewee's experience:

T16 (MSc, distance learning, Nigeria) thought very highly of his course: "*The course was one of the best I have ever done. [It] has enhanced [my] capacity and helps [me] a lot in my job.*" He reported that he thought the UK had very good universities and although they were expensive he had confidence in their quality; his daughter was in the process of applying to study at a university in the UK.

T37 (MSc, distance learning, Zambia) recognised that the UK invests in African education. Having had a positive experience herself, she felt it was a good idea for her daughter to study in the UK, and was applying for a Commonwealth Scholarship to do so.

T68 (MSc, partnership, India) had shifted his career from computing to teaching, and was now a lecturer in a university. He said that three of his students had enrolled on the same MSc course that he had taken, on the basis of his recommendation.

T98 (BEng, branch campus, Dubai) had recommended others in her company to request to study programmes either at that branch campus or in the UK at the parent university, and had herself asked for a transfer at work so that she could study a Masters course at the UK campus.

A number of interviewees had recommended their course to friends and also siblings, some of whom had subsequently enrolled as a result. Recommendations of this type occurred across the range of delivery types and regions.

However, the enthusiasm with which most interviewees reported their tendency to recommend similar study to others was less than had been the case amongst international alumni who had studied in the UK, many of whom were active ambassadors for their UK institutions, some with almost evangelical zeal (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). Although most of the transnational alumni interviewees reported that they would recommend their experience, their experience was either somewhat less positive than that of international alumni, and/or potentially their circumstances were such that they were less able to make recommendations in practice.

### Indirect economic benefits

A range of indirect economic benefits to the UK are thought potentially to arise from internationally mobile students studying in the UK, beyond the education export itself (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). These included:

- Export activity or business for the UK that arose due to the influence of the individual once they left the UK, having had a positive experience of the UK;
- The potential for such benefits in the future through the position of the individual within international professional networks comprising international alumni and other contacts including UK nationals;
- The personal behaviour of the individual as a consumer of UK goods and services after they had left the UK, or as a returning visitor to the UK, and their influence on others to behave in a similar way;
- Their continued presence in the UK after their studies as a skilled migrant.

Questions were posed to the transnational education interviewees to ascertain the extent to which these types of benefit might apply to them in their position as alumni of UK transnational programmes.

There was little evidence that any significant additional commerce or trade had resulted for the UK as a result of the influence of the interviewees in their professional lives since studying their transnational programme.

A small number of the interviewees reported that they had maintained contact with fellow alumni who were now located in different parts of the world, i.e. they had become part of an international professional network.

T72 (MSc, international campus, Australia) reported that she had friends from her course who *“are working in good positions around the world, all in big energy companies.”*

T89 (BA, partnership, Uzbekistan) said that she had *“friends and professional networks all over the world, but not from the UK.”*

However, it was not clear that UK professionals were present within these international networks, which would tend to limit their potential for economic benefit to the UK. It seems relatively unlikely that UK individuals will be involved, given that most of the cohorts within which the alumni had studied were dominantly local, and where they had been international there were no reports of any UK nationals. The absence of direct contact with UK students during their studies, or opportunities to meet others while present physically in the UK, may obviate much of the potential value of most of these subsequent networks to the UK.

In most cases, the friends and contacts that had been made were of the same nationality as the alumni and remained in the country in which they had studied, and so the issue of fellow alumni comprising international networks rarely arose.

Significant continuing contacts were reported with some tutors or other members of academic staff in the UK, so it is possible that these could lead to future academic or research collaborations, where the interviewee had pursued that career direction.

A few interviewees did report that – as a result of their course – they had become much more interested in the UK, which was mainly manifested in activities such as accessing BBC online news and other services. For example:

T46 (LLM, distance learning, Peru) reported that she “*reads the Economist daily, watches the BBC and reads BBC online.*”

However, this was relatively rarely reported by the interviewees. When questioned, most did not feel that they had developed strong links or emotional ties to the UK. Because they had not physically been present in the UK during their study, they had also not been exposed to British brands of products or services, and did not have any resulting allegiance to them.

Around one fifth of the interviewees had visited the UK at least once since their programme, which in many cases was a short trip prompted by the opportunity to attend a graduation ceremony in the UK. A number of interviewees on partnership programmes from one particular UK university had attended its ‘international week’ held annually on the UK campus, during their programme, although this appeared to have been optional. It should also be remembered that the focus of this study was those studying transnational programmes wholly abroad, or without a substantial element of study within the UK, whereas other types of transnational programme do incorporate significant study time in the UK.

T29 (BSc, distance learning, Nigeria) travelled to the UK to attend her graduation ceremony and extended her trip to five months. She has returned four times since, partly to visit a friend she had made during her course.

T95 (MBA, partnership, Russia) when she was in the UK for ‘international week’ met her future husband there; she was now therefore a regular visitor to the UK. They were married at the British Embassy in Moscow, where she attended the UK university’s local alumni events.

The proportion of transnational interviewees who had travelled to the UK (essentially as tourists) since their programme, although significant, was much lower in comparison with international alumni who had spent a year or longer studying in the UK, as was the frequency of those visits (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). This presumably reflects a much weaker perceived affinity with the UK, as well as the absence of UK friends or contacts made during their studies.

As might be expected, there was no evidence for resulting inward migration from outside the European Union to the UK amongst the interviewees, so there was no benefit in terms of additional highly skilled entrants to the UK workforce.

In summary, insights into the lives and work of the interviewees revealed only minor indirect economic benefits to the UK as a result of their study of a UK transnational programme, other than some increase in travel to the UK by alumni which clearly resulted from their participation in a UK transnational programme.

## **Benefits of influence**

Higher education is increasingly being recognised for its potential to deliver ‘soft power’ influences (British Council, 2014). A prominent finding in our study of international alumni was the recognition that many graduates left the UK after their period of study with a positive view of the UK and its culture and values. That mindset could potentially support the UK’s economic, socio-cultural or political agendas. We identified that positive study and related experiences during the time they were in the UK could result in three somewhat linked types of benefit (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013):

- UK ambassadors – alumni were active advocates for the UK as they went about their lives and work, and the emotional bond with the UK that they had developed could lead to them positively influencing future educational, cultural, social, developmental or business collaborations between the UK and the country they settled in;
- Promoting trust – alumni had positive views of the UK’s values as a society and culture which contributed to the building up of a general trust in the UK, making it a desirable business, diplomatic or development partner;
- Influence during capacity building – where alumni returned to a developing nation, they could embed British values, ideas and structures, which could be seeds for long-term linkages and synergies, contributing to the UK’s goals in relation to international development.

These three types of benefit were all seen to be dependent upon the international alumni having had a positive study experience in the UK, gaining a greater understanding of the UK and its people and culture (especially off-campus) and, to varying extents, developing an emotional bond with the UK.

In the interviews with transnational education alumni, in addition to assessing how positively they viewed their study experience, questioning was designed to learn the extent to which the alumni had developed a greater understanding of the UK or any

linkage with it, and whether these had led to an affinity or emotional attachment to the UK. This aimed to reveal whether their activities and circumstances would enable such an attachment to contribute to the soft power influence of the UK.

The first of these requirements – how positively they viewed their overall study experience – has been described in relation to how it underpinned recommendations to others to undertake similar study which could lead to additional education exports. In short, many transnational interviewees had broadly positive views, although these were not as highly positive as those of international alumni, nor held as universally.

Around one third of the interviewees reported that, as a result of their programme, they knew more about the UK than they had before and that they had gained at least some different understanding about it. However, the majority said that they had learned little about the UK (other than in some cases particular specialist issues through reading their textbooks).

Equally, a similar proportion (around one third) displayed some affinity or attachment to the UK, although rarely could it be described as a strong emotional bond. A number did display what could be seen as ‘ambassadorial’ views:

T20 (LLB, partnership, Pakistan) was quite negative about her study environment but positive about the course and its impact, helping her to understand UK culture: *“The British have done a remarkable job in Pakistan; if it hadn’t been for the British we wouldn’t have a legal set up here. The world makes more sense.”*

T22 (BSc, partnership, Spain) had previously only experienced Britons on holiday on the Spanish coast, on which basis she viewed them with some disdain. However, her course transformed her view, and she said the UK was now part of her everyday life. She loved British culture – authors, fashion designer and music – *“it is deeply part of my essence, I can’t explain more clearly.”* She had visited the UK several times since and was applying for work in the UK.

T40 (BSc, partnership, Turkey) claimed she loved British people because *“they love discipline and they love their rules and are predictable.”* She had visited London several times, where she felt safe and noted that she could wear whatever she liked.

T46 (LLB, distance learning, Peru) had been emotionally linked to the UK since childhood having been to a British school in South America. Her course had confirmed her views that *“The British have a serious approach to university education”* and she said she respected the UK for its *“organisation, methodology, openness and less hierarchy.”* She claimed to love the UK and had visited three times.

T80 (BSc, partnership, Uzbekistan) wanted both to hold onto his heritage but at the same time was full of admiration for the west and the UK in particular: *“Studying at [partner university] gave me faith that not everything can be bought or extorted from someone. I went by the truthful path, not bribe, cheat or avoid something but face it head on.”*

T88 (BA, partnership, Uzbekistan) felt he had built views during his time at the partner university: *“I would say one word – justice. There might be different opinions or views but there is justice. Be true to yourself.”*

T105 (BA, branch campus, China) had travelled to the UK as a result of her programme and was in the UK at the time of the Chinese earthquake. She went out collecting for donations on the street and was struck by the generosity of the British.

T109 (BA, branch campus, China) was one of only two interviewees who had spent a year at the UK university as part of her programme (such graduates had not been targeted), and she had subsequently studied a Masters in London. She felt that many Chinese students should go to the UK for a year, *“not for the course or the curriculum but to see the outside world and a different culture.”* She said that the branch campus felt like her second home and now the UK her third; she liked many things about the UK including *“the people, the healthy environment, the culture”*.

Almost all these quoted cases were amongst the minority who had actually visited the UK since their programme, so their positive inclination towards the UK may have developed or been enhanced during that physical presence in the UK. As another alumna in this group put it:

T24 (MSc, distance learning, France): *“I feel good about the UK but can’t say more than that – I didn’t live there and I didn’t get to know any UK students.”*

The remaining two thirds did not report such feelings of attachment. When probed in more detail, perhaps 1 in 10 of the interviewees seemed to have developed a significant understanding of the UK during their programme, which they could now articulate in a coherent way.

It is also interesting that most of these cases with some positive affinity for the UK (including some who had not visited physically) were from a restricted range of institutions and programme types, particularly branch campus-type environments where there was long-term presence of UK staff in senior positions. It is perhaps not surprising that these environments, being more similar to a UK campus, were the more likely to foster the students’ appreciation of UK values, and the presence of UK staff may well have been critical in this.

Some of the alumni also expressed aspirations to develop their country, in which case these positive views could result in long-term impact for the UK:

T80 (BSc, partnership, Uzbekistan): *“It is only 20 years since Uzbekistan entered a market economy and still business has lots to develop in terms of moral responsibility to the environment and to society as opposed to profit.”*

T82 (BSc, partnership, Uzbekistan) commented on her fellow students: *“They were the most amazing people. The most talented of Uzbekistani youth that want to stay here and help the country to develop. In 10 years I am sure that I am going to see 90% of them in top positions helping the development of the country.”*

T88 (BA, partnership, Uzbekistan) saw his time working for a multinational as an opportunity to see first-hand how business should be conducted: *“From the bottom of my heart I want to do something important for my country.”*

The potential impact of these alumni, and certain others who were in positions of growing influence, in relation to societal development or capacity-building in their home country will be seen in the next section.

The evidence from these interviewees suggests that in most cases transnational education programmes are less powerful than study involving mobility to the UK in terms of developing a strong understanding of the UK and/or the potential for participants to develop strong emotional ties to it. Nonetheless, a few of the alumni could be said to be strong ambassadors for the UK, and/or appeared to be on career trajectories which would lead them to positions of strong influence in developing their country and embedding UK values or links when they did so. However, this was a much smaller proportion than appears to be the case through study mobility to the UK, which in some cases is funded through Commonwealth or Chevening scholarships which aim specifically to develop these types of outcome.

The evidence suggests that physical presence in the UK plays a major part in developing emotional ties and ambassadorial attitudes. Study of a UK qualification wholly outside the UK can develop these outcomes to some extent but to do so appears to require particular study circumstances. It is likely that transnational education programmes which incorporate a period of study in the UK will develop these attitudes more strongly.



## Benefits to participants' countries of origin

### Economic and workforce benefits

The personal employment- and career-related outcomes reported by the alumni suggested that the majority of interviewees had entered their labour force or progressed to further study relatively soon after completing their transnational programme. In many cases, they continued or enhanced their existing employment as they were already working. Although a proportion moved to another country in doing so, particularly amongst those who undertook further study, the majority remained in their country of origin (which was also the country in which they had studied). In this respect they appeared in general to be less mobile, in terms of the global employment market, than those who study their degree overseas.

Amongst the few examples of interviewees who had studied their transnational programme outside their home country, continued mobility seemed to be common, and several were now in a third country, which was neither their homeland nor the country of study.

By inference, for alumni who had studied in their country of origin (i.e. the majority), there was presumably economic benefit for their countries of origin in that these graduates mostly made successful transitions into the workforce and to relatively high quality and highly skilled employment. Others, who had already been employed, progressed to higher job levels or were now qualified to do so. The broad benefits attributed to nations in having a graduate-level workforce, including their economic output but also personal contributions to tax revenues and societal gains, presumably apply to these countries on the basis of their graduates from UK transnational programmes.

Where alumni had studied in a different country (including at international hubs providing transnational programmes), relatively few had they stayed in that country for long after their programme. This suggests that the prime benefit to these study countries is the direct economic benefit of fees to the local institution and related expenditure during the presence of the student, as opposed to any benefit of skilled inward migration.

### Capacity building

A benefit to the nations offering UK transnational programmes can be development of their own education systems. Where a local partner is itself a higher education institution, introduction of a programme in partnership with a UK university increases the range of provision, and where there is involvement of UK staff in setting this up and/or delivering it, some upskilling of the institutional workforce is likely to occur.

There was some evidence from the interviews to support this hypothesis, on the basis that:

- UK (and in some cases other international) staff appeared to have been quite heavily involved in the start-up phase and/or first year of many partnership

programmes, whereas there tended to be less involvement of UK staff as the partnership matured over time;

- Overall, the vast majority of delivery of lectures and programme teaching was reported to be by local staff.

In section 5.2.3, a potential benefit for the UK was identified in terms of building the UK's influence during capacity building, where an international graduate returns to a developing country and plays an influential or direct role in its development. This situation was considered to be a distinct impact for the student's country of origin in our work with international alumni (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). A significant number of the alumni in that research had studied programmes in health, science, engineering and other areas that skilled them to undertake high-level roles in the development of their country, and many were also fired emotionally by their UK study experience to want to play a significant role in the development of their country. As noted, a few transnational education interviewees reported similarly that they had undertaken programmes equipping them to enter such roles, and/or that they had personal ambitions to support the development of their country, although this was not the majority based on this particular sample.

There were a number of examples of interviewees who were intent on contributing to the development of their country, in addition to the three examples (T80, T82, T88) quoted in section 5.2.3 above.

T20 (LLB, partnership, Pakistan) had become a member of the Pakistan Youth Parliament, sponsored by the Danish Embassy, whose representatives from all over the country met monthly and sent reports with their views on policy issues to Pakistan's parliament.

T30 (MSc, distance learning, Cameroon) had studied a public health Masters with a key London institution and was working with diseases such as malaria and onchocerciasis. As a result of her programme, she was taking on a more senior role in health care, including leading other people.

T37 (MSc, distance learning, Zambia) had completed her Masters in sustainable development funded through a Commonwealth Scholarship. Her interest had become projects improving the life chances of children, young people and women, and she was working on a project to increase access to safe drinking water and sanitation in urban areas. She and her husband had also set up lodges on their farm for young girls in order that they could go to school and themselves gain the opportunity for education.

T72 (MSc, branch campus, Australia) had taken a Masters on resource management funded through an Australian award, following five years working with environmental conservation. She had been offered a good job with a leading energy company based in Australia, but returned to her native Indonesia. Temporarily working for the UNHCR with refugees, she had plans to set up a new NGO in the form of a floating library to take education "out" to less developed areas, and to try to have it funded by the energy companies she had encountered during her degree programme.

In the 2013 study with international alumni, we identified a subset of interviewees who involved in capacity-building and developing their country but also delivered 'multiplier effects' (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). The most prominent were 'ambassadorial' alumni who had returned to their home country to a role in education, where they transmitted positive views of the UK and related values to many others by embedding them in their educational practice. These could also, in a few instances, be seen amongst the transnational education interviewees:

T1 (MEd, supported distance learning, Singapore) was a headteacher running her own early childhood school but developed her interest in special needs through her Masters programme. She had subsequently been appointed as a part-time lecturer on special needs in early childhood at a local university. Thus her programme enabled her not only to develop practice in her own school but to mentor and support the next generation of educators and thereby impact the lives of hundreds of children.

T66 (PGCE, partnership, Oman) was working as a lecturer in a top private institute in Oman, which put many of its teaching staff through this programme. She reported that their teaching had been transformed and that this had a major impact on their students: "*It has created a new environment – it sets the stage for the students to take responsibility for their own learning. That makes them a different person when they go for a job, they are more responsible, they can take on challenges.*"

From the evidence available it therefore seems clear that a number of the benefits that have been identified for countries of origin of students undertaking higher education overseas, can also arise where they undertake transnational programmes, but seemingly to a lesser extent.

## Chapter 5 Insights into study experiences

This chapter summarises findings from the interviews with alumni which relate to their motivation for studying a UK transnational education programme, study experience and reflections upon it, and other topics of interest.

### Motivations – why undertake UK transnational education?

Previous work has suggested that there are both personal and professional purposes in students' motivations for transnational education (Hoare, 2012; Robertson et al., 2011). McNamara and Knight (2014) also note that many transnational education students are older than 'traditional' HE entrants and are more likely to have employment experience, and that career development is their main motivation for undertaking a transnational programme.

In the interviews, alumni were questioned about their personal circumstances prior to undertaking their transnational education programme, why they had chosen to study this form of higher education, and why they selected the particular course or programme associated with the UK. Almost all the interviewees related broadly career-related motivations for undertaking a higher education programme. Unsurprisingly, this varied somewhat with the nature of the participant and their career trajectory and also the nature of the programme.

Just over half of the alumni were interviewed in relation to a UK first degree programme. Amongst these, particularly those from mid-economic level and developing countries, many interviewees reported rather general assumptions that higher education would lead them to a better job and generally a better life than had been the case for their parents. The majority of these interviewees had progressed to their transnational programme direct from school-level study, although a handful had undertaken a local tertiary qualification already but sought the perceived greater recognition and progression of an overseas qualification. A further small but significant number reported that they had dropped out of a local tertiary programme. A significant minority of the interviewees, particularly but not exclusively those studying at branch campuses, had undertaken a qualifying or foundation year programme in order to progress to the degree course.

Around two thirds of those who had studied a postgraduate transnational programme had done so while employed. Although their motivations were in all cases career-related, the majority cited a somewhat general rationale for overall career progression or greater credibility, rather than the necessity of a specific qualification in order to enter a particular job. Relatively few sought the qualification in order to make specific progress in their firm or career, although in a very few cases this had happened and had been funded by their employer. Equally, relatively few appeared to be undertaking the study in order to make a specific change in career sector. It could be argued that these rationales are more to do with general employability than gaining more specific employment outcomes.

Thus, in many cases, they saw postgraduate study as a medium- or long-term investment towards an enhanced career through higher level employment

(sometimes in their existing company) or a new direction. Some recognised that such a 'payback' could be quite a long time distant, in some cases due to current limitations of the local labour market (such as in Greece or Portugal).

T94, (MBA, partnership in Russia), had been working in executive administration roles and wanted to move 'up' to a position of more influence in the business. *"I wanted to change my life."*

T15 (MSc, distance learning, Portugal) wanted a professional qualification that showed *"you have the right to be working in this area."*

T39 (BSc, distance learning, USA) cited his motive was *"just to have a degree... but I suppose if I wanted to go to law school it could be handy."*

Just two interviewees, from North America, stated no career-related ambitions at all, seeking simply to pursue academic study for more personal or intellectual reasons.

## Why study through transnational education?

Three main issues were cited by graduates in their decision to pursue a course as a transnational education programme:

- Perceived prestige or value;
- Cost;
- 'Fit' with their circumstances.

All interviewees had made their choice based on one or more of these reasons, but the balance between them varied strongly.

Although by no means all the alumni articulated this, there was a common view that a qualification from an overseas institution (an "international degree", as they tended to call it) carried more weight or prestige than one obtained through a local university. There were variations in their perceptions of relative prestige, however, and some had much clearer understanding (or at least a more nuanced perception) than others. For example, while some felt that any degree from an overseas university was more prestigious than one from a local university, many perceived that studying it through a transnational programme was less prestigious than attending the overseas institution physically. However, this was not always the case, and some felt the institution was the only critical issue.

T107 (BA, branch campus in China): *"It's the same qualification as you would get in the UK – it's the same certificate."*

T98 (BEng, branch campus, UAE): *"It doesn't say Dubai on the certificate."*

T106 (MA, branch campus, China): *"[My first degree] university is not well-known and no-one would expect a lot from a student who graduated from that university."*

In a few cases, interviewees felt that certain local universities (for example, private as opposed to public) could offer equivalent prestige to an overseas degree studied transnationally.

However, the majority of those who expressed an opinion considered that the value (to employers, and societally) of an overseas qualification studied through a transnational programme fell between the value of international study at an overseas university and that of studying a local degree at home. This matches the concept of a 'hierarchy' found by Sin (2013) in relation specifically to perceptions in Malaysia, where study in the UK, US or Australia was perceived to be at the top, followed successively by study in other 'advanced countries', then UK transnational study, other forms of international provision available locally in Malaysia, and Malaysian public education at the bottom. However, other research suggests that there are regional variations in perceived hierarchies of this type.

Another consideration is how these factors can evolve over time. In the Malaysian example, transnational provision at undergraduate level had grown because there was only a limited range of local university study options for many Malaysians. However, recent growth of private and quality-assured local universities in the country now offers many new opportunities. How this impacts on transnational education provision there is yet to be researched.

Much the same position seemed to occur in relation to cost, with interviewees perceiving that the cost of studying a transnational programme was considerably lower than that of studying overseas, but generally more expensive than studying a local degree. A few graduates felt that they could obtain an overseas qualification through a transnational programme for about the same cost as going to a prestigious private institution locally, either of which would be much more costly than studying at a local public university.

T91 (MSc, partnership, Malaysia): *"The cost of the course was 28,000, that's three times the cost at a local public university but similar to that at [a private university]."*

T95 (MBA, partnership, Greece): *"If I had the chance to, I would advise to study overseas. But overseas study was just too expensive, even if it was more prestigious."*

T77 (BA, partnership, Hong Kong): *"I took it up because it was much cheaper than other universities. It was efficient too, it didn't take too much time."*

There was a minority of alumni for whom cost had not been an issue, who had obtained a scholarship, or were from a wealthy family or, in the case of a few postgraduates, were funded by their employer. However, this was a small subset of the interviewees. It was not always clear why this group of alumni had not studied overseas, as they could have afforded to do so, but in some cases it was due to family preferences to study locally, or because they wished to continue working. It was not possible to obtain sufficient information to ascertain whether their academic attainment could also have been a factor, as it is possible that transnational programmes could have lower entry requirements than international study.

The issues of prestige (or perceived value) and cost seemed to apply roughly equally at undergraduate or postgraduate level. However, there was much more variation between these two groups in relation to the importance of the potential convenience or logistical 'fit' of transnational education to their personal circumstances.

As stated, most of the alumni interviewed in relation to a postgraduate course had been working since their first degree, in a very wide variety of occupations. For most of them, the mode of their postgraduate study was critical as they needed to continue working and earning while they studied. In some cases they had a family and home to support. While several stated that study overseas would be an ideal, they simply could not afford or accommodate that in their lives. Study of a part-time transnational programme was the only realistic way that they could achieve an overseas qualification, even if they accepted that the eventual qualification and experience might not be valued as highly by employers as "genuine" international study.

T96 (MSc, partnership, Greece) reported that his choice was entirely pragmatic, driven by the need to keep working full-time in order to pay the fees for his course.

T76 (BA, partnership, Singapore): *"I chose [UK institution] because the time involved was more manageable. I need to manage both work and study."*

For the few who had studied a postgraduate course funded by their employer, the ability to continue working for the company and study part-time was key to obtaining the employer's agreement. They did not appear to have been undertaking what in the UK would be recognised as formal work-based learning.

Amongst those who were interviewed in relation to an undergraduate programme, some were employed and stated similar rationales to the postgraduates. However, amongst the remainder who were only studying and not employed, a few alumni related different practical rationales for study locally of an overseas qualification. In the case of a few female interviewees, their family had not allowed them to travel overseas to study, believing it safer to study locally (such as continuing to live at home), while for a few others this appeared to have been their personal choice (i.e. not wishing to "leave").

T98 (BEng, branch campus, UAE): *"My parents would not allow me to travel abroad, so study in Dubai was an opportunity to get an international degree which is rated higher than locally or in India."*

It has been noted that there were also a few cases of the opposite situation, where the UK transnational programme had been studied overseas (i.e. 'third country' students, not in their country of origin or in a neighbouring country), but these were rare amongst the interviewees.

Thus, the most commonly held view was that studying a transnational programme was a highly pragmatic choice, offering the prospect of a somewhat more valuable or prestigious qualification at a lower cost than studying abroad and, for many, in a much more practical way that could be fitted into their life. Clearly, the cost and 'fit' circumstances tended to reinforce each other to some extent.

There was also limited evidence that some alumni perceived that the academic requirements for a UK transnational education qualification were less onerous than for international study, which could be another element to the potential ‘fit’ of programme to student. It was not possible in the research to obtain rigorous information about the prior academic attainment of interviewees.

## Why select a UK programme?

As described, there had been a broad acceptance by alumni and their families during their decision-making that most international qualifications would be perceived of higher value than most local ones, which formed a key part of the rationale for choosing to study a transnational programme. However, there was also the question of why they chose a programme specifically with a UK university.

A major consideration, although not always immediately articulated, for those whose first language was not English was that they had wanted to improve their English language skills, believing that this would assist generally in their career. However, while that might rule out certain provider nations, this would not be a distinguishing issue between some of the major providing nations (UK, USA, Australia).

Of those who articulated a view that an overseas (“international”) qualification was more valuable than a local one, which was the majority, there was relatively common understanding that the UK was a major and respected provider of higher education for overseas students. In most cases this seemed to be held as a rather general view, rather than on the basis of any particular evidence, although in some cases this could be seen as a post-colonial effect. Other countries that had been considered as potential “quality” providers included the USA (most commonly), Australia and, in a very few cases, Germany.

There seemed simply to be a broad view that UK higher education (and by inference a UK institution) was of high quality, although rarely any articulation of why it held this esteem, i.e. that its pedagogy was distinct, or for any other reason. Of the very few that did suggest that a UK course might have a distinct learning style, it was not certain that they had understood this at the time of application and very few related it as a rationale. There were a number of examples, from graduates of Commonwealth countries particularly, where the UK was for them the “obvious” provider because the individual already had UK-based secondary qualifications (such as A-levels), so there was an established familiarity with UK education. The proportion with a parent who had studied in the UK was very low (and much lower than had been the case for international alumni, Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013).

A few alumni had applied to US or Australian transnational programmes as well as to UK programmes, although this seemed to be relatively rare. One or two mentioned that they thought the entry requirements for their particular UK programme had been lower than for a comparable US programme, and this steered their choice.

It should be noted that the extent to which alumni had researched their choice of programme, i.e. the basis on which they made their decision, varied widely. Relatively few reported that they had undertaken what might be regarded as substantial research, and many had made their decision based on the experience of



a single relative or acquaintance. Several had come across a suitable course somewhat serendipitously, whether in a web search or through some other information-finding mechanism.

In a significant number of cases, perhaps the majority, it seems that they had not at that time had much or any understanding of different UK institutions that might offer programmes, or their respective reputations.

T67 (BSc, partnership, Oman): *“When we chose [local college], we chose University of [ ] by default, because it is [the college’s] partner university.”*

T81 (MSc, partnership, Uzbekistan): *“Honestly speaking, I didn’t have many options. At that time there were only two international universities.”*

T105 (BA, branch campus, China): *“I wanted to go to a famous university, I checked it on the internet and I think it is very famous in the world. At that time I did not know what the difference was between majors.”*

The overall impression gained was that, in most cases, the alumni either did not have many choices open to them or were not aware that they did (or at least choices that satisfied their criteria in relation to cost and fit). The extent to which this was genuinely the case, or was a function of a lack of research or knowledge by them, is unclear. However, it contributes to a view either that the market for transnational programmes may not have been very diverse in some cases when they were making choices, or at least that was how they had experienced it. There was also some evidence to suggest that the perceived value of a programme might be as much or more about the provider than the curriculum.

## Study experiences

A number of detailed questions were asked of interviewees about their transnational education programme, partly to obtain perspectives on their experiences as students but also simply to understand the delivery model of their programme. This revealed a very wide range of reported local practice, between different programmes as well as delivery models. The model was not always clear from the reported experiences of the interviewee, but could usually be verified using a search for information about their programme online (provided that it still existed, which was not always the case). This demonstrates the contention that there is effectively a continuum between certain different delivery models (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). In particular, it was sometimes impossible to distinguish supported distance learning from other partnership delivery models, and many more graduates believed that they had studied at an international branch campus than was considered to be the case either from currently accepted definitions or the reporting of activity by institutions to HESA. Experiences are reported here on the basis of only very broad models of programme delivery, i.e. distance learning, international branch campus and collaborative provision.

## Distance learning

Interviews were carried out with twelve alumni who had undertaken unsupported distance learning programmes. These were distinguishable as a group, whereas it was not clear whether some other alumni had studied a supported distance learning programme or a collaborative locally-delivered programme with a blend of learning. A number of the distance learning alumni had undertaken their programme as much as 10 years ago, when the potential online support would have been much less sophisticated than can be the case now.

Although there was evidence that some of those who had studied more recently had benefited from a greater range of interactive online study materials, than those who had studied earlier, this was not always the case. It should, however, be noted that despite this wide range of experience in relation to the amount of interactivity in their study format, the alumni were all very positive about the content of the materials and the course.

T8 (MSc, Nigeria) used a combination of the UK university's virtual learning environment (VLE) and textbooks provided, with a different tutor being provided for each module, with whom he engaged through the VLE. He was also in contact with fellow students through the VLE.

T30 (MSc, Cameroon): *"The materials were of high quality and I had everything needed for the course. There were interactions online – we had illuminating live chats, web boards, web conferences, and were in permanent contact with the school thanks to the Student Support Team."*

T15 (MSc, Portugal): *"It was all written documentation on a platform – it's read, read, read and research. The only opportunity for interaction was a platform where you could be asked questions as well as to ask them, like a Facebook page. You have to be very disciplined to complete this kind of course."* On the other hand he noted that his assignments had been returned with very specific comments and felt *"they treated you as a mature student who knew what you were doing."*

T28 (LLB, Jamaica): *"There was no interactive but all the information I needed was on a very good website and a CD resource."*

Some of the more recent graduates did speak of being able to "observe" UK lectures online, in addition to receiving text material and related resources common to all these programmes. Although these appeared to be cases of students watching a recorded video file rather than accessing a streamed 'live' lecture simultaneously with others, some did perceive it to enhance their experience:

T16 (MSc, Nigeria): *"The course was one of the best I ever done because the programme was well prepared. I had all of the materials I needed, including videoed lectures which felt like the professor was talking to you. It felt like I was in the classroom."*

Many of these alumni reported that they had been offered the opportunity to attend short residential elements of their programme in the UK (such as a summer school),

but few had taken them up, presumably because they were optional and at extra cost.

What was common to all the alumni who had been unsupported distance learners was that they believed the content of their programmes had been very strong, and many felt that this up-to-date technical knowledge underpinned the career impact that they attributed to their programme as well as the qualification itself. While their reporting of the actual study experience was somewhat more variable, they universally reported respect for the quality of the course content.

Some further reporting of online access to resources is covered in a later section, but much of the remainder of this chapter is based on interviews with alumni who had experienced collaborative or branch campus programmes, as they could report a wider range of experiences than was the case for unsupported distance learners.

## **Partnership and branch campus programmes**

The majority of the interviews were with alumni who had undertaken programmes delivered by or through a local institution or partner, or at least supported by it. The nature of the study environment, teaching, support and physical facilities varied greatly, aspects of which are described in the sections that follow.

Although two small groups of the interviewees had studied programmes at international branch campuses of UK universities, their study experiences are described here together with those who studied through collaborative or partnership programmes. This is largely because the range of their experiences was clearly a continuum, although differences are highlighted where they are distinct. The study location for one group of alumni, which had the words “International University” in its title, bore many of the hallmarks of an international branch campus as far as the experiences of its students were concerned, although its UK institution reports its programmes to HESA as collaborative provision.

## **Pattern and mode of study**

The alumni reported a wide range of patterns of study, which in some cases were related to the level of the programme. Relatively few reported that they had studied full-time, and these tended to have been on undergraduate programmes, although it was not always clear whether the programme had been advertised as full-time or part-time. Postgraduate courses were mostly undertaken part-time, with teaching organised during evenings, weekends and/or more intensive blocks of days (or a combination of these), and the part-time nature of these models had in many cases been crucial for the interviewees’ participation (in order that they could continue to work and earn sufficient income to pay the course fees). It was clear that for many of the postgraduates, their activity at the time would be described as ‘full-time employment and part-time study’ although none of them appeared to have been undertaking a work-based learning programme that was formally integrated with their job. For some others, the situation would be best described as full-time work and full-time study.

T95 (MBA, partnership, Greece): *“Classes were held on alternating weekends, on Friday evening and all day Saturday.”*

T0 (BA, partnership, Czech Republic): *“It was called a full-time course but the lectures were in blocks every second weekend. They were in [nearby] university which was empty at the weekends, taught by its faculty, almost entirely in Czech.”* Interestingly, this student did not attend the lectures herself but relied on a fellow student’s notes, and travelled to the university only to take the modular exams.

T71 (MSc, branch campus, Australia): *“I didn’t like the way the programme was delivered [one module per month]. The programme was really designed for part-time students and all of the full-time students were international and there was nothing for us to do outside of classes.”*

The evidence seemed to confirm previous observations that conventional UK terms to describe mode of study apply less well to overseas study (Drew et al., 2008), and McNamara and Knight’s view (2014) that many transnational students are working full-time during study.

In almost all cases the interviewees’ programmes had featured blended delivery, with a combination of face-to-face lectures and self-directed learning using online or other resources. Many reported, in addition, some proportion of learning in groups through workshops, group discussions or, more rarely, joint assignments or case studies.

### **Involvement of UK staff in teaching and learning**

A key question in the interviews was to ascertain the nature of the staff delivering the teaching or supporting the programme and, especially, the extent to which UK staff had been involved (as this might be expected to be a feature of UK provision of transnational education).

Only three groups of alumni reported that UK academic staff had been present throughout their programme, two of which were from international branch campuses of UK universities (and the other a partnership which functioned like a branch campus). There were also rare instances of a ‘flying faculty’ approach, where academic staff from the UK institution attended the partner institution for relatively short periods in order to deliver certain parts of the programme:

T91 (MSc, partnership, Malaysia): *“It was taught in intensive semesters of two weeks, so you could fit it around work. All the teaching was by [UK university] staff who came out for the teaching blocks.”*

The remainder of the alumni were roughly evenly split between those that reported limited or occasional physical presence of staff from the UK institution and those that reported none at all (at least that they were aware of). In several of the former cases the UK staff were reported to have been present purely for quality assurance purposes or at graduation, which could be a point of some frustration for some (who

had felt that their educational experience would have been better if there had been more direct involvement of UK teaching staff).

What is perhaps more important is the extent to which teaching delivery by UK staff had been expected by the students when they selected their programme or not and how this affected their perceptions of the quality of the programme. Although the majority did seem to have had some understanding that UK staff might not be widely involved, there was a relatively common feeling of disappointment at the low level of direct involvement of UK staff. While some alumni reported that local lecturers had been good – and in some cases this was crucial because the teaching was in their local language, not in English – there was a significant minority of cases where perceptions were that the standard of teaching by local staff had been poor.

T3 (MBA, partnership, Canada) reported that no UK lecturer visited the local institution during her programme and that she made no visit to the UK, although the UK institution did offer free attendance at its UK lectures if you could visit. On the other hand, the Dean [of the UK institution] attended the graduation ceremony which she felt made her degree “*feel more valuable.*”

T17 (LLB, partnership, Sri Lanka) noted that the Vice-Chancellor had attended their graduation ceremony. There was also an annual 1-day “Q&A day” with a visiting representative from the UK, which she had found useful.

T80 (BSc, partnership, Uzbekistan): “*Unfortunately, there were not many teachers from the UK, the majority were local. A top level visitor from [UK university] came for our graduation. I was so nervous I just took my degree and ran away.*”

T74 (BA, partnership, Sri Lanka): “*It would have been better if we had a mixture of local and foreigners [as] lecturers, including some from the UK. If I am going to a university which is affiliated to an international university, it is only right that [there] are lecturers from that university.*”

T95 (MBA, partnership, Greece): “*[Classes were] taught entirely in Greek by lecturers at other Greek universities. The books and course notes were in English.*”

T70 (BA, partnership, Malaysia): “*A representative from [UK university] visited once a year – they sat in lectures to observe. They did not really talk to the students. The lecturers did not translate the theory into practical application because none of them had been in business and they didn’t understand it.*” It should be noted that this was from one of the most negative interviews in the sample who was particularly disillusioned.

On the other hand there were several instances where alumni reported that a variety of international academic staff were involved, particularly on postgraduate STEM and business courses, and this seemed to be seen as a strength (i.e. as strong or better than if UK staff delivered it all). In other cases the alumni could distinguish between local staff who had themselves studied abroad and those who had not, finding the former to be much stronger.

A number of alumni reported that the proportion of teaching by UK academics had diminished as they progressed through their programme (where it spanned several years). This seemed to reflect a pattern where UK academic staff would directly deliver parts of the collaborative programme in its first year of operation, but gave way to local staff delivery as the partnership matured. The extent to which this was a deliberate strategy (i.e. to train up the local partner) was unclear, but the practice could lead to a negative perception by these alumni. This again reflects their assumption that delivery by UK staff was somehow better than by local staff, and/or could be a 'right' of their participation in a UK programme.

### **A distinctive UK pedagogy?**

In the previous study of international alumni who had studied in the UK, a substantial proportion of interviewees reported that they had selected the UK as a destination for study at least partly on the basis of their perception of a distinctive 'UK style' of education, and the majority claimed to have experienced it (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). This was described as an approach where students were encouraged – or required – to take responsibility for their own learning, with the expectation that they would need to research and find out things for themselves, and were also invited to challenge their lecturers and provide their own ideas. Some referred to it as “learning to learn”. For many it was very distinct from their experience of more directive learning styles (which some called spoon-feeding) where teachers simply imparted knowledge and learners received it.

In this project we sought to establish the extent to which transnational education alumni believed they had encountered a distinctive UK style of pedagogy (although few seemed to have cited it as an expectation in their selection of a UK programme). Sin (2013) has noted occasional cases where pursuit of a UK transnational programme was a deliberate strategy to create distance from a culture of rote learning and spoon-feeding.

Over two thirds of the alumni interviewed identified that their programme had been taught in a manner that was to some extent different from their experience of local education, in terms of being less directed and more participatory. It should be remembered that many first degree graduates would have had no direct experience of local higher education, so their comparison could have been with their secondary education, or based on the experiences of others. Some who had studied a Masters course (MBA in particular) also felt that it would be taught in a different style from their first degree irrespective of where or how it was studied.

There were instances where some pedagogical distinctiveness was reported within transnational programmes, which some articulated as a positive aspect of their experience:

T6 (BA, partnership, India): *“It felt like being at [UK university] because of the curriculum and the way it was conducted – research-based, team projects, lots of discussion, using software to detect plagiarism. Indian equivalent degrees are completely different.”*

T103 (BA, branch campus, China): *“In Chinese classes we sit and just listen to the teachers and when they ask a question we answer. But in [UK university branch campus] we sit round a long table and any time we want to say anything we raise our hand and the teacher would stop and ask our opinion. The most important thing I learned was how to think. You don’t just listen and accept. You listen, you think, you challenge, and then you accept.”*

T105 (BA, branch campus, China): *“I think that the UK way is better because we can think by ourselves and not just accept what we are told to remember.”*

Although these observations were most prominent amongst a group of Chinese alumni who had studied at an international branch campus, they were also reasonably commonplace – to varying extents – across different regions and modes of delivery. There was some correlation between the extent of involvement of UK staff and the reports of pedagogical distinctiveness, but it did also appear to be present to some extent in some programmes with little or no UK staff involvement.

Conversely, there were a few examples where there had been no visible involvement of UK staff or any apparent ‘UK pedagogy’. These often coincided with negative experiences overall:

T27 (BSc, partnership, Singapore): *“The quality of the lecturers was poor. They didn’t understand the content and their teaching style was eastern – learning by rote.”*

T31 (Diploma, partnership, India) noted that all the course was delivered by local teachers and the occasional visits from UK staff seemed to be only to ensure that diploma students chose to progress to the degree at [UK university]. *“The lecturers were too used to teaching by rote – the lecturers were changed several times because they could not meet the standard.”*

T21 (BSc, partnership, India): *“It was just like going to school. The course was dry, very textbook based, with no project work and no presentations. The lecturers would miss out complete sections because of lack of time. The content was actually good – it was the delivery that was poor.”*

In summary, some UK pedagogical distinctiveness did appear to feature, to varying extents, in many transnational programmes, but unsurprisingly was less prominent than within study physically in the UK. This could potentially raise some questions in relation to the Quality Assurance Agency’s requirement for comparability of study experiences between programmes delivered by UK institutions transnationally and in the UK, although it must be seen in the context of what may be distinctive and different motivations and profile of transnational students. What seemed to be clear, however, was that awareness of this potential pedagogical distinctiveness of UK programmes had not been widespread when programme choices were made and there were few reported instances where it had been an overt motivation for choosing a UK transnational programme.

## Employability development and co-curricular opportunities

Support for the development of employability has been a key strategy for many UK universities in recent years, so it was interesting to investigate the extent to which this was also evident within transnational programmes, at least for those alumni who had graduated from programmes within the last five years or so. As enhanced employability is understood to be an important outcome of the student experience, in principle UK institutions should be providing to transnational students comparable experiences and outcomes to those which would be expected during a similar programme studied in the UK. This particular aspect of the interviews with these transnational alumni has also been reported in depth in parallel (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015).

As has been described, almost every graduate interviewed had career-related motivations for undertaking their degree programme, although many were rather general aspirations rather than specific job-related objectives. To that extent, longer-term enhanced employability, rather than immediate employment outcomes, was perhaps inherent in their aims when they selected their programme.

Beyond this rather generic or inherent employability enhancement, questions were posed in the interviews to try to understand the extent that support for improved employability had been a focus of the programme itself or had been provided as co-curricular support. A range of employability support mechanisms could be identified or inferred from the interviewees' descriptions:

- Embedded or optional modules of content that were either overtly labelled as supporting employability development or would be considered to contribute to employability development (such as those designed to develop transferable skills);
- Availability of support or advice in relation to career learning or job hunting, some of which could be considered as more directly employment-related;
- Availability of extra- or co-curricular opportunities that are generally considered to enhance employability or employment outcomes directly (such as work placements) or indirectly (extra-curricular activity to develop non-academic or transferable skills).

The alumni were also asked the extent to which they believed that employability enhancement had been an identifiable aspect of their programme (at the time that they had undertaken it). The majority of the alumni struggled to understand this question beyond the very generic considerations highlighted in relation to their motivations. Their responses related strongly to the motivations they had stated, i.e. their belief that the main point of taking the course was to improve their career or job chances, and they believed that the technical knowledge gained within the course and especially the qualification itself constituted the potential employability enhancement that they sought.

With further prompting, it was possible to investigate this in a more nuanced way, based on the extent to which the range of mechanisms above could be identified within the graduates' experiences. However, it should be noted immediately that over half of the interviewees reported no experience of any of these activities or support



mechanisms whatsoever. This might have been because they did not exist, but equally because although they were perhaps present the interviewee had not recognised a need to undertake them (which could relate to their profile as a transnational student) and therefore did not take advantage of them.

### **Employability-focused ‘content’ and other curricular learning**

Overall, specific content or learning activity within their programme (or at least that they recognised) that directly addressed employability was rarely reported by the alumni interviewed. However, it was identified regularly by three groups of interviewees, respectively from a major international branch campus, an established partnership which largely resembled a branch campus, and one partnership with a private university.

Most (but not all) of the alumni interviewed from these three institutions reported that within their programme they had taken either curriculum modules which contained content specifically directed towards employability and/or transferable skill development. These appeared to be delivered through classroom learning or through practical workshop approaches or a combination of both.

T80 (BSc, partnership in Uzbekistan) reported that issues relating to employment were integrated into many lectures and that *“this was one of the most useful aspects of the degree”*. There was a compulsory module on organisational behaviour which included behaviour in meetings and interview skills.

T85 (BA, same institution) also reported compulsory modules on personal development, professional communication, negotiation and interview skills, including some role play *“It was very useful.”*

T89 (BA, same institution): *“I think that the UK education system is really good at developing work skills. We did lots of teamwork and business communication. They really help me in my work now.”*

T103 (BA, branch campus in China) keenly reported that the delivery style on his course had encouraged the development of skills, through joint project work, presentations and simulations. *“Before we present our work, we actually had to rate each other’s quality of contribution to the project – before the teachers rated us”*. Course information on the institution’s website states *“This course equips you with a range of skills and knowledge that will be of practical use in your future career. Your international experience will also improve your employability among global corporations”*.

T108 (BA, same branch campus) had taken a credit-bearing module replicating a programme run by the UK university to recognise employability: *“I finished two of the award modules – the first involves a lot of workshops delivered by current employees from the big names – Tesco, PwC, KPMG – and I got to know more information about the companies, what kind of talents they are looking for. The second was about sustainability.”*

T75 (BSc, partnership in Sri Lanka) indicated that his course included group project assignments and visits to companies which they had to evaluate.

There was also a compulsory module in final year covering interview skills and CV writing, as well as provision of help through one-to-one advice from student support staff and presentations from companies.

However, outside these three institutions, only around 1 in 6 of the interviewees mentioned that their programme had included any overt content or learning activity that they understood to have been included to enhance their employability skills (taken to include team-working, communication, leadership or management skills). Amongst these relatively rare examples were:

T6 (BA, partnership in India) indicated that her course included assignments requiring team-working, and short modules on entrepreneurship, self-awareness and self-development. She reflected that she had not fully understood the purpose of these at the time, but now saw the benefit and that she had developed personally, being *“confident, able to express myself, and I feel knowledgeable, empowered and employable.”*

T67 (BSc, partnership, Oman) noted the difference between her siblings who had done local degrees: *“In their studies, they only have to study to get high marks; in my course, we focus on learning and interpersonal skills more.”*

T72 (MSc, branch campus, Australia) reported that she had been offered a variety of employability courses but *“didn’t have time to attend any of them”*.

T19 (BSc, partnership, Ireland) at the time of interview was undertaking a 6-week online “employability course” offered free to any graduate of that UK institution. This had covered issues relating to CV development, writing professional job applications and interview skills, so the content appears to have been strongly focused on tactical skills to support finding employment rather than developing broader employability.

## Co-curricular advice and support

Overall, the alumni interviewed were somewhat more familiar with the concept of careers advice and/or support in finding employment, than they were with any concept of embedded employability development. When asked what in their programme could have helped to develop their employability, several did identify that careers advice or support could be useful when they were seeking employment.

However, the number reporting that they had either been offered such support within their local institution, or knew that they had access to it, was surprisingly small, being around one third of all interviewees. To some extent this could reflect that many of those who had studied postgraduate programmes were already in employment, so they may not have had much interest in such support. However, relatively few of those who had studied as undergraduates reported its presence either.

Many of the interviewees who had studied at the three institutions highlighted in relation to providing embedded or curricular employability support also reported that they knew that co-curricular careers advice or support was available:

T74 (BA, partnership in Sri Lanka) reported that the local institution's 'student services' team offered CV support and information about careers opportunities, but it was up to student discretion and he personally had chosen not to use them.

T86 (BSc, partnership in Uzbekistan) reported that there had been a career development office which had tried to host job fairs but these were unsuccessful as they were under-supported by employers.

Fellow alumna T82 (BSc), who graduated several years later, also suggested that this was case, laying the blame with the employers who expected graduates to approach them and did not tend to be open in their recruitment.

Several of the alumni of the international campus in China reported the presence of a 'university careers service' – and were conspicuously the only ones to use this terminology.

T103 (BA): *"The university careers service was very helpful offering different workshops for students to learn about different careers. And they help students to write proper resumes and learn basic career habits. There was also the option of one-to-one guidance and help. Some of my classmates found really nice internships and jobs from the vacancies posted."*

T107 (BA, same branch campus) was an international student and saw that the careers service sent e-mails about internships and jobs but these were only useful for local students as his visa did not allow him to work after his course. He noted that employers regularly came onto campus and students visited employer premises, and that *"many Chinese students found their jobs through the [university] job fair and other careers events."*

It should be stressed that not all its interviewees mentioned the presence of this branch campus's careers service, while one suggested *"The careers service was not very good at that time but it has improved now."* However, it was clear that careers

support at this institution was modelled on provision at its UK campus, and the observation that not all the students actually made use of the service mirrors the UK campus situation.

Beyond these three institutions, co-curricular careers advice or support services seemed to be as rare as embedded employability (in the form of embedded transferable skills development), with only a handful of interviewees reporting the presence of such a service or office.

One of the few such graduates, T98 (BEng, branch campus, Dubai) had been in the first intake of students at the branch campus at which time there had been no careers adviser, but thought one had subsequently been appointed. On the other hand there was a careers fair in her final year attended by large international firms.

It is worth reflecting that the nature of much careers advice or guidance is such that it needs to be offered on a personalised basis, and in its local context. This requires it to be provided by the local partner (unless the UK institution employs staff with local knowledge at its branch campus). It is tempting to infer from the interviews that where this support was left to the partner institution, it was mostly not being provided, with a few exceptions where the local partner was itself a university or similar institution.

There were rare instances where employers were reported to have visited the local partner institution's campus or a branch campus. The examples were also only reported by those studying STEM subjects (including Masters programmes) and especially MBA courses. It was unclear if the involvement of employers resulted from the operation of a careers service, albeit latent to the student.

There were also a handful of examples where an interviewee reported that they had received contact from employers via their UK alumni network, and again these were mainly MBAs.

Broadly, evidence from the interviews suggests that employability enhancement strategies and opportunities were much less developed within the transnational programmes undertaken by the interviewees, than is the case in recent UK provision, whether in the form of embedded, co-curricular or extra-curricular activity. However, these potential benefits of a higher education programme may not be as important to many transnational students due to their profile (i.e. many are already employed) and somewhat differing motivations. Alternatively, or additionally, it could reflect a different conceptualisation by the local partner (compared with current UK institutional strategies) of employability development. It could also be the case that employability strategies have been introduced into programmes since some of these alumni undertook their programmes.

## **Quality of teaching and learning facilities**

Generally speaking, the quality of the physical environment of the local partner institution was reported by most of the alumni interviewed as at least adequate and in some cases highly praised in contrast with perceptions of local public universities.

A range of environments was reported, which reflected the wide range of local partners involved in delivery, including some very positive experiences:

T72 (MSc, branch campus, Australia): *“The campus is very luxurious, very expensive, very posh. Everyone looks like an executive.”*

T75 (BSc, partnership, Sri Lanka): *“[Partner institute] is very good”* and he commented that it provided a rich campus life.

T101 (MA, international branch campus, China): *“It is not common to have air conditioning in every room and carpet on the floor.”*

T103 (BA, branch campus, China): *“We have a lot of grass and our university raised a lot of ducks – this made me feel that it was different.”*

Those who had studied at international branch campuses and similar partner institutions universally commented positively on the facilities. A further group who were very positive were those who had studied at partner colleges located within international education or knowledge hub developments in the Middle East.

On the other hand, not all were so complementary, including:

T17 (LLB, partnership, Sri Lanka): *“The ‘campus’ was a basic building, next door to a school. It felt like a school – there was no campus experience. It was all about work.”*

T54 (BSc, partnership, Pakistan): *“It was a private college in one building, a small private college with limited facilities”.*

T78 (BA, partnership, Hong Kong): *“It was a commercial building, not a campus.”*

One particular issue of interest was the extent to which transnational education students had had access to their respective UK institution’s virtual learning environment (VLE) or online library, as this could potentially be one element of their programme that matched the experience of study physically at the UK campus. This issue was perhaps most prominent for those who had studied through distance learning, but was also mentioned by many others, not least because blended learning – including self-study – was widespread in most programmes.

The proportion of interviewees who stated that they had had online access to their UK institution’s library, to support the independent study element of their programme, was around half. For distance learners this might be expected to be universal, although from the sample of alumni interviewed this did not seem to have been the case, some reporting that they had received access to a discrete course website containing “all” the materials that they would need.

The proportion who specifically mentioned a virtual learning environment (when prompted) was far smaller, in fact fewer than 1 in 10 of the interviewees. However, those who did have access (or at least had known that they had) to such learning

environments found them very valuable as a repository of resources but also as a mechanism to interact with their UK tutor or others. Again, those studying at international branch campuses and knowledge hubs were more likely to report this type of support for their study.

Although this study engaged only a sample of alumni, some of whom had graduated before online learning environments were commonplace, it was perhaps surprising how few alumni reported having access to these facilities, which would seem to be tailor-made to improve the learning experience on transnational programmes and bring it more closely in line with experiences of study in the UK. This could be worthy of further research.

## Perceptions of overall quality

The extent to which the alumni reported that they had recommended their programme to others has been covered in considering this as a potential benefit to institutions. Such recommendations will presumably reflect the alumni's perceptions of whether, overall, they had had a positive study experience.

Overall, across the group of interviews, about two thirds reported that they felt very positive or quite positive about their study experience, although the proportion who were very positive was the smaller part of this (about one fifth of all interviewees). Most of the remaining third reported somewhat neutrally and a small proportion (up to 1 in 10 interviewees) felt their experience overall had been negative.

Although a directly comparable question may not have been asked of alumni who have studied in the UK as international students, research suggests a very high proportion of them strongly recommend their experience to others (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). This would appear to suggest that a higher proportion of international graduates are very satisfied with their experience than amongst the transnational alumni interviewed. Of course, this could also relate to the relatively potentially greater personal investment, and/or motivations, that mobile students may have made, in comparison with transnational students.

The proportions reporting negative experiences were low in both studies, although this could be a reflection of some respondent bias (in terms of which alumni responded to invitations for interview, the more positive being more likely to participate).

Although the sample size is insufficient for robust analysis of this type, there was some evidence for a greater variety of experiences (in terms of positivity) by those who had studied through partnerships, and slightly less variation within either the group who studied by distance learning or at an international branch campus (amongst both of which perceptions were generally very positive). A high proportion of those who reported negative or mediocre experiences had studied through partnership provision, which presumably reflects that collaborative provision is less strongly controlled by the UK institution than either distance learning or programmes on a branch campus.



## Chapter 6 Summary of findings and recommendations

### Key findings

Transnational education has become an established element of internationalisation strategies by UK universities but is an under-researched area in relation to its impact on students or institutions. There has been relatively little previous empirical research into student experiences and outcomes, or into the economic or wider value to UK institutions of transnational education provision.

This study provides new empirical evidence and insights into the experiences and outcomes for alumni of UK transnational programmes, from which inferences can be made about wider benefits to the UK of this form of higher education provision to students overseas.

### Transnational education students and their experiences

The overwhelming majority of alumni interviewed had undertaken a transnational education programme in response to overtly career-related motivations. In most cases these were broad-based, i.e. an expectation that the degree would increase their career prospects generally, rather than enabling them to enter or achieve a specific job or profession or enact a career change. These relatively general motivations are perhaps surprising given the high proportion of transnational provision which is quite specialised at taught postgraduate level.

There was much evidence to suggest that students had chosen to study through a transnational education programme very pragmatically. This form of higher education was seen by many as an attractive but 'achievable' option, whereas a programme studied abroad that they might perceive as more prestigious and potentially of higher value to them (and their future employers) was unachievable for practical reasons. On the other hand, the transnational education option was often perceived as more valuable than many local alternative modes of study. There was a resulting broad match in terms of a programme's relative cost and potential value, compared with alternatives. For many, however, it was also the potential 'fit' of the study option to their personal circumstances that was critical.

Many of the alumni had needed to remain in employment in order to fund their programme, so a part-time or flexible full-time programme that they could study whilst continuing their job and living in their current home was crucial. The profile of many transnational education students is distinct in this way, with consequent impacts on students' motivations and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activity and some of the wider developmental aspects of higher education.

There was evidence that many programme choices had not been deeply researched but had been based on very broad positive perceptions of the reputation of the provider country (the UK) rather than the particular UK university, and less still the



local partner institution. For some this was more important than the specific content of the programme.

The majority of alumni interviewed reported positive experiences of their programme, although there was a small minority of negative experiences (exclusively from those who had studied through collaborative programmes).

The local facilities and environments in which collaborative programmes were studied were highly variable, ranging from university campuses to commercial offices or buildings attached to schools. This could impact strongly on aspects of the study experience, especially in relation to extra-curricular activity and potential personal development (although many students did not seek these).

The quality of subject teaching on collaborative programmes was also reported to be variable, from highly professional to poor, although the most common perception amongst the interviewees was positive. Mostly the involvement of UK staff in teaching was limited, and frequently absent, which could prove a disappointment to those who had perceived that teaching by UK staff would be of higher quality than that by local staff. That said, very few had based their choice to study a UK programme on any expectation of a particular or distinctive UK pedagogy. In contrast to this variability, perceptions of the quality of provision of distance learning programmes, and those at international branch campuses, was uniformly high.

Co-curricular provision to support employability development – such as careers advice or transferable skills development – was rarely reported by those on collaborative programmes, other than where the partner was itself an established university or similar institution. Similarly, opportunities to engage with employers or undertake a work placement seemed to be rare on these programmes. Participation in extra-curricular activities, such as student societies, sports or volunteering, was also rarely reported, other than in a few notable collaborations.

While these absences may suggest a lack of comparability with UK campus provision of similar study programmes in certain aspects, the profile of many transnational education students is such that they may not seek or be aware of the potential benefit of these wider opportunities, as many study while working full-time. However, reports from those alumni who had studied full-time first-degrees through transnational programmes, and had not been employed, confirmed the frequent absence of this type of provision (at least at the time that they were students). Many alumni did not have a good conceptualisation of employability or its development (in comparison with current notions in the UK) and had a more simple faith in the value of the qualification itself to their future careers.

The vast majority of alumni interviewed had studied their transnational programme in their home country in a student cohort that was largely domestic. This limited their opportunities for intercultural learning or other personal development through interaction with international students, and development of international networks of friends or contacts. Those who had studied their transnational programme overseas, and to some extent those who studied at an international hub, had experiences that were more similar to those reported by international alumni who have studied

physically in the UK (for whom intercultural development and the gain of international social contacts have been reported as highlights of their experiences).

Interestingly, relatively few transnational alumni had maintained significant social contact with their fellow students, again in marked contrast to the results of research studies with international students. This again partly reflects the student profile, with many studying part-time whilst employed, but may also relate to nature of the study environment.

There was a clear distinction in many of these experiences between those who had studied at international branch campuses and those who had studied through collaborative programmes. Student experiences at international branch campuses were almost universally positive, whereas there was a far greater range of experiences of collaborative provision.

Alumni who had studied through unsupported distance learning inevitably had much narrower experiences, although reported the quality of the provision to be very high and positive overall in relation to their expectations.

## **Benefits to participants**

Most alumni reported that they perceived a positive impact of undertaking a UK transnational education programme in relation to their dominantly career-related motivations. For many, this was the key impact that they desired. Many had successfully obtained a first job and/or experienced job progression – outcomes that they believed their qualification had enabled or enhanced. As many reported that they had used the qualification to progress to further study (which, notably, was in almost all cases not of a transnational nature). There was a small but significant minority who did not perceive positive outcomes of this sort, including a few who had discovered that their qualification was not accepted in their chosen profession.

Beyond the broad career- or job-related impact, the other most commonly reported key impact derived by many of the transnational programme alumni was an improvement in their English language skills.

The extent to which alumni reported personal development benefits varied greatly, although some reported increased resilience and confidence as a result of overcoming the physical and mental challenges of coping with working and studying at the same time. Many who had studied a first degree reported the increase in self-esteem and maturity that would be expected from degree-level campus study. Other significant developmental impacts tended to be stronger for those who had:

- Studied their programme abroad, and reported personal development due to the physical mobility and increased intercultural awareness; and/or
- Taken part in extra- or co-curricular activities at an international branch campus or during study of a collaborative programme in a similar study environment.

There were modest reported levels of social development impact, other than by those who had studied at a branch campus where impacts could be as strong as for

international study. Relatively few transnational education alumni were active within international networks of alumni, either informally with fellow students or formally through an alumni body, although there was evidence for some effective formal alumni networks run from the UK.

Overall, graduates perceived a range of impacts that were positive but perhaps more rarely transformational than has been reported the case for some internationally mobile students. This broad difference could partly relate to limitations in the study environment and opportunities available through transnational programme provision, which in some cases may not (or cannot) offer some of the richness of experiences available through international study at a UK campus. On the other hand, it will also reflect the nature of the students that undertake many transnational programmes and the arguably more limited investment that they have made (than by internationally mobile students, many of whom are looking for transformational impact). In this respect the potential outcomes and impacts may well be appropriate given the position of transnational study as a pragmatic option achievable within the constraints of students' affordability, employment and social contexts.

## **Benefits to UK higher education institutions**

This study provided little additional empirical evidence for the overall impact of transnational education programme provision on UK provider institutions. This is partly due to the relatively distant relationship between students on UK transnational programmes and the UK institution, at least for many types of delivery.

The cumulative direct financial benefit of transnational education provision to UK institutions, in terms of fee income, has been estimated at just under £500m annually (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014), although few institutions were able to report a net value, so it was not possible to estimate a net financial figure for the UK. Estimates were made in that study of related, indirect economic benefits due to increased enrolments of international students in the UK resulting from the in-country presence of UK universities engaging in transnational education provision. This could be in the form of articulation agreements (which could actually result in fees from international students which outweigh the income from their overseas transnational programmes) or less directly from a 'halo effect' (i.e. an increased institutional profile in the overseas market). This study provided direct evidence that alumni of transnational programmes had made recommendations to others to follow their path as transnational students, and to study at the UK campus of the institution (or another UK institution) as an international student.

UK institutions have reported other strategic motivations which contribute to their engagement in transnational education provision, which are not directly financial, but there was little evidence here to assess the extent of these rationales and most were outside the scope of the empirical research with alumni.

Modest benefits of other types to institutions could be inferred from interviews with the alumni. For example, a number had visited the UK institution through optional summer schools or other study opportunities, or to attend a graduation ceremony. However, relatively few appeared to be active in alumni networks to the extent that

(we inferred) they might have sufficient strong affinity with their UK institution to be considered ambassadors or potential future donors philanthropically.

## **Benefits to the UK**

In a similar study of wider benefits of international students (who had studied in the UK, Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013), a raft of actual benefits were identified and potential benefits inferred, both economically and in terms of soft power influences.

Evidence from the transnational programme alumni in this new study (and directly from institutions) supports the view that transnational education provision by UK institutions increases the level of UK education exports, beyond the additional fee income directly from the programmes. For the UK cumulatively, the indirect benefit through increased international student enrolments has been shown to outweigh the direct fee income from transnational programmes.

A number of minor economic benefits to the UK were identified or inferred from the experiences related by the alumni. A significant minority had travelled to the UK after their studies, either directly to attend a graduation ceremony or as a tourist at a later point. Many of these would almost certainly not have done so had they not studied a UK programme. However, the economic benefit of their travel behaviour will be modest. As these alumni did not physically spend time in the UK during their programme, little or no allegiance to the UK had built up in relation to their behaviour in life or as consumers, so there was little additional UK brand allegiance that could translate into increased trade.

A few transnational programme alumni continued to engage in international networks with their peers and fellow alumni, although it was not clear that these networks included UK nationals. The potential for future business collaborations for the UK that could result from these networks as the alumni progress, to positions of seniority in their jobs and professions, seems relatively limited. This is in contrast to the situation with international alumni who studied in the UK, who tend to be very active in international professional or social networks that include UK nationals.

In relation to impact for the UK through influence, or soft power, it seems clear that some transnational programme alumni did develop the emotional bond or affinity for the UK that could underpin their potential role as ambassadors for the UK, and from which they might exert influence in their home countries as their lives and careers progress. However, this was lower than amongst international alumni who have studied in the UK (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2013). Physical mobility to the UK appears to be a strong driver of development of students into informal UK ambassadors as alumni, although some transnational education contexts can deliver this benefit.

## **Comparisons between transnational and international study**

The methodology adopted in this project offered the opportunity for comparisons to be made between the wider benefits of transnational education study and international study undertaken in the UK. Such comparisons have been highlighted in this report, but should be considered with the following caveats:

- Most of those studying transnational programmes do so part-time and on a flexible basis, whereas the majority of international students in the UK are full-time and campus-based. Inevitably there are greater opportunities available to those who study full-time, and a fairer comparison might be between transnational education students and others who study on a part-time basis.
- Transnational programmes are provided to meet a range of student needs which include market factors, including cost. Levels of support and opportunity are inherently related to programme costs. The graduates selecting transnational education understood this balance, and provided that prospective students are well-informed the key issue is that expectations are met.
- The sample of alumni did not include those who undertake significant study within the UK as part of their transnational programme (e.g. it did not include those who had studied articulation programmes). A number of potential benefits or impacts appear to be contingent on physical mobility to the UK, which could be achieved through a transnational education programme which includes a period in the UK.
- There was no evidence available to compare the prior educational attainment of those who had undertaken first degree programmes through transnational and other options, which could have an impact on longer-term outcomes. On the other hand, although both studies relied on relatively small samples, some of the interviewees in our research with alumni who had been internationally mobile students were clearly from social elites, whereas this appeared to be the case more rarely amongst the transnational alumni.

In addition, as most of the alumni interviewed had graduated some years ago (deliberately, in order to allow time for impacts to develop post-graduation), the position reported may not reflect current transnational education provision, and it is known that the balance of different types of delivery is evolving. No comparisons were attempted with transnational provision by other countries' institutions, or with 'local' study by students in their home countries.

Accordingly, some caution is advised in making comparisons with other types of higher education provision, in relation to the benefits to participants, and to the UK.

## Recommendations

### Relationships with alumni

**Recommendation:** UK universities should seek to build better contacts and long-term relationships with their transnational programme alumni, including those who studied through partnership programmes. The sector could seek to share good practice from institutions that appear to be more proactive and effective in terms of maintaining relations with alumni from their partnership programmes.

## Learning and other student support services

**Recommendation:** UK universities need to review critically the full mix of support that they (and their partners) offer to students undertaking transnational programmes. It would not be realistic to expect UK providers to aim for full comparability between transnational education and UK study experiences, as provision will take account of the local context and students' needs and expectations. They should consider the extent to which there is, and should be, comparability in relation to a number of learning and support services offered, potentially including:

- Access to the virtual learning platform (VLE), particularly for those on distance learning programmes;
- Co-curricular support and extra-curricular opportunities provided by local partners, particularly in relation to strategies for employability development;
- Provision of some in-country teaching by UK staff, perhaps combined with the regular visits to review quality assurance compliance;
- Access to other student services and activities, e.g. Student Union (as far as is practically possible), accessing work placements or volunteering opportunities;
- Consider running student satisfaction or experience surveys amongst students on their partnership programmes, as a means to provide further feedback on experiences, needs and outcomes in relation to student demands.

## Contact with and understanding of the UK

**Recommendation:** The sector generally needs to foster amongst transnational programme students and alumni a greater understanding of the UK and to maximise relationships with UK nationals (both overseas and within the UK). This should be a role for both institutions and government agencies working in cooperation. Some of the other measures recommended in this study would contribute to this. There would also be clear benefit in having more options available to transnational students to participate in programmes with some presence at the UK university, for example residential programmes or credit-bearing periods of attendance on equivalent programmes offered in the UK.

## Marketing and related activities

**Recommendation:** Marketing and communication activities to support transnational education programme recruitment need further to be improved. Institutions should review the marketing of their programmes by and with their collaborating delivery partners, to ensure fair representation of issues such as the potential acceptability of the qualification in certain professions and regions, and clear understanding of the nature of teaching, learning and other experiences to be expected.

## Further research

**Recommendation:** Further research is recommended in a number of areas:

- The findings in this research highlight apparent differences in some experiences, outcomes and wider benefits between transnational education and international study alumni respectively. One factor that was not able to be considered in this research has been academic attainment, either prior to degree study or in the degree itself. Further study of the academic attainment of transnational education students and graduates would be helpful in comparative studies, and to affirm the extent to which transnational education programmes are effective in helping students to achieve their aspirations and employment objectives.
- Given the wide range of stated institutional strategies for transnational education provision, and the paucity of evidence – at least available to the sector – as to whether such wider impacts are being observed, some case study work into these strategies and their realised impacts, at institutional level, would be useful to the sector and to institutions.
- The changing demand for transnational partnership and collaborative provision should be researched from an individual country perspective, particularly at undergraduate level, given the rapid increasing development of local provision. Such analysis might better advise UK universities on both growing and declining market opportunities.
- A tool for transnational student satisfaction measurement research should be researched, developed, trialled and distributed, as a means to provide more consistent feedback on student experiences, needs and outcomes.
- With the new growth in UK distance learning provision, particularly online, more detailed market research is important to consider such areas as learning and support experiences, acceptability of qualifications (for all priority countries) and cultural preferences for such options.

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