



Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

**BIS RESEARCH PAPER NUMBER 128**

**The Wider Benefits of International  
Higher Education in the UK**

**SEPTEMBER 2013**

**RESEARCH**



The Career Development Organisation

**Prepared by the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) Ltd  
for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills**

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- 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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**Acknowledgements:**

The authors would like to thank the members of the Steering Group convened for this project, and especially Charles Ritchie, Eleanor Kilpatrick and Brian Johnson of the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. The input of Louise Atkin of CRAC as Project Manager and Gill Wilson as an interviewer were also crucial to the success of the project. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

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BIS Research Paper number 128

September 2013

# Contents

<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
Research objectives and method.....	ix
Group results.....	ix
Wider benefits and impact.....	x
Benefits to the UK (economic) .....	xi
Benefits to the UK (influence) .....	xi
Benefits to international graduates.....	xii
Benefits to countries of origin.....	xiii
Summary of benefits and impact.....	xiii
Individuality .....	xiv
Promoting the UK as a host for international HE .....	xiv
Wider experiences including work.....	xiv
Ambassadors including scholarship alumni .....	xv
Sustaining positivity.....	xv
Recommendations .....	xv
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Context: UK international higher education.....</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1 Growth of international HE in the UK.....	2
2.2 International students in the wider global context.....	3
2.3 Internationalisation of HE systems .....	3
2.4 Dynamics of the international HE market .....	5
2.5 Government interventions in UK international education .....	6
2.5.1 Immigration and employment .....	7

2.6	Benefits and impact of international student mobility .....	8
2.6.1	Beneficiaries.....	8
2.6.2	Benefit types.....	8
2.6.3	New insights .....	13
<b>3.</b>	<b>Research aims and methodology.....</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1	Research objectives and design.....	14
3.2	Primary research methodology.....	16
3.2.1	Interview preparation and structure.....	16
3.3	Sample design and stratification.....	17
3.3.1	Countering positive bias in the interview sample .....	21
<b>4.</b>	<b>Benefits of international graduates.....</b>	<b>22</b>
4.1	Benefit types and classification .....	22
4.2	Benefits to the UK (host country).....	24
4.2.1	Benefit type A1: Additional HE exports .....	24
4.2.2	Benefit type A2: Indirect economic benefits .....	27
4.2.3	Benefit type A3: Professional networks.....	29
4.2.4	Benefit type A4: Personal consumer behaviour .....	32
4.2.5	Benefit type A5: Skilled migration.....	35
4.2.6	Benefit type B1: UK Ambassadors .....	38
4.2.7	Benefit type B2: Promoting trust.....	42
4.2.8	Benefit type B3: UK influence during capacity building .....	45
4.3	Benefits to international graduates .....	47
4.3.1	Benefit type C1: Career enhancement or change .....	47
4.3.2	Benefit group C2: English language proficiency.....	52
4.3.3	Benefit type C3: Cosmopolitanism and intercultural sensitivity .....	54

4.3.4	Benefit type C4: Personal growth and wider experiences .....	59
4.3.5	Benefit type C5: Social benefits and networks .....	64
4.4	Benefits to countries of origin .....	69
4.4.1	Benefit type D1: Capacity building and societal development.....	69
4.4.2	Benefit type D2: Personal multiplier effects.....	72
<b>5.</b>	<b>Other research findings.....</b>	<b>76</b>
5.1	Results and observations .....	76
5.1.1	Semi-quantitative results of interview preparation questions .....	76
5.1.2	Semi-quantitative analysis of interview information.....	78
5.1.3	Distinctive pedagogy: A motivation for study in the UK.....	79
5.1.4	Experiences of work .....	81
5.1.5	Formal and informal alumni networks .....	82
5.1.6	Visa issues .....	83
5.1.7	Negative experiences.....	84
5.1.8	Inferred academic benefit – internationalisation at home .....	85
5.2	Emerging trends .....	86
5.2.1	National differences.....	86
5.2.2	Other characteristics .....	87
5.2.3	Changes in perception over time.....	88
<b>6.</b>	<b>Overall findings.....</b>	<b>90</b>
6.1	Reflections on impact beyond student experience .....	90
6.2	Positive impacts and attitudes .....	91
6.2.1	Sustaining positivity.....	92
6.3	Individuality.....	93

6.4	The UK as a destination for international students .....	94
6.5	Cosmopolitanism (and integration) .....	94
6.6	An optimal width of experience .....	95
6.7	Ambassadors including scholarship alumni .....	96
6.8	Other student mobility and internationalisation at home .....	97
<b>7.</b>	<b>Conclusions and recommendations .....</b>	<b>99</b>
7.1	Recommendations .....	100
<b>8.</b>	<b>References .....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>105</b>
	Rationale for groupings of graduate characteristics .....	105
	Detailed characteristics of the interview sample .....	106
	Additional alumni groupings accessed .....	108

# Executive summary

## Research objectives and method

The UK has a long tradition and worldwide reputation for being at the forefront of international higher education (HE), and is a top destination for internationally mobile students. The 435,000 international students in the UK in 2011/12 comprise a major part of UK HE provision with potentially large-scale impacts on the HE sector and the UK itself.

There is direct financial impact of international students on the host country through fee income and associated expenditure during study. The value of this 'education export' for the UK has been researched and for HE was estimated at about £8 billion for 2008/09 (Conlon et al., 2011). However, there has been much less investigation of the wider benefits of international HE study in the UK. The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills is undertaking work to understand the range and extent of that wider impact.

This study was commissioned to develop understanding of wider benefits to the graduates, their countries of origin and, especially, to the UK. The aim was to investigate and illustrate social, economic and political benefits, including 'soft power' impact. This was attempted through primary qualitative research with non-EU international graduates who studied in the UK, underpinned by a review of existing knowledge and literature. Hitherto, many studies of the UK's international HE have focused on current students and their perceptions of the study experience. Our study provides a new angle on study experiences and especially subsequent benefits and impact, through the lens of international alumni.

Interviews were carried out with non-EU international alumni who graduated from UK HE institutions in 2007 and 2008, re-contactable after participation in recent research (i-GO study, BIS, 2012), and others responding to targeted invitations through alumni networks including Chevening and Commonwealth scholars. The interview sample was designed to reflect the range of characteristics of international students in the UK, including country of origin, level and subject of study, HE institution type and location, current residency and occupation, and funding type. A total of 100 telephone and Skype interviews were carried out in February-March 2013, by a small team of 'expert' interviewers skilled in career conversations and international education, using a semi-structured interview basis.

The focus on non-EU international graduates was partly pragmatic, as there was access to the previous survey sample, and partly because less is known about their circumstances (they have not to date been included in HESA's Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education surveys). Non-EU students have also historically been a distinct group in relation to fee levels. For simplicity, the research was restricted to graduates who had physically studied in the UK (excluding transnational education students and other models of international HE which could be worthy of separate research).

## Group results

Collectively the alumni interviewed had extremely positive memories and perceptions of their experiences of HE and study period in the UK. Almost all perceived positive impacts

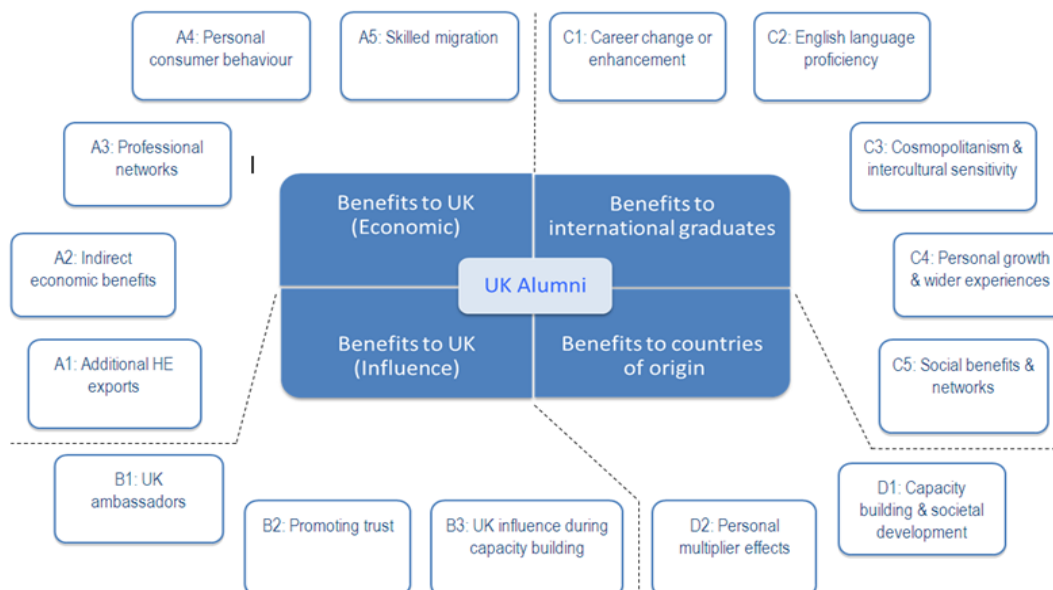
of their HE experience within their career and wider life, 5-10 years after graduation, and would recommend a similar experience to others. To counter fears of positive bias within the sample (volunteers might dominantly be those with positive stories to tell), individuals known from prior information to have less positive and distinct negative views were included. The i-GO survey reported that around 95% of non-EU international graduates would recommend others to study in the UK and/or at their HE institution, similar to the proportion amongst our interviewees, suggesting that our sample was also broadly representative of attitudes and not biased towards positive stories.

Alumni had embarked on a wide variety of career trajectories and most reported good progress, although this was still early in career for most. Crucially, they were very satisfied with the contribution that studying HE in the UK had made to their career progression, either accelerating them in an established career direction or inspiring or enabling them to change direction. There was also strong expectation that further impact would ensue.

Interestingly, their attitudes were generally more positive now than they had been immediately after graduation. Some alumni who had previously held negative views, due to particular personal experiences in the UK, had subsequently come to view these differently and now reflected positively overall.

## Wider benefits and impact

A wide variety of benefits were identified, which we classified at the highest level by beneficiary and then by type. Benefits for the UK as host country were sub-divided into ‘economic’ (excluding the direct financial benefit of fees and expenditure during study) and ‘influence’ sub-groups. The ‘internationalisation’ benefit on UK HE institutions and the student community from the presence of international students was excluded since this would have required wider research, but could be inferred.



**Figure A** Depiction of benefit types identified



The benefit typology in Figure A arose from the interview information, although there is some resonance with previous understanding of broad types of impact, particularly de Wit's rationales for international HE (de Wit, 2002).

Brief descriptions of the 15 benefit types identified follow. The report illustrates each of these types using testimony from the alumni including exemplar case studies of individual graduates. The boundaries between some types are somewhat subjective and indistinct, with considerable overlap.

### Benefits to the UK (economic)

**A1: Additional HE exports.** The great majority of alumni with a positive experience of their personal participation in UK HE had influenced or would recommend others to undertake a similar experience. The scale on which they had done so varied greatly with their circumstances and personality.

**A2: Indirect economic benefits.** These comprise a range of tangible business-to-business transactions benefiting the UK, other than additional education exports (type A1) or the personal consumer behaviour of the alumni (type A4), arising directly through the activity of the alumni since graduation. While a minority reported these types of transaction to date, their extent should grow as alumni progress to more influential positions.

**A3: Professional networks.** Almost all the alumni retain friends and contacts made while they were in the UK, now located worldwide including some in the UK. As potential professional networks these offer the possibility of future business transactions and collaborations of economic value to the UK. The extent to which alumni utilise these contacts for business is likely to increase as they progress to more senior positions.

**A4: Personal consumer behaviour.** Distinct trade benefits to the UK arise from alumni as purchasers or consumers of UK products and especially as travellers who return to the UK for leisure purposes. The value of the personal consumer behaviour of a single graduate may be limited, but multiplied across hundreds of thousands of alumni could collectively be substantial. Alumni with loyalty to UK brands may also influence the behaviour of others.

**A5: Skilled migration.** Some alumni were still in the UK when interviewed, of whom about half expected soon to return to their home country. Those few that hoped to remain in the UK permanently were either working in highly skilled occupations or, in a few cases, had married UK citizens. The proportions broadly reflected evidence that the dominant motivation was for study in the UK to lead to impact once they returned home.

### Benefits to the UK (influence)

**B1: UK ambassadors.** Many alumni had formed very a positive understanding of the UK's culture and values. For some, this underpinned activity on return home to facilitate educational, cultural, developmental and business links and collaborations with the UK. They had become informal ambassadors for the UK, based on an emotional bond developed during their UK HE study. The impact of this will only increase as they become more influential in society, bringing potential support to UK economic, socio-cultural and political agendas.

**B2: Promoting trust.** One key perception held by international alumni of the UK is trust; in the UK as a nation, society, and its enterprises and individuals. Alumni promote trust in the UK, leading to perceptions of the UK as a desirable partner in potential trade, diplomatic or developmental relationships. The underlying basis for this benefit relates to issues of mutual understanding and soft power, but it also has potential in terms of national economic benefit.

**B3: UK influence during capacity building.** A proportion of alumni had returned home to work in capacity building or other societal development, taking with them embedded British values and ideas. These may be seeds for long-term development of different linkages and synergies with the UK. Chevening and Commonwealth scholarship alumni are expected to have positive impacts on their home countries, but other alumni were also contributing to national socio-economic development, including through education.

### Benefits to international graduates

**C1: Career enhancement or change.** The most common motivation for study in the UK was potential improved employment or career outcomes, and the advantages of income, status and influence that follow. Alumni cited many individual career-related benefits, either acceleration on an existing career trajectory or a change in career direction inspired or enabled by UK HE study. Several had perceived an enterprising ‘can do’ culture in the UK which helped prompt them to set up their own business at home.

**C2: English language proficiency.** Another main ‘pull’ factor for international students choosing the UK is the opportunity to study in English and improve English language skills. Irrespective of their course of study, many alumni whose first language was not English reported that their greater command of English language was an asset valued on return to their country and in their career.

**C3: Cosmopolitanism and intercultural sensitivity.** Amongst the most striking testimony from alumni was the impact of interaction with fellow students from all over the world. Very many reported increased sensitivity towards other cultural perspectives and an improved ability to understand and communicate with people from a wide range of national and social backgrounds. These are characteristics of global citizenship, which will help them to work and operate anywhere. The benefit arose through integration in a globally diverse student body, but was markedly less where they chose not to integrate or circumstances limited this. In a few cases there had been limited integration with UK students or society.

**C4: Personal growth and wider experiences.** Alumni reported other perceived personal and social development while in the UK, and beyond academic learning. An expected impact of international study is that students change and grow as individuals both through their on-campus activities and wider interactions with the host country society. Alumni obtained many such impacts through off-campus activities, including part-time work and volunteering, as well as growth in confidence as they overcame challenges inherent in overseas study and even certain personal hardships.

**C5: Social benefits and networks.** Almost all the alumni articulated social benefit through new friendships developed while they had been in the UK, with fellow students in the UK or elsewhere and also other contacts they had made. Many of these relationships had

sustained, providing alumni with a wide international network of social and professional contacts. Some will last a lifetime, including marriage/partnership. Much of the interaction within these networks is through social media such as Facebook.

## Benefits to countries of origin

**D1: Capacity building and societal development.** From the alumni interviews it was possible to infer impacts within countries of origin. These included impacts as a result of their professional activities, ranging from the direct labour market benefit of their up-skilling and acquisition of new skills, to broader impacts within societal or economic development and capacity building, or political impact. Some of these were directly related to new careers they embarked upon after UK HE. As the alumni progress to more senior career and societal positions, with embedded UK values and links, these impacts may grow considerably for the home nation.

**D2: Personal multiplier effects.** Beyond the impact through their professional activities, alumni could deliver other impact through certain multiplier effects. These could be small-scale, such as impact on children and family who had accompanied the graduate to the UK, or at a larger scale through the influence of the alumni where they chose to undertake work or volunteering in education or other social or political settings.

## Summary of benefits and impact

In summary, we identified tangible personal benefits for international graduates in relation to career progression and/or change, their position in society and especially their personal growth, not least the development of extensive networks of social, and potential future professional, contacts. As higher-performing and more highly skilled employees they introduce benefits to their employers and economies, in their home or chosen country. There they can bring impacts in education, capacity building and societal development, which will increase with time as they become more influential.

For the UK itself we identified:

- tangible economic benefits through additional trade with existing UK enterprises and new international collaborations, and the potential for far more through the global network of links existing between alumni and their contacts in the UK;
- existing active international collaborations in research and education, and the potential for more in future;
- continuing support for further HE exports as they personally recommend others to participate, as well as the allied home academic benefits of international HE;
- tangible personal purchasing power from the alumni's allegiance to British brands, including tourism to the UK, and from those they influence;
- enhanced perceptions of the UK, its people and culture, especially increased trust in the UK which supports cultural and political ties but also future economic benefits.

## Individuality

Few trends were identified based on nationality groups or other characteristics, and the absence of systematic variations was noteworthy (although the sample size was modest). For example, there was relatively little difference between the perceptions of impact amongst those who attended world-renowned research-intensive universities and those at HE institutions of other kinds. Although many of those who had studied in the UK for several years, for a first or research degree tended to have integrated more deeply through activity outside HE, many of those articulating the strongest benefits had studied for a 1-year Masters course.

The individual circumstances of alumni were major factors in the extent and range of benefits they perceived, as well as the secondary impact and influence they had on others. This individuality contextualised both perceptions of their experiences as students and of the subsequent benefits derived.

## Promoting the UK as a host for international HE

Reflecting on their experiences and study impact, the almost unequivocal positivity of the alumni underpinned their recommendation of the UK as an HE destination to others. Their positive views were based partly on perceptions that their own motivations had been reasonably well founded: a distinctive pedagogy in which challenge, independent thought and critical thinking were invited; a safe and welcoming environment; and subsequent career enhancement impact for most. Many expressed admiration for the tolerance they witnessed in UK society, including the cosmopolitan nature of their HE student body. Collectively these factors instilled in the alumni strong bonds to the UK.

‘Come to the UK and meet the world’ could be a promotional strap line for UK HE, based on the intercultural sensitivity many alumni felt they had developed while in the UK, due to the global diversity of its international students. Some alumni felt transformed in learning to engage with others of different nationality or culture. While such benefits will not be unique to the UK in providing international HE, it may be that the impact is more acute than in competitor host countries due to the particular composition of UK student bodies.

## Wider experiences including work

Some of the richest stories of personal development and impact came from those who had widened their activities off-campus while in the UK, in the form of volunteering, employment (including post-study) or other social or cultural activity. This enabled greater integration with a wider range of UK society than they met on campus. That integration developed deeper and better informed – positive – perceptions of the UK as a society, engendering trust. A few alumni reported rather narrow experiences during their stay in the UK, remaining largely within their nationality group or simply through shyness or reticence.

Alumni perceived that employment, during placements or part-time for subsistence during study but also post-study where allowed, had added greatly to the career enhancement benefit they had gained from HE study in the UK. There are perceptions that recent amendments to UK visa restrictions reduce such employment opportunities, limiting the potential for career enhancement impact and thus making the UK a less favourable HE

destination. These have been prominent in the press and were high in the minds of a few alumni. Given that career-related motivations are uppermost for the vast majority of potential applicants, such perceptions could have negative effects, and can be amplified through the use of social media by negatively-minded alumni or commentators.

What was clear from the alumni interviewed was that the overwhelming majority studied in the UK with the long-term goal of making a success of their life in their own country. However, many felt the option to work in the UK for a period post-graduation would consolidate and maximise the impact of their HE study in terms of career enhancement.

## **Ambassadors including scholarship alumni**

Personal stories from certain Chevening and Commonwealth scholarship alumni were prominent and amongst the most memorable. There was strong evidence that the aims of these schemes are being fulfilled by many of their alumni, and that the scholarships are appreciated and highly regarded. However, the 'emotional bond' with the UK articulated by alumni was not unique to those who had benefited from UK-funded scholarships. Similar emotional connections with the UK were also held by other alumni, at a wide range of institutions, as well as personal commitments to societal or capacity development at home.

The combination of factors underlying positive experiences of HE study in the UK engendered strong feelings of trust in the UK, its institutions and products. In conjunction with the influencing power of soft diplomacy, this creates support for the UK and its products, culture and language, resulting in brand loyalty for UK goods, travel to the UK and Europe as preferred tourist and holiday destinations, the promulgation of UK pedagogic style on return home, recommendations to family, friends and employees over whom alumni have influence to study or train in the UK, and in the choice of UK partners when national businesses and networks expand into international partnerships.

## **Sustaining positivity**

The strikingly positive perceptions held raise interesting questions about what more might be done to build on these individual experiences and the warmth of feeling for the UK that international alumni exhibit. Over 2 million international alumni have graduated from UK universities in the last 10 years, and if trends continue there could be a further 3 million over the next decade. The vast majority return to their home countries or move elsewhere. While many UK universities have alumni associations operating internationally, alongside those of the main UK-funded scholarship schemes, most of the contact between alumni occurs informally.

## **Recommendations**

A series of recommendations are made to Government, HE institutions and stakeholders, including:

- Clear and positive promotion of the opportunities allowable for post-study employment, and work experiences during HE study, would help to alleviate growing perceptions

that UK international HE provision may be less attractive due to recent changes in visa regulations or processes.

- UK HE's sheer cosmopolitanism can result in sub-optimal integration of international and home students. HE institutions should continue to review and continue to improve their support for international students so as to strike the right balance and optimise integration.
- As wider experiences off-campus deliver many benefits to international students, HE providers should support and promote these further to students to maximise their overall experience, and in turn foster their own positive reputations.
- Digital social network media are dominating communications between alumni worldwide, and may provide new opportunities for alumni offices to support their graduates in appropriate ways. Consideration of a 'national' network for alumni of UK HE could be worthwhile to enhance and reinforce positive reflections and memories.
- There is a growing 'army' of alumni as informal ambassadors for 'brand UK' and UK HE in particular, potentially increasing by hundreds of thousands annually, whose influence will increase in their home countries with time. HE providers and the wider HE sector should consider how this goodwill can best be utilised for optimal benefit, within the constraints of effective soft power.
- While there is a growing evidence base on international HE impact, future research tracking alumni further into their careers would be valuable to understand whether their positivity sustains and to what extent there is realisation of some anticipated longer-term impacts.
- As this study was restricted to the 'traditional' model of incoming international student mobility, extension to include the wider benefits of other models of international HE would provide a more complete picture. This would need to include transnational education (TNE) and other models; what is the impact when the student does not physically visit the UK?
- Given the unequivocal benefits perceived here from international student mobility, it could be useful to consider the extent and range of impacts on the UK of a strategy to increase UK student outward mobility, potentially to provide measures of the value of implementation of that strategy.

*"It changes everything"*

Nigerian alumnus I80, Development Studies, Reading University

# 1. Introduction

The UK has a long tradition and tremendous reputation for being at the forefront of international higher education. The wide range of opportunities to undertake study and research in UK universities have always been attractive to international students, and many have returned to their home countries as UK alumni to achieve successful careers and highly prestigious positions, for example as Presidents, leaders of business and industry, designers and artists, writers, researchers, Nobel Laureates or social reformers.

Fifty years ago the number of international students in UK universities was relatively modest (just over 20,000 full-time students, according to the 1963 Robbins Report), mostly either from very wealthy families or scholarship recipients. However, in 2011/12 there were 435,235 international students studying at UK universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs), according to latest data (HESA, 2012). Many will likely progress during their careers to become high achievers and some will be just as successful as their illustrious UK alumni predecessors. It is a given that higher education should make a positive difference to the student's knowledge, abilities and confidence, and also to the wider society in which they live. All international higher education should additionally allow the student to grow and develop in terms of intercultural awareness and self-knowledge.

Given the large absolute numbers now involved, provision of international higher education has become a significant economic activity for the higher education (HE) sector and for the UK as a whole (Conlon et al., 2011). There are potentially other substantial benefits to the UK, not least from the increasing scale and reach of the international networks that now comprise UK alumni (Miller, 2013). Understanding these benefits, as well as the benefits that the alumni themselves obtain from their UK HE experience, so as to value and nurture that potential goodwill, is in the national interest.

Such understanding will inform the HE sector and HE providers' support both for current international students and also for alumni to sustain their interest in the UK. Given that 'word of mouth' is an extremely important influence amongst students and others considering future study destinations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), how might the goodwill of UK alumni be best leveraged also to support future UK provision of international HE?

This report offers evidence, chiefly based on the perceptions and attitudes of international alumni, for the wider benefits that arise from international higher education in the UK – benefits for the UK, for the alumni themselves and for the societies in which they now work and live. It focuses primarily on benefits beyond the direct financial benefit of fees paid and associated income ('education exports'), and provides new insights through the eyes and experiences of alumni.

## 2. Context: UK international higher education

### 2.1 Growth of international HE in the UK

The existence of a non-UK contingent among the domestic university population is far from new, as the UK's medieval universities taught a multinational student cohort and such student 'visitors' have been a part of universities' development and expansion ever since.

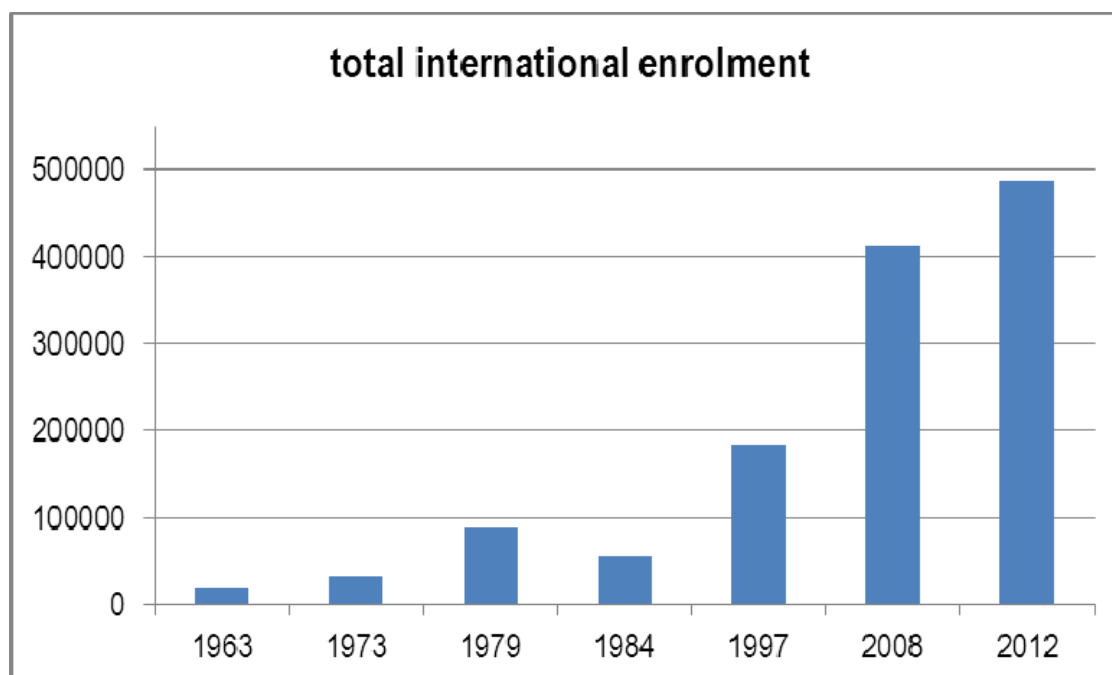
Since the end of World War II, when UK universities hosted about 6,000 non-UK students, there has been spectacular growth in the number and proportion of international students within the UK HE system. There was continued growth through the three decades following WWII (with 34,000 in 1973, and 88,000 in 1979), reflecting a belief in and increasing understanding of the soft diplomacy associated with subsidised higher education for non-UK students, which held until the constrained public sector finances of the 1970s intervened.

In response to a perceived need for more places to be made available to home students, as well as the national financial backdrop of the 1970s which raised doubts as to whether subsidised fees for non-UK citizens was still a valid and sustainable policy, higher 'full-cost' fees were introduced in 1981 for non-UK (subsequently non-EU) students. This was also consistent with the free market ideology that was driven across the economy at that time. Predictably, the numbers of non-UK students declined and it progressively became clear to the HE sector and universities that instead of selecting international students they had to recruit them, and that such recruitment required marketing. The British Council, working with (then) DfES and HE sector representatives, subsequently developed the concept of marketing British tertiary education as a discrete product (an 'education export'); this also led to establishing the Education UK brand.

During the 1980s the government began to increase targeted support for overseas students, providing a number of scholarships (including Chevening) which were aimed at selected groups of international applicants, to foster soft diplomacy and reinforce UK overseas development assistance priorities. Between 1984 and 2011/12 (the last year for which there is currently published enrolment data by HESA) there were increases in international student enrolments across all UK university mission groups (Figure 1).

Currently, the UK's HE system is a destination of choice for international students globally, with 435,235 international students enrolled in UK HE institutions in 2011/12. Of these, 132,550 were from (non-UK) EU countries and 302,680 non-EU countries. They made up 13% of first-degree undergraduates, 46% of all taught postgraduates and 41% of all research postgraduates in UK HE institutions in that year, with non-UK students comprising almost 12% of the UK's total student population (HESA, 2012). These data exclude international students in private HE institutions and some colleges, and shorter-term exchange students, so the full total is higher still.





**Figure 1** Illustrative trend in total international student enrolments in UK HE

## 2.2 International students in the wider global context

International student mobility (ISM) is a core element of international higher education (IHE). It is the most well-established and visible aspect of the ‘internationalisation’ of higher education since it involves the physical movement of increasingly large numbers of people across national borders for the purpose of study. The growth in enrolment of international students to UK universities must be seen in this wider global perspective. According to UNESCO data, at least 3.6 million students in 2010 were enrolled in tertiary education abroad, up from around 2 million in 2000. This represents around 2% of the total number of students enrolled in higher education globally (OECD, 2012).

There is currently high growth in domestic HE enrolments around the world, as more countries strive to meet the demand for places from growing numbers of their young people exiting secondary education. That expansion may well, in turn, lead to further increases in global student mobility. The British Council report ‘The Shape of Things to Come’ predicts growth at least until 2020 (British Council & Oxford Economics, 2012). Even as lower and middle-income countries increase their own local provision of higher education places, overall international student mobility seems unlikely to decline.

## 2.3 Internationalisation of HE systems

Over recent years increasing numbers of countries and their HE institutions have sought to ‘internationalise’, responding to pressures of globalisation, the need to achieve competitive advantage in the international knowledge economy and to enhance international strategic positioning. Internationalisation has many facets that include international student and staff mobility, partnerships and collaboration in research and teaching and the internationalisation of curricula.

This can be perceived as an evolution from international student recruitment to a more holistic interpretation, enhancing student experiences, international development and international pedagogy, and can involve many inter-related activities (Table 1).

Internationalisation at home	Internationalisation abroad
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Attracting international students – both for full programmes and short exchanges</li> <li>▫ Internationalising curricular and teaching materials</li> <li>▫ Providing foreign language programmes</li> <li>▫ Providing specific country and regional programmes</li> <li>▫ Recruitment and exchanges of international academic and research staff</li> <li>▫ Growing joint teaching programmes – including for split/joint degrees or other accreditation arrangements</li> <li>▫ Growing international cooperation in research</li> <li>▫ Encouraging international activities on campus</li> <li>▫ Hosting international events and conferences</li> <li>▫ Promoting international work opportunities for students – including not for profit</li> <li>▫ Internationalisation of institutional governance and management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ Encouraging domestic students to study internationally</li> <li>▫ Supporting work experience placements internationally</li> <li>▫ Growing international research links</li> <li>▫ Encouraging staff to work internationally: both for teaching and research</li> <li>▫ Consultancy for international projects</li> <li>▫ TNE - delivery of courses and programmes internationally:</li> <li>▫ Partnership arrangements</li> <li>▫ Accreditation of partnership programmes</li> <li>▫ Joint/split degree offerings.</li> <li>▫ Establishment of offshore campuses</li> <li>▫ Specialist research centres abroad</li> <li>▫ International development agenda – capacity building or technical assistance projects</li> <li>▫ International volunteering and not for profit activities</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Summary of key internationalisation activities for higher education institutions (adapted by the authors from Fielden, 2007)

However, amongst these activities, the international mobility of students and the competitive activity to recruit them probably remains the most visible, researched and reviewed aspect of international HE. While many universities around the world have sought to grow internationalisation strategies, UK universities have been particularly successful. The global reputation of UK universities is the envy of most other countries, achieved for a variety of reasons including their continuing drive to internationalise. One key and growing area within international higher education is Transnational Education (TNE). It is thought that TNE will inevitably expand over the next few decades (British Council, 2013a), driven by both supply-side considerations (more new programmes on offer, more varied modes of delivery) and student demand. The total number of students enrolled on UK TNE programmes delivered internationally was estimated to be 571,000 in 2011/12, 13% higher than in the previous year (HESA, 2012).

Improvements in on-line degree courses, in terms of content, availability and means of delivery, could also impact greatly on the international higher education market, and in ways that are still difficult to predict. For example, the current tremendous surge in the development of massive open online courses (MOOCs) was hardly foreseen a few years ago, even though their impact in terms of completed HE qualifications currently remains modest and they may in the end act as a ‘taster’ for more traditional learning models.

## 2.4 Dynamics of the international HE market

Understanding the evolving dynamics of the international student market, including changing patterns of demand and what might influence study destination choices by students, is key if the UK wants to maintain its leading position as a destination of choice for international students.

A small number of destination countries tend to dominate the global market for international students. In 2010, five countries (the US, UK, Australia, France and Germany) accounted for nearly two thirds of all international student enrolments (OECD, 2012). It is almost inevitable that the market share of each of these countries will decline over the longer term, given that increasingly other countries and their universities want to attract students, in some cases with strong government support to enhance their likelihood of success.

However, in spite of this potentially reducing global market share and sharper competition, given the right investment and supportive policies of government, UK universities should be able to continue to grow international enrolments numerically, given the overall expansion of the total global market (British Council & Oxford Economics, 2012). Ensuring that it recruits the ‘brightest and best’ will remain a challenging issue within this, and research is ongoing to provide some indications as to what might be needed to maintain the UK’s position of success.

In similar fashion, the current pattern of ‘sending’ countries is also dominated by a few players. Together China (82,995 students enrolled) and India (31,595) accounted for about a quarter of all international enrolments in the UK in 2011/12. Other important student source countries for the UK, on the basis of more than 10,000 students enrolled in UK HE (2011/12) were Nigeria, the USA, Malaysia and Hong Kong (HESA, 2012). In addition there were 154,385 international students from EU member states, with over 10,000 enrolled from each of Germany, France, Greece and Italy.

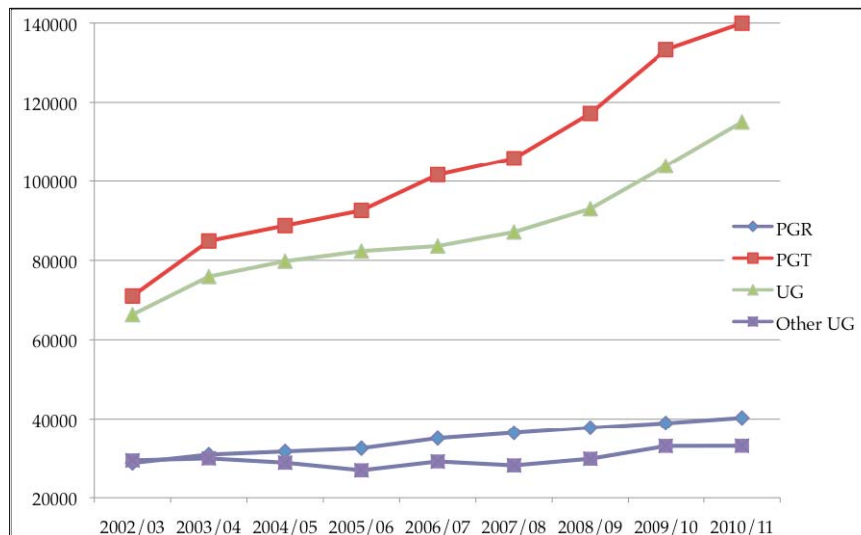
Much of international study is driven by demand for a relatively limited range of degree programmes including business and management, finance, hospitality and tourism management, electronics and computing, which together account for about 60% of globally mobile students. Other topics with strong international demand include many STEM<sup>1</sup> and health-related subjects. This appears to be a relatively consistent pattern.

Undergraduates are the most internationally mobile amongst all students globally. However, the UK has very successful taught Master’s degree enrolments, particularly for one-year employment-related degree programmes, including the MBA which remains a

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<sup>1</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

very highly valued degree and continues to grow in international demand. Recent trends in UK recruitment in terms of level of study are shown in Figure 2. In this the roughly similar growth rates of non-EU student enrolments to undergraduate and PG taught degree programmes are apparent.



**Figure 2** New non-EU international student enrolments to UK universities according to level of study (HESA, 2012).

There is also considerable variation in demand for subjects and levels according to the source country. For example, while the greatest demand from Indian students is for one-year Master's degree programmes, particularly in business, finance and IT-related topics, US students are concentrated in social sciences and humanities, including at doctoral level. Individual country preferences thus also need to be understood and segmented, rather than being considered purely at an aggregate level.

## 2.5 Government interventions in UK international education

Growth in international student participation in the UK was further enhanced through the 1992 Education Act, which abolished the binary line and helped the former polytechnics by according them university status. This allowed them to enter the international student market with a similar offering to that of the other UK universities.

Prime Minister Tony Blair was sufficiently taken by the apparent benefits that international students might bring to the UK that he agreed to invest in international HE. The 1999 Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) funded projects targeted to lead to an increase in enrolments in both the HE and the FE sectors and establishment of the Education UK brand, including marketing campaigns in identified priority countries (MORI, 2003). Parallel investment programmes were taking place in some other countries including NUFFIC Netherlands, AEI Australia, Education New Zealand, Campus France, DAAD Germany and Education USA. Many other countries have also begun to grow their activities and

provide support for national campaigns – from China and Malaysia to Mauritius and Panama.

The PMI 2 programme in 2006 continued funding and gave impetus to developing new forms of international partnership, including supporting the increasing UK interest in transnational education (DTZ, 2011). The recent announcement by BIS to lead on development and delivery of the Education UK brand<sup>2</sup> is to be welcomed, as are the various support activities being delivered by the British Council internationally.

### 2.5.1 Immigration and employment

International student mobility has become increasingly aligned with and dependent upon immigration and employment policies in host countries. At the launch of PMI 1 in 1999, policy was adjusted so that international students no longer required authorisation on an individual basis to take up work. However, the involvement of government in international HE activity has subsequently become far more direct, due to:

- growing awareness of international terrorism, heightened after 9/11 and 7/7, and resulting increased focus on domestic security;
- the recession from 2008 onwards, which led to concerns about the labour market and public expenditure;
- strongly expressed concerns over net migration by the public and reflected in the policies of the newly-elected coalition government in 2010.

These concerns have had effects on non-EU international students, who may be affected by a series of new legislation and Visa regulations.

The stated aim of recent policies has been to attract the brightest and the best students to the UK for study purposes, but at the same time to tackle immigration abuse in the student route. However, many in the international HE sector (in the UK and elsewhere) view these as new 'restrictions' on international study in the UK, including reduced rights to employment in the UK after study. In a modern inter-connected world where students, prospective students and their influencers are involved in many social networks, perceptions of tighter immigration controls may for some paint a picture of an unwelcoming student destination. Such perceptions have been linked with recent significant declines in student enrolments in the UK from certain source countries.

Other countries have similarly been struggling to achieve balanced immigration policy which covers the recruitment of international students and their possible employment. Stricter visa controls introduced in Australia in 2008 led to declines in inward student numbers, before a review (Knight, 2011) resulted in subsequent reductions in some immigration restrictions and included the introduction of post-study work visas for graduates (Institute of International Education, 2011). In the UK the topic remains one of active and heated debate (British Council, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://news.bis.gov.uk/Press-Releases/New-team-to-help-UK-exploit-international-opportunities-in-education-exports-6864b.aspx>

## 2.6 Benefits and impact of international student mobility

### 2.6.1 Beneficiaries

International student mobility has a strong history and some evidence of the benefits and impact of students crossing borders has been accumulated and articulated over time, from a range of different perspectives (Woodfield, 2010). Most of the focus has been on who benefits and the way(s) in which they benefit, although there are often multiple beneficiaries and the impacts and benefits can be multi-faceted and interlinked. Less attention has been paid to the temporal dimension of impact, such as whether there is any 'time-lag' to benefits, reduction over time (akin to a 'half-life' in radioactive decay) or an increase or evolution of impact over time. Another important issue is whether or not student mobility always provides those benefits or positive impacts, for all stakeholders, or to what extent they vary with the individual student.

The most obvious beneficiary is the mobile student (Fielden et al., 2007), although he/she is likely to be embedded in other social networks that may also receive immediate and short-term direct benefits, such as the student's family, particularly if they work in a family business or if their family has supported them to pursue their studies.

Other potential beneficiaries in the student's home country include sponsors and facilitators of mobility, such as employers or government or other funding agencies, as well as those who employ or engage with the mobile students upon their return. The stakeholder group for a mobile student could potentially be a wide cross-section of his/her society, depending on the individual's role. If the mobility period is embedded within a home study programme, there can also be benefits to the home HE institution as it develops and refines its internationalisation agenda.

Within host countries, the most direct beneficiary is the host institution, in particular the faculty or department which recruits the student. However, the wider HE sector can also benefit from inward mobility, as well as local communities, regions and even nations as mobile students engage more broadly with their host country during and after their studies.

In the spirit of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, benefits of mobility can also be felt beyond the source and host countries as mobile students engage with citizens and organisations in other countries throughout their future lives.

### 2.6.2 Benefit types

The impacts and benefits of ISM are likely to manifest themselves in a range of different ways – planned and unintended, positive and negative, immediate or longer term, and implicit or explicit. As these benefits and impacts are dependent on a very diverse body of mobile students, they will be expressed distinctively and according to different national and/or cultural contexts. They are hard to control and influence because they are dependent on the individuals, their cultural backgrounds, personalities and career trajectories.

However, five broad categories of benefits and impacts have been identified and are explored here to inform the primary research in this study:

- financial;

- economic;
- academic;
- socio-cultural;
- political.

These are essentially de Wit's (2002) 'rationales for international higher education' but re-categorising 'economic' into separate categories for financial and wider economic benefits. They are now considered, in turn.

### **Financial benefits**

The financial benefits of international student mobility to host HE institutions – and host countries – are the short-term, cost-related benefits. These are well rehearsed and include the fees paid by international students (where these are payable) as well as their associated accommodation and living costs. These can benefit host institutions directly and contribute to their revenue streams, as well as more broadly to national and local economies of host countries in the form of inward foreign investment. Recent estimates of the value of annual financial income from education exports for the UK have been as high as £14 billion (for 2008/09), of which HE comprises over £8 billion (Conlon et al., 2011).

However, there are associated financial costs to this mobility, since students consume national and institutional resources and services (e.g. such as healthcare). The provision by host countries of scholarship and support programmes is clearly also a discrete cost (Oxford Economics, 2012, 2013).

### **Wider economic benefits**

For host countries, beyond the direct, short-term financial benefits of inward mobility, there is also a range of indirect economic impacts of international student mobility. These impacts are less straightforward and may be less tangible, but potentially accrue over a longer period of time and can reach beyond the host country. Such benefits include:

- impact on economic development via skilled migration and skills development for specific sectors of the labour market (e.g. STEM);
- increasing the pool of employable graduates for the global knowledge economy;
- development of national and global research and development capacity;
- establishment of trade and R&D networks between countries and regions (e.g. via alumni links);
- meeting local skills and employment needs.

Such impacts may not always be positive for host countries, particularly if there are perceptions that international graduates and students are taking local jobs for lower salaries, or if there are concerns that national universities are educating graduates for competitor countries (as has been reported in some Scandinavian countries, Woodfield, 2009).

For the source country (i.e. from which the student comes) there are often concerns about skills or brain 'drain' despite recent evidence which suggests an increasing trend towards brain circulation (or a brain 'train') where students often return home or live and work in a

country different to their place of study, and may become serial travellers over longer periods of their career.

For the students themselves, the economic or financial benefits of student mobility are largely focused on their employability as graduates. In many cases studying internationally for a foreign qualification offers opportunities for labour market advantage (Brooks et al, 2011), for example in terms of the acquisition of knowledge, personal or 'soft skills' development, enhanced language proficiency and increased levels of inter-cultural understanding. International experience can also provide alumni with significant additional credibility when they seek graduate level employment either in their home country or elsewhere – an international qualification is often perceived as a unique selling point in a crowded local employment market, when compared with a local degree (Sweeney, 2012).

Such future employability capital is particularly important for those students not supported via scholarships or grants. For these, a potential return on their investment in overseas study is a crucial aspect of their decision-making process when choosing whether, and where, to study internationally. If they are not able to earn enough to repay their creditors quickly after graduation (or if they are under- or unemployed) then overseas study may not appear to be a worthwhile investment. Students' employment experiences post-study, shared via word of mouth and social networks, can have knock-on effects for future mobility flows, and can influence future students to select other host countries and/or institutions where they perceive they will obtain greater labour market advantage.

There is also limited evidence to the contrary, in that some countries have a tight-knit employment system, where networking at a local university may be important. This is believed to have been the case at one point in Japan, and may remain to some extent in certain other countries.

### **Academic benefits**

A successful and positive overseas study experience can provide a strong academic benefit to the mobile student, which will help prepare them for further studies or an academic career (Education Intelligence, 2013). Other academic benefits beyond subject knowledge might include increased inter-cultural understanding, the development of a 'global outlook', improved academic-related language skills, contextualised knowledge, and exposure to different approaches to learning and assessment. However, these benefits are not always certain and a negative academic experience could result in damaging impact on a student's personal and educational development.

Host institutions can also benefit academically from inward mobility, through the contribution of international students to 'internationalisation' agendas (Knight, 2012). This is particularly the case in improving the possibilities for internationalisation 'at home' for local students unable or unwilling to travel overseas for study, and for staff who are more locally-orientated. Home students will interact with students from other countries, in both classroom and social settings, and an international student body may also facilitate adaptations of traditional teaching and learning approaches. This could be through curriculum development, modified teaching and learning practices, the integration of international perspectives into the learning process, and opportunities for students to develop inter-cultural competencies as they prepare for life in an increasingly globalised employment market.



ISM can also help HE institutions to improve their reputation through improved positions in international league tables which, in turn, may enhance their broader global reputation and thereby attractiveness to potential students, academics and research partners.

There is also an academic sustainability dimension to ISM, which is a strong motivator for the involvement of many host HEIs in international recruitment. In UK universities, foreign students made up 43% of the full-time postgraduate research body (HESA 2011/12) and are particularly concentrated in STEM-related disciplines. International student recruitment can help to sustain particular subject areas and programmes (which may be under short-term threat due to low local demand), and help to develop strategic areas of research through the recruitment of highly skilled research students. A US study (Chellaraj et al., 2008) has indicated that the presence of international students has a significant and positive impact on both future patent applications and patents awarded to institutions. Further US research (Black & Stephan, 2008) demonstrated the high impact of foreign-born researchers in relation to science and engineering publications in leading journals. A 2012 report (*'Patent Pending: How Immigrants are Reinventing the American Economy'*) found that 76% of patents from the top 10 patent-generating universities in the US had a foreign-born inventor (almost all of which were in important STEM-related areas of research). Other studies have shown that foreign-born researchers working in US universities and with US-awarded doctoral degrees are more likely to develop future collaborative research with universities in their original country of origin than with other countries. The large numbers of Chinese, Indian and South Korean researchers now active in US universities may well result in a change in the geographic locus of US research partnerships.

Longer-term alumni relationships with overseas students may also support and facilitate international collaborative research and consultancy projects, which are becoming increasingly important to institutions (Technopolis, 2008). Some alumni retain research and teaching links with their alma mater during their careers, and such networks can also help to facilitate future international partnerships for teaching, research and student and staff exchange.

Concerns have been voiced about the possible negative academic impact of inward mobility, particularly if some institutions become over-dependent on recruiting large numbers of international students (possibly due to difficulties in recruiting home students, or financial considerations). Conceivably this could even lead them to lower academic standards or language requirements. Should an HEI no longer be perceived as recruiting the 'brightest and best' students, there is likely to be significant reputational damage. Institutions (and host and source country governments) seek to avoid situations where particular programmes – or a campus as a whole – has an imbalance of students from particular countries or regions. This could impact negatively upon carefully developed reputations for diversity and academic quality in worldwide recruitment markets. For example, for periods in the 1990s, in topics such as business studies or Master's degree programmes and with international students from Asia, this became a growing tendency. However, in most instances university awareness, and a move to 'responsible' recruitment and partnership development, has helped to improve the situation.

Students could have negative study experiences in other ways, particularly if the reality fails to meet their expectations, through dilution or lack of academic or administrative

support, and/or poor facilities that prevent them from being able to adapt to, and thrive in, their new academic and living environment.

Academic benefits are not limited to individual host institutions but can be experienced by national HE sectors as a whole (The World Bank, 2002). It is possible for there to be enhanced overall reputational benefit for the country as well as a potential boost in national economic competitiveness due to the existence of a critical mass of 'talented' international students and researchers within the HE sector.

Other academic benefits resulting from mobility might also be experienced in the student's home country through the developmental and transformational impact of 'high-quality' international education and experience they might have following return home, and subsequent participation in economic, developmental and academic activities. However, those 'home country' benefits pre-suppose that the student returns, rather than remaining in the host country or using their mobility capital to live in another part of the world. There is evidence that this tends to be the case, for example 95% of Commonwealth Scholarship Commission survey respondents working in HE now worked or living in their home region (Day et al., 2009). However, there is a view that such brain 'churn' provides enrichment globally and that even those students who do not immediately return to their lower income countries might also enhance those economies through significant remittances to their families.

### **Socio-cultural benefits**

Beyond their studies, and the immediate employment consequences of their mobility period, ISM can result in several forms of socio-cultural impact upon students and host communities. Many of these impacts are less tangible, particularly in the short-term, and tend to relate more to the development of 'softer' skills. Mobile students, through time spent abroad, gain exposure to other cultures and can develop relationships and friendships with both host country students and students from other parts of the world. Living and studying in a multi-cultural environment can help students to acquire such attributes as tolerance and respect for diversity, often associated with highly desirable characteristics such as 'cosmopolitanism' and 'global citizenship'. Such competencies will assist international graduates to gain advantage when seeking to enter the labour market (Diamond et al., 2012); for example they might result in increased confidence, greater understanding of other cultures and how to work with them, and provide access to international networks – all of which are likely to provide additional benefits to them in their future lives.

Some similar benefits can be gained by fellow students (home and international) who study alongside internationally mobile students, and to an extent for the wider host community should they engage in work, volunteering or leisure activities. Many host institutions and wider communities become far more multi-cultural through the presence of international students. However, whether exposure to students from other cultures manifests in greater tolerance can depend on the nature of these interactions and the degree of integration of internationally mobile students into their host communities. There is potential for a 'darker side' which can include racism or violence against international students, concerns about over-representation of international students on university campuses, and a lack of integration between domestic and international students.

## Political benefits

Finally, ISM also has the potential to provide significant political or foreign policy benefits. These are often described in terms of cultural diplomacy, international relations and/or 'soft power' (Nye, 1991). They are largely felt at the national (and sometimes sector or international) level, rather than the individual or institutional level, unless the mobile student grows significant international linkages and networks in their working life. In many ways the political benefits of ISM accrue through the combination of the other benefits of mobility. As individuals gain exposure to other countries, have positive experiences, and develop friendships and networks, when they become alumni they can act as unofficial ambassadors for host and source countries that, in turn, can reinforce and support their international relations strategies (Atkinson, 2010).

Examples of soft power include building trust (British Council, 2012) and positive perceptions amongst citizens internationally through increased engagement (British Council, 2013b) and interaction. Such attitudes and perceptions could contribute to reductions in the likelihood of future conflict and also facilitate increased positive international engagement culturally, politically and economically. While this is particularly true for future leaders and influencers, to an extent it applies also to those embarked on other career trajectories. Most graduates are likely to have some degree of influence in their home countries (or elsewhere), even if they do not form part of a national elite.

From a soft power perspective, such impacts are powerful since they are embedded in individuals through authentic experiences rather than being artificially created through explicit government policy. However, should there be a perception that political benefits are explicitly being sought via educational mobility experiences, then any – often delicately balanced - 'soft power' benefits may be lost (Pan, 2013). Soft power is perceived to work best when it is not directed or shaped by government, but when it is facilitated and supported such as via scholarships or other forms of aid that are not explicitly tied to 'hard' power agendas (such as national security, or trade). In addition, the flipside of these benefits is the risk posed by students with negative experiences who, if great in number, could potentially undermine any soft power gains.

In addition, inward mobility can sometimes be perceived as a political and social threat or risk by host governments. This risk can take many forms including fears of illegal immigration through fraudulent entry via educational programmes, over-staying on study visas, government concern about potential terrorist activity and potential access to politically (or commercially) sensitive technologies.

### 2.6.3 New insights

Our new research study sets out to recognise, illuminate and illustrate these benefits and potentially identify new ones or variants, chiefly through the reported experiences of international alumni.

## 3. Research aims and methodology

The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) commissioned this research to examine and evaluate the wider academic, political, social and economic benefits to the UK from non-EU international graduates who studied at HE institutions in the UK. This builds on the foundation of existing knowledge of the financial benefits brought by internationally mobile students to the UK whilst they are students, and of the other impacts summarised in Chapter 2.

The key aim of this project was to identify, understand and illustrate the ‘wider’ benefits that ensue to the UK, including in the longer term. More specific aims included:

- developing a comprehensive understanding of the range of potential social, economic, political and other benefits to the UK that could be derived from international HE graduates who studied here;
- identifying and illustrating the range and scale of these ‘wider’ impacts to the UK, as currently experienced and perceived by international alumni;
- establishing a better understanding of the personal circumstances of international graduates 5 years or more after leaving UK HE study, including their reflections on their UK HE experience, and particularly the benefits they have derived personally;
- identifying and illustrating benefits to the international alumni’s home countries, as a result of their participation in UK HE;
- understanding how ‘wider’ benefits relate to the provision of international HE in the UK, and how providers might support and enhance benefits both to the UK and the alumni.

### 3.1 Research objectives and design

It was agreed that the research team would conduct desk research into the existing UK and international academic, policy-based and ‘grey’ literature in order to gain any available understanding of the potential range of benefits that may accrue to the UK as a host nation providing higher education to international students. This would underpin primary research within the project.

The literature review work would seek and focus on:

- reports of the ‘wider’ value that international students and graduates bring to the UK or other host countries, beyond the direct ‘education export’ financial benefit generated during their study in the UK;
- potential and known ‘soft power’ benefits accruing to the UK as a result of international graduates once they leave the UK as HE alumni, including improved perceptions of the UK and enhanced propensity to interact with the UK, or to other host nations;

- potential and known increases in the extent to which international graduates who studied in the UK increase the propensity of others in their country to study in the UK, and other possible multiplier effects;
- the extent to which international HE study leads to enhanced bilateral linkages between people and organisations (in the host and students' home countries), including increases in trade, educational linkages, or research and enterprise links;
- how this understanding might be translated into measures to identify potential benefits for use in the primary research within this project.

Primary research would then be conducted in order to obtain evidence from international UK alumni on their experiences and perceptions of the benefits and impact of their study in the UK, their perceptions of benefits to the UK and their home country, and also evidence with which to infer wider benefits. Given limitations of time and budget, this would be the only aspect of field research.

The project would essentially research the issue through the lens of international UK alumni experiences, which would be quite a different approach from most of what was known of the relevant literature. The specific research approach was discussed and agreed with BIS, partly pragmatically on the basis of available access to certain samples of international alumni.

The primary research would therefore seek to provide:

- reflections on international alumni's personal study experiences in the UK, in the context of their motivations and career trajectories;
- alumni's perceptions of the benefits and impact that have ensued and may develop further in their own careers and wider lives, if possible identifying particular experiences that have led to demonstrable impacts;
- alumni's involvement in commerce, networks and linkages of different kinds with individuals and organisations in the UK, including academic/educational, business/trade, political and social/cultural interactions;
- how such linkages were developed during their UK HE experience, and how they might be sustained or enhanced;
- their perceptions of any tangible or potential value of these interactions and linkages, to themselves and also to the UK, and the extent to which this is dependent on their UK HE experience;
- their understanding and perceptions of other wider benefits to the UK, and to their home country;
- how these issues might vary with individual differences, including graduates' nationality, circumstances and country of current residence, as well as their study characteristics such as level of study, subject, institution type or funding type.

## 3.2 Primary research methodology

From the outset the project team recognised that seeking evidence on the desired themes could be challenging, because some of the issues are relatively subtle and perceptions about them would chiefly be reported by graduates for whom English was not the first language. That expectation shaped the choice of a qualitative research method, which we believed would be necessary to obtain sufficiently deep understanding to identify potential ‘wider’ benefits. Since so much would depend on graduates’ perceptions, which are rooted in their personal backgrounds and circumstances, it was agreed that qualitative interviews would be conducted on a lightly structured basis, using interviewers with expertise in facilitating career conversations and international higher education. Through relatively deep engagement in conversation with graduates, it was hoped the chances of recording relevant and reasoned perceptions would be maximised. An interview team of five expert individuals was assembled for this task. Given that the graduates would be located literally worldwide, the interviews were conducted and recorded by telephone and/or Skype.

### 3.2.1 Interview preparation and structure

The broad structure of the interview was:

- graduate’s background and motivations for UK HE study;
- reflections on UK HE experiences;
- current employment circumstances and perceived impact on career;
- other personal impacts perceived by graduate;
- professional and personal networks relating to UK HE experience;
- perceptions of wider benefits to the UK.

Volunteers for interview were screened using responses to a short online questionnaire issued as part of the request for volunteers, including questions on current country of residence, employment circumstances and two perceptions relating to possible HE benefits. This built upon previous information known about them obtained from their participation in a prior research study (as outlined in the next section).

Those selected for interview were sent a further short online questionnaire as interview preparation, inviting them to indicate perceived extents of a number of possible personal benefits. This was intended both to serve as ‘homework’ for the interviewee (to encourage them to think about relevant experiences) and to provide possible prompts for the interviewer during the interview.

The interview style and structure were created in order to understand the alumni as individuals, identifying the key ‘human’ circumstances that shape career and personal learning decisions, activities and resulting benefits. It was important to understand the graduates’ career trajectories, as the point at which they undertook UK HE could vary, with corresponding different motivations and potentially different benefits or perceptions of impact. Personal issues such as whether they had a spouse/partner or family, who either travelled with them or were left behind in their home country, and also their family background circumstances and schooling, could all be important in framing their HE experience, what they derived from their time in the UK and their perceptions and

memories. This personal information provided deep understanding of the context for the motivations and benefits perceived by the alumni, as well adding richness to their stories.

On completion of each interview, in addition to transcription of the interview, a short 'portrait' of each interviewee's personal career story and UK HE experience, and key benefits identified, was written. In some cases there were further exchanges by e-mail between the graduate and the interviewer, initiated by the graduates for further clarification or to provide additional information, but also where they had found the interview thought-provoking and beneficial in reflecting on their own career and personal development.

### 3.3 Sample design and stratification

When BIS commissioned the research it indicated the intention to use a sample of international graduates who had taken part in a previous research project on the destinations of international graduates of UK HE and their reflections on their HE experience. Around 2000 non-EU international graduates had consented to being re-contacted as part of a quantitative online survey project ('i-GO') for BIS by i-graduate during 2010-11 (BIS, 2012). They graduated during 2007 and 2008 and so would now be around five years after graduation from their UK HE institution. These would form the core of the sample for our primary research, augmented with additional volunteers drawn from other networks of alumni accessible through the contacts of the research team, which could broaden or deepen the sample as needed.

The restriction to non-EU international graduates was partly pragmatic, as the i-GO study sample available comprised that subset of graduates (partly due to the intention of that project to complement HESA's 'Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education' surveys of UK and EU graduates). While it is clear that the participation of EU graduates also offers benefits to the UK, the divide between non-EU and other international graduates also reflected (for graduates in 2007 and 2008 at least) different levels of fees paid.

In consultation with BIS it was agreed to conduct 100 interviews. Although that number of interviews could not be statistically representative of the wide range of non-EU graduates, in terms of their personal characteristics and parameters of HE study, we sought within this interview sample to reflect the range of those characteristics and parameters. In consultation with the project Steering Group convened by BIS, a sampling matrix was proposed (Table 2). In this the primary variable was agreed to be the graduate's country of origin (classified in seven broad groups, see Table 3). Secondary variables comprised the range of other characteristics that the sample would seek to reflect, including gender, level of study, institution type and location, subject of study, country of current residence, current employment sector and source of funding. In addition it was felt important to try to include graduates with differing levels of positive (and negative) experiences of UK HE, and different extents of linkage with fellow alumni and other contacts made in the UK, in order to avoid potential bias in the sample towards positive examples.

Primary variable: country of origin							
Secondary variable	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7
Current residency							
Gender							
Level of study							
Subject of study							
HEI type							
HEI location							
Funding source							
Occupational sector							
Level of 'positivity'							
Extent of alumni links							

**Table 2** Schematic sampling matrix

It was necessary to group very broadly some of these characteristics, to reduce the granularity of sampling that would otherwise be required. As a result many compromises were made (agreed by the project Steering Group), such as the seven rather broad groupings of country of origin, their subject of study and institution type. Clearly it was not feasible within 100 interviews to represent every possible permutation of the key variables, so pragmatic selections had to be made to interview graduates who displayed different combinations of variables, in order broadly to reflect the spectrum of characteristics.

Different proportions (of the 100 interviews) were proposed for certain main characteristics (or groups within them) on the basis of rough approximation to their distribution in the overall cohort of non-EU international students in the UK, in particular their (grouped) countries of origin, level of study and gender. Hence quite high proportions of the sample were sought from China and India, and about 60% would be graduates of taught postgraduate courses, reflecting cohort characteristics. For other parameters, the proportions proposed were chosen either to shed light on certain sub-populations of particular interest or to ensure that the potential range of types was reasonably represented. UK-funded scholarship holders were deliberately somewhat over-sampled as it was believed they might provide particularly useful stories. Further detail on the rationale for selection of the proportion targeted for each characteristic is given in Appendix 1.



Variable	Grouping	% of international students in UK	Proposed % of interviews	Achieved % of interviews
Country of origin	China	22	17	15
	India	13	17	16
	Other Asian nations	25	16	16
	Middle East	10	10	10
	Low income nations	31	20	17
	Latin America	2	10	15
	High income	16	10	11
Current country of residence	Country of origin		80	77
	UK		10	16
	Other		10	7
Gender	Female	47	50	50
	Male	53	50	50
Level of study	Undergraduate (UG)	39	25	25
	Taught Masters (PGT)	47	65	65
	Postgraduate research (PGR)	14	10	10
Subject of study	STEM (& medicine)	38	30	34
	Business/finance	31	30	24
	Arts & humanities	7	15	19
	Social sciences	17	15	20
	Other	7	10	3
HEI type	Research-intensive	58	60	61
	Other	42	40	39
HEI location	England	83	80	86
	Other UK nation	17	20	14
Funding source	Self-funded	68	60	63
	Scholarship	18	30	33
	Other sponsor	14	10	4
Current occupational sector	STEM/manufacturing		20	23
	Education inc HE		15	19
	Business/finance		15	14
	Health/social care		10	4
	Media		5	4
	Government/public		15	8
	Law		5	6
	Retail/logistics/services		5	14
	Other		10	8
Positive experience	Yes		50	63
	Somewhat		40	26
	No		10	9
Extent of links	Professional % personal		60	42
	Only personal		30	42
	Few/none		10	15

**Table 3** Interview sample characteristics: target and achieved proportions and distribution in international HE cohort. Cohort data for 2011/12 from HESA

The agreed 'target' characteristics of the interview sample are outlined in Table 3. Stratification of the sample was conducted by selecting and inviting small groups of graduates to interview from within the volunteer pool, with repeated iterative adjustments on the basis of the characteristics of those actually taking part in interviews. This required substantial and persistent effort and communication amongst the interview team, particularly given that a proportion of graduate volunteers who had been selected were then not available for interview within the timeframe for the primary research.

As can be seen from Table 3, this rather labour-intensive, iterative process delivered an actual interview sample which closely matched the target proportions for most of the key characteristics, particularly gender, level of study, institution type and, crucially, the country groupings. For some other characteristics the 'match' to target was more approximate, but some interviews at least were achieved for every targeted sub-group of all key variables. More detail on the characteristics of the sample achieved, including the countries of origin of the graduates and their individual HE institutions, is given in Appendix 1.

The match against target for the more subjective characteristics of positive experience and extent of links was not quite so high, but the sample did deliberately include a significant number of examples anticipated to be less 'positive' overall, to counter risk of positive bias. Classification against these two factors had to be made on the basis information supplied by the graduates prior to interview, whereas we found from detailed information provided during interviews that these earlier responses were not always consistent. While this did not affect the inclusion of 'negative' examples, the proportions of the respective sub-groups of 'positive' respondents were somewhat different once the interview information was taken into account. The targeted proportion for those with established professional and personal linkages turned out simply to be too high an estimate, in comparison with the circumstances of graduates in reality.

As part of the iterative selection and invitation process, potential gaps in the range covered by the original sample – such as certain subjects of study – were identified, which we attempted to fill by issuing invitations to specific target groups within other alumni networks, including a number of institutions and scholarship schemes. The list of alumni groups that supported the project in this way is given in Appendix 1.

In numeric terms, eligible volunteers within the original sample from the i-GO study comprised around 180 graduates. Around 100 other volunteers came forward as a result of our contacts via other alumni groups. It was from this combined group of 280 graduates that we drew the final 100 graduates for interview.

The interviews were conducted by the interviewers within the research team over a period of five weeks in early 2013; the duration of each interview was 35-50 minutes. The 'portraits' of interviewees and transcripts of interviews were analysed to identify reported benefits and other results of interest, which were then grouped and used as the basis for coding of the interviews. This process was conducted largely on a 'bottom-up' basis, i.e. the specific benefit types were identified from the interviews rather than using a classification from previous literature, but taking into account what was available from the literature and also the research team's prior experience.

### 3.3.1 Countering positive bias in the interview sample

Research which is not representative statistically of the population from which it is drawn, and uses a sample of respondents who are self-selecting (i.e. who volunteer to take part), has an inherent risk of bias. There was some likelihood that those who were keen to participate might generally be those with more positive experiences and stories to tell, although arguably those with strongly negative views might also like the platform of the research to air their views. In order to counter the possibility of the research only reporting those with positive experiences, the sample was designed to include around some graduates with known 'negative' experiences, as indicated above, but some investigation was necessary to judge whether the 10% targeted was an appropriate proportion.

It was possible to compare results from interviewees' pre-interview survey responses and interview information with results from the wider graduate cohort to comparable (or proxy) questions. Results for our interview sample as a whole are reported in Chapter 5 on 'other results', and can be compared with responses to similar questions in the i-GO study (BIS, 2012) and using International Student Barometer (ISB) research.

One question which offers a proxy for a graduate's overall positivity towards their UK HE experience (or not) is whether they would recommend a similar experience to others. The ISB contains a question on whether a graduate would recommend study at the graduate's institution to others, and a similar question was included in the i-GO study. These both suggest that, typically, only about 5% of international students/graduates would not recommend their study experience to others. A broadly similar figure was obtained in the i-GO study for recommendation of a UK HE experience in general, confirming that the vast majority of experiences (perhaps 95%) were positive. In comparison, the responses of our interviewees who had also responded to the i-GO survey (to which we had access) indicated that 4-5% would not recommend their experience to others.

The combination of these two indicators, bearing in mind that these 'recommendation' responses are only a proxy for overall positivity, seem to suggest that the interview sample was not substantially 'more' positive in outlook than the cohort as a whole, and that seeking around 10% of interviews with graduates with 'negative' experiences was appropriate. This suggests that the research results obtained should be reasonably reflective of international graduates from UK HE in the period studied. However, it is acknowledged that given the nature of the population it is difficult to quantify or eradicate bias fully from the findings.

## 4. Benefits of international graduates

### 4.1 Benefit types and classification

In this chapter we present the main evidence from our primary research into the wider benefits of international HE in the UK, investigated through the experiences and perceptions of international UK alumni recorded in our 100 interviews.

At the highest level, we grouped these benefits and impacts by beneficiary:

- benefits to the UK (host country) – groups A & B
- benefits to the international graduates themselves – group C
- benefits to their countries of origin (source countries) – group D.

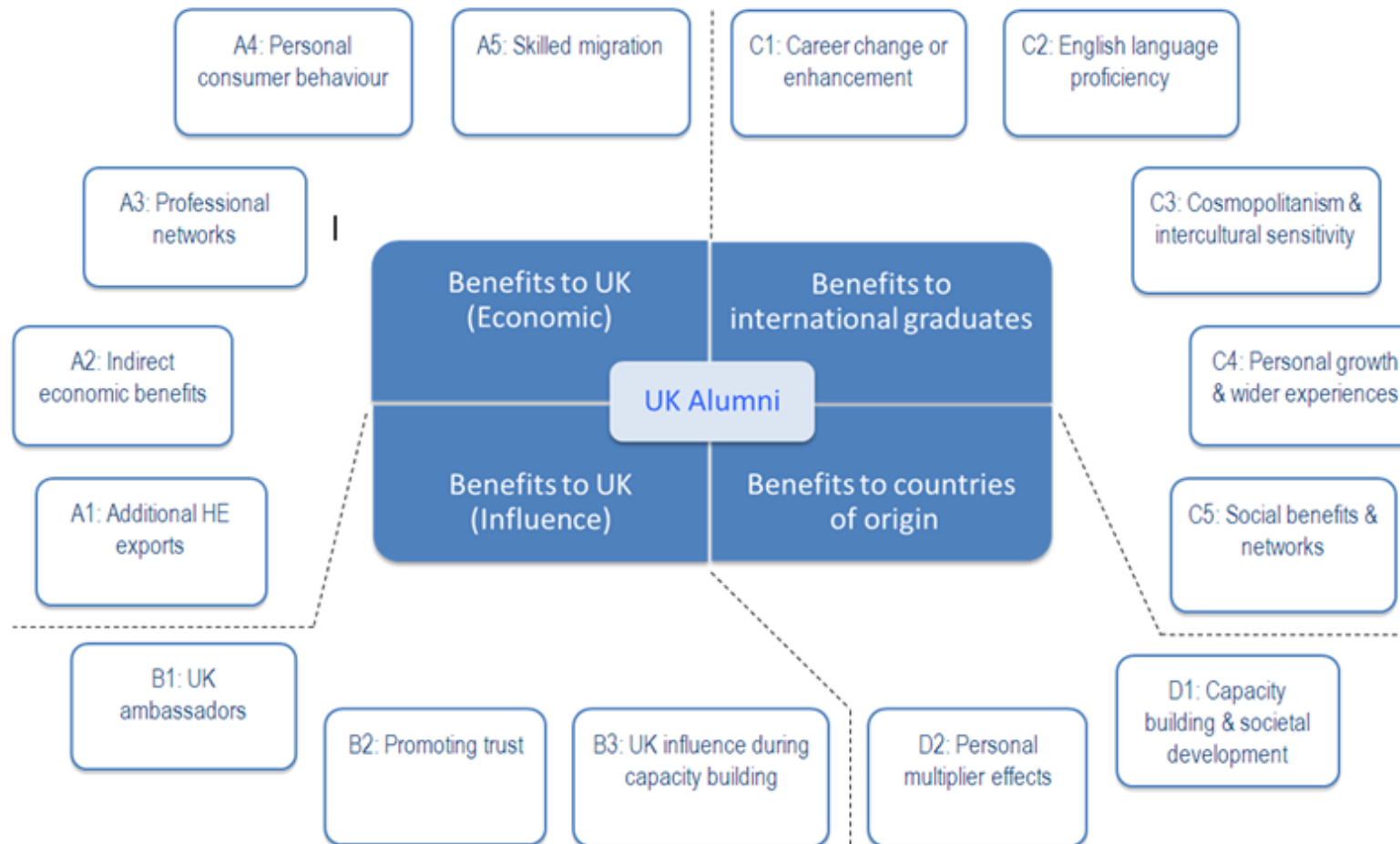
Within these very broad groupings, we identified a total range of fifteen benefit types inductively from the interviews. These included two sub-groups within benefits to the UK, economic (A) and influence (B). The fifteen benefit types are depicted in Figure 3.

Some of these benefit types map well onto types of impact identified in the existing literature, but others less so. Table 4 attempts to map the fifteen types to known benefits in the form of de Wit's (2002) rationales for international education. As can be seen, many do not map uniquely and there is also much overlap between them. We chose to define and describe the benefits on the basis of the evidence obtained during our primary research.

De Wit rationale	UK Economic	UK Influence	International graduate	Country of origin
Financial	A1			
Economic	A2, A3, A4, A5	B1, B2, B3	C1, C2, C3, C4	D1
Academic	A1	B3	C2, C3, C4	D1, D2
Socio-cultural	A3	B1, B2	C3, C4, C5	D1, D2
Political	A3	B1, B3	C3, C5	D1, D2

**Table 4** Benefit types identified against de Wit's rationales for HE (de Wit, 2002)

In the remaining sections of this chapter, each high level benefit grouping (A-D) is introduced, set in the context of any prior knowledge obtained from our literature search, and then each benefit type within it is defined, described using primary research evidence and illustrated with a short case study of an example from the alumni interviewed.



**Figure 3:** Benefit types identified from interviews with UK international alumni

## 4.2 Benefits to the UK (host country)

Benefits to the UK were grouped into two main sub-groups, economic (A) and influence (B), in which there were five benefit types and three types respectively:

Economic (A)	Influence (B)
Additional HE exports (A1)	UK Ambassadors (B1)
Indirect economic benefits (A2)	Promoting trust (B2)
Professional networks (A3)	UK influence during capacity building (B3)
Personal consumer behaviour (A4)	
Skilled migration (A5)	

### 4.2.1 Benefit type A1: Additional HE exports

Alumni with a positive experience of their personal participation in UK HE report that they have recommended or would recommend others also to apply to the same institution and/or to UK HE generally.

#### 4.2.1.1 Research evidence

Within the interviews, almost all (around 9 out of 10) alumni expressed positive views on their overall experience of undertaking HE in the UK, positive specific reflections on their HE institution, and positive perceptions about its impact and the benefits they had gained. The vast majority indicated that they would recommend a similar UK HE study experience to others.

However, the extent to which they had actually or actively made such recommendations varied considerably with their personal circumstances. It ranged from alumni who worked or volunteered in promotional activities for the UK HE sector, such as visiting schools to give talks about UK HE or supporting marketing campaigns, to those who had simply influenced a younger sibling or close friend to follow their path to the UK. The latter situation was extremely common. Alumni returning home are in a particularly strong position when it comes to influence upon potential students, transmitting the benefits of the UK experience to the next generation of internationally mobile students. Examples across this range included:

- Chinese Manchester graduate I37 worked for a very large educational training company in China: *“A lot of students in China come to us, seeking for help not only in language training like IELTS, TEFL, also for the application to study abroad. They need our advice, from me or from my colleagues who’ve had experience from studying abroad, to tell them what’s the right [thing] to do. [I] share my experience to show what I am doing before and what I am doing right now, to tell them you have a choice to be a*

*better person, you may have a better choice to study abroad to become a different person”.*

- Colombian law graduate I60 undertook a Masters at Liverpool and then a PhD in South Africa. She wrote to all final-year law students at her university in Colombia recommending that they study in the UK: *“Oh, not only I would, I have [recommended it]. And at least five people have gone there upon my insistence. After I finished, I circulated through my circle of friends in the law school in Colombia. I said, “Look, there’s a very good scholarship, very good university. Please, if you are very smart, apply because it’s a great opportunity.”*
- Nigerian human resources manager I68 had been supported by the British Council and now assisted their promotions of UK HE: *“I’ve been in speaking programmes for the British Council. I’ve insisted, I wanted to do this for free. I’ve, you know, specifically shared my own experiences and encouraged Nigerians to think about going to the UK for university. We’ll travel around Nigeria, all the way to Kano in the north.”*
- Leeds Metropolitan management graduate I84 participated in British Council events with other returners in Indonesia, and had directly supported two others to apply for Masters degrees in the UK.
- I10, an Indian graduate who undertook a taught Masters in international business at Nottingham: *“As the time has passed, I realised the importance that the higher education has in my life. That is the reason I thought I’d send my younger brother to the same university last year”.*

Where it was evident that an alumnus had young children, they were asked if they would send their own children to attend UK HE. In almost all cases they indicated that this would be likely if circumstances were appropriate, and several said that they would definitely do so. Strong personal commitment to their UK university was also demonstrated by a handful of alumni who indicated that they had made, and in one or two cases were making regular, donations to their alma mater, although this appeared to be quite a small minority. It seems likely that the proportion will grow as many progress in their careers and continue to perceive positive benefits.

We had access to the responses to the i-GO survey of many of the alumni we interviewed, and posed a similar ‘recommendation’ question during the preparation process for the interviews. Those results are summarised in Chapter 6. Most of these alumni had been positive when originally surveyed by i-graduate in that study around 3 years after graduation. If anything, they were now even more positive. Around half of the (few) graduates who had originally been ambivalent or somewhat negative in their perceptions had now changed their views to positive, and would now recommend or had recommended the UK HE experience to others.

#### **4.2.1.2 Implications**

The vast majority of alumni interviewed were either recommending others to participate in UK HE at least to some extent or would do so given the opportunity. That extent depended not only on their environment and personal circumstances, but also very much on their personality, as the more outgoing individuals were more confident in actively relating their

positive experience, while others did do more quietly and modestly within family or friendship networks. Some of these direct recommendations were amplified through the use of social media networks.

Underpinning these recommendations to others to study in the UK, which would result in further UK education exports as well as some other future benefits, there was consistent reporting of positive perceptions of a distinctive identity of UK higher education and especially its pedagogy. These perceptions are described in more detail in Chapter 6.

The i-GO study (BIS, 2012) suggested that, reflecting on their experiences of UK HE, around 85% of UK international alumni would recommend their institution to others, 90% were satisfied with their learning experience and over 80% felt their UK degree was worth the financial investment. These survey statistics from 2007/08 non-EU graduates appear to relate high satisfaction across learning, living and support aspects of their HEI experience. Asked if they would recommend HE study in the UK generally, 80-90% (of various groups within the cohorts surveyed) would do so. These are very similar results to those obtained over a number of years through the International Student Barometer, which demonstrates a strong correlation between student satisfaction, particularly with the learning experience, and potential positive recommendations to others.

International student satisfaction surveys also support this very positive view and the increasing concentration on the student experience in UK universities is likely to maintain or even increase such satisfaction levels (UKCISA, 2004, 2011). The UK has a strong reputation for certain values and a strong reputation for educational quality. Its approach to teaching and learning can foster strong relationships between those who learn and those who teach, often resulting in learning partnerships built on enquiry, respect and challenge. Although international students will engage to some extent in wider local and national socio-cultural activities while in their host countries, their main interaction with the host country's values and culture is initially via their host institution.

### Case study: I60

Alumnus I60 related a quite complicated but uplifting personal experience of UK HE. After a law degree in Colombia, she pursued postgraduate law course options in France and the UK, having also done an exchange to the US. The UK appreciated her strong local degree attainment and she thought a UK Masters would be prestigious in Colombia; her grandfather had studied at Oxford. Accepting a place at Liverpool, she won a Hodgson Scholarship there.

She viewed her time at Liverpool as *“the time of my life... absolute delight”* and took every opportunity to participate, from the RAG committee to voluntary work and even Spanish lessons as well as part-time work, and notes the opportunities afforded her through the Scholarship trustees. She loved Liverpool itself and made friends from all over the world, finding that experience personally profound but quite shocking – as she had to *“make peace with my devils”* (i.e. overcome her own prejudices). Overall she reports that it made her more open, more flexible and confident to blaze any trail.

Having wanted originally to work in international litigation she changed direction and



### Case study: I60

worked for the World Trade Organisation and then as an intern for the UN in South Africa, where she moved with her husband and is now also studying for a PhD. The Masters directly enabled much of this progression.

She is still in touch with her Liverpool lecturers and actively involved in the alumni network both in the UK and South Africa, as well as donating to the university regularly. She circulated a personal recommendation to all student finalists at law school in Colombia that they consider studying in Liverpool and/or the UK, and 5 students have since come to the UK. She also notes that the UK is becoming the destination of choice for HE in Colombia, partly due to the language and London's dominance as a corporate/financial centre.

## 4.2.2 Benefit type A2: Indirect economic benefits

This benefit type comprises a range of tangible trade and commercial benefits to the UK, other than additional education exports (A1) or personal consumer behaviour (A4), that have arisen directly through the activity of the alumni since leaving HE in the UK.

### 4.2.2.1 Research evidence

A minority (perhaps 1 in 10) of the alumni interviewed reported specific instances where they had personally been responsible for, or very influential in, commercial transactions with enterprises in the UK. These were typically between their employer in their home country (or in a third country) and a business or organisation in the UK, or could relate to development of new business ventures. Several of these were reported by those working in their family business (typically after undertaking a business-related course in the UK):

- Interviewee I10, an Indian graduate managing his family's steel manufacturing firm, selected a major supplier based in the UK, through a contact he originally met while a student in the UK.
- I5, a Pakistani graduate in a management role in the family leisure-sector business, ordered £500k of go-karts from a UK supplier he met at a trade fair in the Middle East, reporting that he had struck up conversation with them because they were based in the same county as the university he had attended.
- I19 in Hong Kong worked in her family's aviation business representing European manufacturers in Asia: *"One of our main suppliers is actually a British company, and we are currently thinking of setting up a joint venture in Hong Kong...it's mostly me who deals with that company."*
- I3 worked in his influential family's diamond business and reported that he *"like[s] doing business with people from the UK – it's easier"*, and also intended to enable his UK HE academic contacts to engage in research in the Indian jewellery and diamond industry.

In other cases there was economic benefit to a UK employer or organisation as a direct consequence of working with the graduate, including more than one who was involved in setting up new offices for a UK employer in their home country, such as:

- I66 from China who studied psychology and initially remained in the UK working on a post-study visa. She undertook much of the market research behind the decision for her UK employer to open an office in Shanghai in order to expand its Chinese operation, and helped them practically to open it.
- Indian graduate I86 who was assigned by his major employer to manage major UK contracts due to his experience of an MBA at Cardiff and resultant contacts. Recently they had been working on acquiring a UK business.

A handful of graduates were specifically doing business with fellow alumni now working in the UK, including I25 who worked for a Sri Lankan engineering company (in East Africa) for whom he had set up several partnership ventures with UK engineering firms in which his fellow Sheffield alumni worked.

#### **4.2.2.2 Implications**

Although the reporting of specific business transactions was relatively rare, such benefits to UK commerce may increase and evolve with time as the alumni progress to more senior career positions with more influence, as many are yet early in their careers. Several of the alumni reporting these trade relationships worked in their family businesses, in which they may have had accelerated career paths compared with other career settings, and hence were able to influence commercial transactions at a relatively younger age. The overall extent of these economic benefits is not readily estimated, but at the very least there was evidence for some tangible benefits already, in addition to many more instances of active collaboration and widespread expectation that business with the UK would ensue when circumstances enabled it. Together these could coalesce to become substantial trade and commercial benefits to the UK economy.

The extent to which these benefits are causally related to the graduates' experience of HE in the UK, or whether some of them would have transpired anyway, is not always certain. This is explored further in other sections considering the role of personal networks and also the impact of trust in the UK.

The British Council reports that those who trust people from the UK are more interested in opportunities to do business with people and organisations in the UK than others ('Trust pays', British Council, 2012). This reflects the belief by economists that trust is an important factor in international business links/relationships – higher trust tends to mean lower commercial risk. It will also tend to build upon any existing UK brand value. The report also suggests that direct experience of, and engagement with, UK cultural institutions (including studying in UK HE) enhances trust in the UK and its people.

The belief that a positive UK university experience by an international student can lead to a commercial advantage for the UK has been long understood. The Dearing report stated "*Such people [international students and alumni] are likely to look naturally to the UK as a potential trading partner or for investment opportunities.*"

### Case study: I60

Interviewee I19 came to the UK from Hong Kong as a teenager to study at Cheltenham Ladies College, then a Foundation degree at Kingston and BA in design at the University of the Arts London (Central St Martins). Her father's aviation business in China sells products on behalf of European partners into Asia. She reported having a great time in her years in British education, forging friendships with people of all nationalities and enjoying the style of learning. Although she would have liked to work in design in London, visa limitations meant she returned to Hong Kong and joined the family firm where she is currently a manager.

I19 believes she has added competitive advantage to their business through her international experience, her fluent English language and also high transferable skills developed as part of her degree (including presentation and project management). She manages the company's PR and also entertains business partners when they visit Hong Kong; understanding European culture and being able to relate to people irrespective of cultural background really helps.

One of their main suppliers is British, a relationship she manages, and they are currently setting up a joint venture with a British company in Hong Kong. She expects to take over from her father to run the business in around 5 years time.

She now regards both England and Hong Kong as 'home' and returns to the UK twice a year for holiday and business. Away from her professional work, she has assisted UK friends looking for jobs in Asia and also arranged for quite well-known DJs within her UK networks to play in Hong Kong.

### 4.2.3 Benefit type A3: Professional networks

Many alumni reported that they maintained informal professional networks with fellow alumni and other personal contacts made while they were in the UK. These were global but included contacts based in the UK. As professional networks these offer the possibility of future business transactions and collaborations of economic value to the UK.

#### 4.2.3.1 Research evidence

Although relatively few of the alumni interviewed had already engaged in tangible business dealings with UK enterprises (A2) or with fellow HE alumni, more expected that they would do so in future, as well as with other contacts they had made while they had been in the UK. Those contacts were now part of alumni's professional networks, based in the UK or anywhere globally. It is the potential for future economic benefit from commerce or other business collaboration through these contacts in the UK that makes this benefit important. The number of graduates reporting this potential was modest – perhaps 1 in 5 – but somewhat greater than the proportion who had conducted tangible business directly with the UK already. Examples included:

- Interviewee I4 who worked in film in India and had strong contacts through his fellow alumni from Bournemouth: *"If I want to do something with UK, if I want to have a collaboration, I have classmates who are working in the same field over there right*

*now; some of them have their own companies. And they are technically just a phone call away to arrange everything that I need in the UK, much [more] reliable business than something I would research over the internet”.*

- I65 was a senior attorney specifically deployed by her employer – a law firm in the Dominican Republic – to work with and support UK companies considering investments in the region.
- Graduate I74 was marketing director for a multinational fashion retailer based in China and expected soon to start work with UK companies.
- I77 had her own PR agency in Bangladesh and had collaborators around the globe developed through the personal networks she created while at Middlesex.
- I99 worked as a lawyer in Turkey and had actively made links with the British expatriate community, promoted through the British Council, offering specialist services in relation to property acquisition and other legal issues.

Two alumni cited that they had a long-term aim to set up small consultancy firms with fellow alumni (in their UK scholarship schemes).

Amongst the strongest examples of professional networks were those reported by postgraduate research graduates who were pursuing academic careers. Personal contacts they had made during their research in the UK tended to sustain and could form the basis for new and future collaborative research projects, either between themselves and their former UK research supervisor and/or group, or with others with whom they had made contact or worked jointly:

- I48 was in the final stages of medical training at Harvard towards a specialised clinical and research career in oncology, built on the MB/PhD programme she undertook in Cambridge. She continued to collaborate with her former Cambridge lab and expected those research contacts to sustain into the future: *“I’m also continuing to collaborate with the lab in Cambridge. So we’re still writing papers together and I Skype with them regularly. I still have a Masters student from the lab who is doing some experiments for me and we’re publishing something together.”*
- I61 undertook a Masters in London and was now completing a PhD as well as having worked on projects with the British Council and RNIB for several years in her native Lebanon. She developed an international network of contacts while in London and anticipated a partnership with a university in Lebanon: *“we worked on building an Arabic / Middle Eastern network to share stories and to share experience and knowledge and issues related to inclusive education... and to make it available in Arabic”.*
- I1 had worked in research for the Indian government before undertaking a PhD at Southampton in grid computing. Now working in a university in India, he remained in touch with his supervisor, and former research colleagues had visited to foster partnerships.

- I44 developed an international network of specialists while studying for her PhD in medieval literature in Cambridge, and intended to return to New Zealand to pursue an academic career and facilitate group research projects in this subject.

#### 4.2.3.2 *Implications*

UK-based personal contacts made during study in UK HE can form part of alumni's professional networks and may represent considerable potential for the UK in the long term in the form of business links, collaborations and joint development work. A small number have already produced tangible economic benefits (reported under benefit type A2), but these are most likely outweighed by the potential future value inherent in these professional networks.

Those who undertook postgraduate research degrees and now work in research careers tended to have more developed international professional networks than others, which may reflect the more interconnected and collaborative nature of their work, in comparison with graduates at the same career stage in other industry sectors. In this sense they may be somewhat similar to graduates working in family businesses, i.e. they may have somewhat 'accelerated' career positions in relation to international networking and professional interactions.

It may well be that the professional contacts held by graduates will become more active with time, once graduates and many of their contacts move into more senior and influential employment positions. It is impossible to quantify the long-term benefit of these linkages, including the extent of benefit to the UK economy. Nonetheless, the existence of UK employees and their organisations amongst networks of trusted potential business partners, on a global basis, must represent considerable potential value in the long term.

An evaluation of Chevening scholars and their influence refers to the "powerful network of long term friends and this is having a tangible impact on UK interests" (River Path Associates, 2004). The importance of such networking both for the alumni and the UK is recognised in, inter alia, the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission's support for its Professional Networks.

#### Case study: I4

Indian alumnus I4 had originally studied engineering but went into the media industry, initially working largely backstage and behind the camera for 10 years. In order to support his career shift into the business side, and in the absence of postgraduate taught courses in film in India, he came to Bournemouth University. He was attracted by the 1-year structure and practical course content. His grandfather had traded through an office in London, and his parents were in education, so he inherently believed there would be value in a Masters, in career terms, and funded his studies through an educational loan.

He lived in a hall of residence which was segregated in a different wing to UK nationals, and found most of his informal socialising was therefore with other international students, and he was President of the Society for People from the Sub-continent. He also worked part-time at Debenhams, although hid this from his family as they would

### Case study: I4

believe it beneath his class.

Now back in India, he reflects that the year away gave him time to think about all of the other things he could do in the media, and the ability to think laterally and scale up projects internationally. His new research skills were also really useful, somewhat to his surprise. Now an entrepreneur, he has been involved in a wide range of media-based activities. He believes the single year in the UK widened his outlook far more than five years in his own country would have, and considers it “*One of the best investments of my life.*” I4 would strongly recommend UK HE to others as it gives a headstart and encourages some enterprising risk-taking.

He now has international personal and professional networks in which working relationships are easier, reporting that if he wanted to shoot a film in the UK, he has classmates who have their own companies who are just a phone call away, which is a much more reliable supply chain than one researched on the internet.

In wider terms, his perceptions of the UK have changed, being “*just people like any other – not everybody is a character from a military textbook...not everybody is a Mountbatten.*” He also now feels more connected globally, rather than somebody from Bombay, and when he sees news about the UK feels personally affected. He remains in touch with his lecturers, has revisited the UK and two more students have gone to Bournemouth on his recommendation.

I4 also thinks that India benefits from his study abroad – the media industry obtains people who are trained in cutting-edge techniques and future ideas, way ahead of what is taught locally, so this impacts strongly on an industry struggling for people with sufficient skills.

#### 4.2.4 Benefit type A4: Personal consumer behaviour

A further type of tangible economic benefit to the UK arises from alumni through their personal behaviour as purchasers or consumers of products and especially as travellers who return to the UK. In this section we consider only those who have returned to their country of origin or now live in another country, not the UK. Benefits from alumni who remained in the UK since HE study are reported under benefit type A5.

##### 4.2.4.1 Research evidence

Some aspects of graduates’ personal behaviour were explored in the interviews, as potential consumers having been exposed to a variety of UK brands while they lived in the UK. Given the vast and increasing number of international alumni of UK HE, collectively this could represent considerable purchasing power worldwide.

Where the experiences of alumni as consumers during their time in the UK had been positive, they had built up some degree of brand loyalty and many remained consumers of those UK exports in the long term, as well as influencing others’ purchasing behaviour. A number of alumni reported that they continued to purchase UK brand items (such as

clothing) by mail order from their home country, and/or favoured UK brands that were available locally, such as interviewee I89 who claimed to be something of a shopaholic loving UK brands, with a particular affinity for Boots as she had studied in Nottingham. She reported that she tended to pick up UK brand products in her supermarket and also seek UK shops whenever she travelled:

*“Whenever I go and if I see[ ] a Topshop or Marks & Spencer ...you’re going to walk into that store first because you know [it]. Whenever I go shopping I always look for either Body Shop or Boots or anything like that; ...to change that brand becomes difficult.”*

Many graduates reported that they were avid subscribers to the BBC, especially for its international online services, and certain other UK media such as international editions of the national press, while some others pursued UK-linked leisure activities such as support for a football team, while others maintained subscriptions to UK scientific journals or technical press as part of their ongoing professional development.

The development of social contacts and personal relationships during study in the UK, and maintaining them, is considered in detail in a later section (benefit type C5), reflecting its prominence as a personal benefit for almost every international graduate interviewed. While the majority of alumni reported that they did maintain social interactions with fellow alumni or other contacts made during their UK HE experience, only perhaps 20-25% had until now actually travelled back to the UK. The dominant driver for such visits was to meet the friends in the UK that they had made, although a minority also made trips for business purposes. Some of these were regular visitors, making annual trips, and the majority of those who had not yet returned expressed a desire to travel back to the UK for leisure or social purposes (but often could not yet afford to do so).

- Life in student hall did not suit interviewee I50 and it was through her subsequent shared house with British students that she made strong friends during her first degree in forensic psychology at Staffordshire. She reported still watching the BBC constantly, shopping online in the UK and returned frequently for holidays: *“I’m very fond of the UK...and I keep going back on vacation. Every time I’m on vacation, I tell myself I have to go somewhere new, and every time I still go to the UK”*.
- I70 visited every year for a fortnight from Thailand with her daughter, staying with the neighbour next to the house in which she had lived during her PhD at Essex.
- I77 visited regularly from Bangladesh and the extent of her personal and business contact with the UK was such that she planned to buy a house in London.
- I99 returned to the UK from Turkey regularly to visit both her personal friends and also her tutor from Anglia Ruskin, whom she regarded as family: *“I have also English people from my university and also I have a contact with my tutors still. We are sending email cards to each of them. When I came to the UK, I visit them, we will meet in a café and [be] just like a family”*.

A number of graduates professed very strong liking for the particular UK city in which they had studied including (but not exclusively) London, which was an additional driver for their return as tourists.

#### 4.2.4.2 *Implications*

As was the case for other benefit groups, the extent to which return travel to the UK may translate into quantifiable economic benefit to the UK is partly dependent on the alumni's current personal circumstances. While the proportion that had returned to the UK for social or leisure purposes by the time of interview – around 5-6 years after graduation – was modest (roughly 1 in 5), many more expressed a desire to do so when circumstances allowed. The i-GO study and information within the ISB both offer evidence that the majority of alumni and current students express an expectation to travel back to the UK for leisure purposes at some point.

Given the accelerated career progress expected for these graduates, it is likely that many will in due course be able to afford such travel, so this particular benefit is expected to sustain over the long term. There is some evidence from graduates of earlier cohorts supporting the idea that enhanced career progression leads to a faster rising salary, in turn allowing additional disposable income, some of which will be spent in the UK or on UK brands (Roberts et al., 2012).

As personal relationships with those in the UK are regularly now supported by the use of social networks, the longevity of these relationships may be great and this is likely to be reflected in more return trips to the UK long into the future. These relationships were the dominant driver for return to the UK for the alumni interviewed. Relatively few had returned for professional purposes, but this is likely to increase as they progress in their careers to positions requiring international travel.

The extent of economic benefit to the UK of the purchasing power of a single international graduate as a consumer, and their behaviour, is relatively limited, but may potentially grow as they become more affluent, assuming they maintain social relationships and loyalty to UK brands of product. However, the accumulation of these individual transactional benefits across the huge population of international graduates represents very substantial economic activity. This is highly dependent on the experience of the individual as a student during their time in the UK, in terms of their social interactions and wider exposure to life in the UK.

#### Case study: I70

Thai graduate I70 had been an assistant teacher in a Thai university but wanted a PhD from the UK in order to become a lecturer. With her husband working for the Thai airline and a child, she chose Essex for its proximity (she thought) to Heathrow, although she subsequently regretted that choice as the department was small with limited facilities and opportunities. Her other expectations of the UK were based on James Herriot novels.

Her daughter (then 2½) attended school and had a great time while also learning English. She made some Thai friends locally but also some strong British friends through her daughter's schoolfriends and also her next door neighbor in Colchester. She found the university quite supportive in helping her sort out domestic issues and the atmosphere very collaborative generally.

Having returned home she has a better position, earning more and undertaking research and lecturing with a growing international research network; she considers that people



### Case study: I70

now listen to her and respect her views much more. She is also much more able to engage with new people at conferences, with greater confidence and better English. In retrospect she would choose a different HEI and wishes she had been more informed in her choice.

She retains very good friends in the UK with whom she stays in touch and visits every year (with her daughter) for a fortnight. They with her former neighbour for a week annually and her daughter maintains English friends too.

Her research network is international and includes UK academics. She encourages her students to think globally, and to look for funding in their projects (films and media) internationally, with the aim of exporting Thai culture around the world.

#### 4.2.5 Benefit type A5: Skilled migration

Some international graduates who came to the UK to participate in higher education were still in the UK when interviewed. This offered an opportunity to consider the extent to which the UK benefits from their presence as migrants.

##### 4.2.5.1 Research evidence

When the proposed interview sample was designed, the aim was for around 10% of interviews to be with alumni who now lived in the UK (as distinct from 80% who had returned to their original home country and 10% living somewhere else). When the interviews were conducted, more graduates turned out to be currently resident in the UK, which had not been evident from earlier information. As a result 17 interviews were with current UK residents, close to the 15% of international students that are understood on average to stay in the UK long term. Broadly these alumni were in three sub-categories.

The majority of the 17 had gained employment in the UK immediately after their degree, aiming to make the most of opportunities in the UK prior to intended return to their home country at some stage. For most, the interview was around 5 years after graduation, but for some it was as short as 3 years. Many of these alumni were working in technical roles for UK engineering, telecommunications or IT companies, and earning salaries that in some cases encouraged them to stay somewhat longer than they had originally intended. In several instances their companies had put them into international teams or projects, sometimes working on projects involving their home country. These would very clearly fall into the category of skilled migrants of high value in the UK labour market:

- Nigerian alumnus I53 studied engineering management at Wolverhampton and took every opportunity to work throughout his stay in the UK: *“The work experience here was paramount because you have to have money to leave there and come and study here. My motivation was if I come here and get international work experience, when I go back, I will be much more valuable ... because I have seen how it had been outside in a developed world”*. He now worked for Alstom in the UK but some of his projects were in Nigeria, to which he wanted to return and improve energy technology there: *“in another three to five years from now, I should be a lot more involved in the*

*development of my country. I work in the energy sector which is a big issue in my case and I am going there because of that. That is my dream.”*

- I86 studied mechanical engineering at Sunderland and was currently undertaking a part-time MSc in subsea engineering sponsored by his UK employer, whom he first joined partly to offset his first degree costs. In the long term he wishes to work in the Middle East in oil and gas exploration.
- I90 studied computer science at Newcastle and took advantage of the work experience placement allowed through her visa. On graduation she joined a software company and was now a senior executive. She was thinking of studying for an MBA here too, wanting to maximise her gains before returning to Nigeria with her husband.
- I88 undertook an MSc in signal processing at Strathclyde and subsequently a PhD in Dublin before returning to Kings London for a research position related to MRI cancer imaging. He expected this to lead to other research positions abroad and ultimately hoped to become a scientist / entrepreneur.
- Chevening Scholar I28 took an MSc in operational communications at Coventry to try to differentiate herself and progress in the IT sector in Mexico. After a frustrating period trying to get an appropriate job on return to Mexico, she came back to the UK with a Mexican company and has been deployed on strategic international projects in IT and communications infrastructure. In the medium term she wished to return to Mexico and teach in a university: *“I spent eight months trying to get a job [in Mexico]. I got recommendations from my teachers here but when it comes with the government the reply cycle is that I was 29 and I was overqualified. And that it was going to be very difficult for me as a woman to be in a team that was composed of men”.*
- I83 had planned to return to China after international business law Masters at Leeds but stayed temporarily as the Chinese boyfriend she met here had yet to complete his PhD. He subsequently joined ICI and she joined a Chinese logistics and immigration company in the UK, where she was an immigration consultant assisting transitions for Chinese people coming to the UK.

A smaller number of those currently employed in the UK did wish to remain here permanently, and stated in the interviews that they would seek citizenship or residency, including I45 who had started an engineering degree at Nottingham’s Malaysian campus but transferred to Nottingham itself, and afterwards worked in a succession of aerospace supply chain companies. She now worked for Rolls-Royce and would soon be eligible to apply for residency:

*“I’m an integrated project team leader... I have got designers in Germany and engineers in America, and I have travelled for work before to both places. My supply chain is global, so occasionally, I have to meet with the overseas supply chain”.*

The third group was a small number of female graduates had remained in the UK long-term through marriage to a UK national, either somebody they met during their HE study or in one case beforehand. For example Canadian alumna I16 studied global and political economy at Sussex and initially returned to Canada to work for a healthcare charity with

her Welsh partner. They subsequently returned to the UK with his job, where I16 now worked at a senior level in the health and social care sector.

#### **4.2.5.2 Implications**

Based on the interviews conducted, the majority of alumni working in the UK after their HE experience do intend at some point to return to their original home countries. They have tried to make the most of opportunities to work here in order to maximise the value of their investment – combining study and international work experience – as well as raising funds to offset the costs. Many work in key industries such as engineering and IT where the UK has a shortfall of skilled labour. As skilled migrants, they are significant contributors to the UK economy.

A constraining factor in the cohort sampled was that the majority graduated in 2007 or 2008 during the economic crisis and as the UK was entering recession. Several alumni interviewed had been extremely keen to try to remain in the UK to work, to consolidate their learning experiences, but as they found little on offer they opted to return home where they considered that there might be more opportunities. The extent of ‘skilled migration’ evident within the sample was perhaps therefore lower than might be the case in more positive UK economic circumstances.

Viewed broadly though, there was clear evidence of an increasingly mobile global labour market, with skilled workers returning to their original and other countries after HE study and work experience, while some others who returned home immediately after UK HE were expecting in the future to come back to the UK for other work opportunities. Very few seemed to anticipate staying in the UK permanently, with the exception of those who had married UK residents or had similar very strong personal ties.

There is an established literature on skilled migration and labour market movements, and current active debate on net migration and international students. Given that level of knowledge and debate, there is little value to be added by rehearsing it here. Broadly there is evidence suggests that around 15% of international students stay in the UK in the long term, and our evidence seemed to support this or indicate that fewer will stay permanently.

There is also very active discussion in the HE sector about the extent to which immigration rules are perceived to deter international students from working in the UK post-study, and how that may potentially decrease the UK’s attractiveness as a host country. The UK currently needs talented international alumni within the labour force to support its growing knowledge-based economy. In academia, as just one such sector, high proportions of researchers and teaching staff in areas such as STEM disciplines are required from overseas in order to sustain HE quality and delivery, as the supply of such skilled people within the UK is no longer sufficient. Recent government announcements reflect these needs for skilled labour, indicating that international alumni earning a reasonable salary – which presumably indicates areas of skills shortage – will be permitted to stay and work after their HE study.

### Case study: I28

Mexican graduate I28 had obtained top score in her first degree in cybernetics in Mexico and worked in the very male-dominated world of ICT. She felt she needed something different to progress, and obtained a Chevening Scholarship to attend an operational communications MSc course at Coventry. Amongst the 40 nationalities on the course were many Chevening Scholars and this had a strong impact on her; *“It changed my little world”*: in Mexico you live with your parents until you marry, so suddenly she was thrust out of her comfort zone. The language, culture and independent living were all a challenge, but facing them with others she gained hugely in confidence, instilling a positive mindset *“in the face of anything”*.

Back in Mexico I28 tried to get a job with the Government in telecoms regulation, but could not break into it. Told that (at 29) she was over-qualified and would not be able to fit into a male team, she was repeatedly rejected. After a short period in the more liberal financial sector, she applied for a visa and came to the UK. She worked for her old Mexican company, and now leads international teams working with different companies on strategic IT and communications infrastructure work. Long-term she would like to return to Mexico to teach at a university, in the *“English style”* (which she sees as challenging students, *“not spoon-feeding them with knowledge”*). She also has aspirations to start a consultancy company with other Chevening Scholars.

I28 meets up with alumni friends whenever they visit London. She returns to Mexico twice annually and feels she is a travelling ambassador; living here she feels she is continually refreshing her bond with the UK and its benefits and can transmit them back home when she visits. She encourages others to study abroad and shares her experiences. Her view is that such an experience *“takes the best of you”*, and that she has benefited from a gender-blind education that has changed her life in several ways, for which she feels deeply grateful to the UK.

## 4.2.6 Benefit type B1: UK Ambassadors

International alumni have the potential to return to their home countries with a greater understanding of the UK’s culture and values, through which they promote and help to facilitate future educational, cultural, developmental and business links and collaborations. Alumni with strong positive experiences of HE study in the UK can develop into informal ambassadors for the UK. In doing so, they advocate positive aspects of our culture and values, which potentially supports UK economic, socio-cultural and political agendas.

### 4.2.6.1 Research evidence

While the vast majority of the alumni interviewed felt positively about their UK HE experience, and would recommend others to undertake a similar study experience, some reported a much more emotional attachment to the UK. This was expressed in a variety of ways, ranging from alumni who simply professed themselves as ‘anglophiles’ or that they loved the UK, through to those who felt a much deeper commitment or ‘emotional bond’ with the UK which impacted strongly on their behaviour, activities and lives.

Amongst the former were alumni such as:

- Interviewee 73 from Mexico: *“Well I’m kind of in love with [Britain]. I think they’re great people. Maybe they don’t laugh all the time but they have their own kind of warmth and I’m quite in love with the whole culture.[...] Yeah, I do [recommend people to study here]. And I mean if they can’t go and study I always recommend they at least go visit.”*
- I7 from India who had studied both undergraduate and Masters degrees in the UK (and who was later offered a post in the university), having worked in a number of countries: *“I love Britain...it was the best time of my life”.*
- Alumnus I18 from Malawi felt that the connection spread to values and impacted on his thinking and understanding professionally: *“I would say I have some bias towards the UK. I would say that I feel a part of the UK and I also feel like biased if we discuss things, like international issues with global health. I would easily say that I think the UK is better.”*

Indonesian Chevening Scholar I29 tried to articulate what was behind her connection somewhat more specifically:

*“I feel I’m closer to the UK. I don’t know which makes me closer, the people or the atmosphere or even with my own memories of living there. After we get back, we also have the reunion with other Chevening scholars and we are received by the British Ambassador in Indonesia, and I felt more of a tied connection between the two countries. Maybe this is also because I was funded by the UK government.”*

Many of those who expressed this type of connection or ‘emotional bond’ most strongly had been supported through UK-funded scholarships such as the Chevening or Commonwealth schemes. Many of them clearly saw themselves as ambassadors for the UK, to varying degrees, including some who felt very strong personal obligations to support the UK and to endorse and promote its values and culture wherever they went.

Such personal bonds or commitments underpinned voluntary work and related activity that they engaged in, such as giving talks in schools or universities, mentoring applicants to UK HE, helping with local assessment of scholarship applications and more general assistance at their local British Council office or British High Commission. For some this could intermingle with their professional activities, when they attended receptions for overseas delegations or business visitors hosted at these ‘British’ locations or even when their professional role brought them into contact with commerce involving the UK.

- Chinese PhD graduate I100 had been funded by a university scholarship at Cambridge, but felt this bond extended to the UK much more generally and into his professional activities: *“[You] have a friend down in China. [Cambridge UK is] my second hometown, always. When I have a negotiation with Bank of England, I always go kind of emotionally bonded. I feel like there’s a bridge between China and UK at my job in the Central Bank. When the Bank of England or other UK people visit me in my office or duty, I will [treat them] like family, quite like a kind of large family, like an old friend. Emotionally bonded”.*

- Chevening Scholarship holder I65, a financial lawyer from the Dominican Republic, related her own emotional position to what she saw as the purposes of the Chevening scholarship: *“I think that the Chevening wants to select leaders and at the end, what the whole scholarship thing does is promote the relationship between the two countries. And why do I think this? Well, I went to England, I studied there. I feel a much more concrete link now to UK and I feel like I want to do things that will keep the countries together. I really want to promote activities or certain events that will eventually lead to a culture link between the Dominican Republic and the UK. When I returned to the country, one of the first things that happened was that I opened the newspaper and some enterprises had come from the UK and they were seeking investors here in the Dominican Republic, and it was with the UK Embassy. I went to the activity because I wanted to interact with the UK companies. I wanted to see if they needed any legal assistance and promote the relationship between the two countries.”*

Many of the alumni articulating this ambassadorial attitude most strongly had benefited from very full and wide experiences during their study in the UK, although often within a single-year programme. It was hard to find any cases where a graduate valued their institutional relationship positively while feeling estranged from the UK national culture. However, conversely, one or two graduates whose academic experiences had been disappointing had found other aspects of their UK experience to be very positive, and were in hindsight very happy to have gained a UK Masters and now felt *“special and different”*.

#### **4.2.6.2 Implications**

The most powerful examples of this apparent ‘emotional bond’ were exhibited by Chevening and other UK-funded scholars, which suggest that it could relate in part to recognition that the UK had supported the student. That could potentially result in the graduate feeling some moral obligation to ‘pay back’ in some way, although the attitudes held seemed to transcend this. It also represented a personal articulation by the graduate of the underlying diplomatic purpose of the scholarship scheme, suggesting that the model works, and very strongly for at least some graduates.

On the other hand, it was very clear that other alumni too have developed a lasting relationship with the UK which is somewhat emotionally based, beyond what might be expected as a rational reflection of a positive experience and expression of gratitude for it. ‘Emotionally bonded’ ambassadors were therefore by no means restricted only to UK scholarship scheme alumni.

Many of the international alumni carry a positive mindset in relation to the UK, and as a result are likely to promote its cause and endorse UK values to varying degrees. The extent to which this ambassadorial attitude will have concrete impact will depend much on their personal circumstances, as is the case for many of the potential benefits identified in this study. The elite Chevening scholars articulate their ambassadorial role most clearly, and many will enter careers in which this mindset may have strong and wide influence. However, the much larger number of other alumni, many acting in a more modest sphere, could also have considerable effect cumulatively, across a wide spectrum of activities.

What this suggests is that graduates’ recent positive experiences of HE in the UK have equipped them as a global force of informal ambassadors, all unique, who individually and collectively have the potential to support the UK in some unspecified but beneficial way

when the opportunity arises. The specific impact of any individual ambassador may be hard to judge, particularly at this early stage of their careers.

However, continued investment in the HE sector to assure continued positive experiences of international students while in the UK should maintain a supply of future ambassadors, while any weakening of that underpinning experience could reduce that flow or its potential for benefit. Continuity of communication with and support for these alumni through alumni networks, to nourish their positive memories, would also seem highly logical as a mechanism to sustain their attachment.

Some studies have suggested that that overseas study can engender positive perceptions of host countries amongst alumni and help to generate allegiances to their host countries, although there is no evidence for the additional benefit that this has in terms of increased levels of engagement or influence through soft power. Generally this type of benefit tends to be assumed or inferred, rather than based on sound evidence or detailed research, so this has been seen as potential ‘additional impact’ beyond the more measurable direct economic, educational and more personal benefits.

A single graduate, from Iran, believed he was playing an ambassadorial role the other way around. In addition to the benefits that he felt he achieved personally, he thought there was some benefit to both Iran and the UK in his presence in the UK, showing the UK that *“the government of a country may not represent the people of a country”* and telling people he met in Iran that he had been welcomed in the UK.

### Case study: I100

After degrees in China, interviewee 100 studied for his PhD in economics in Cambridge, funded by a Cambridge Overseas Scholarship. He considered this to be his dream opportunity, as the state of economics education in China in the 1990s was very limited and the British PhD would set him way apart for any career in economics. His family had no prior experience of UK HE and neither he nor they could fund the PhD themselves.

He was in Cambridge for 4 years and active in student life, leading his College Student Union and a student society, and undertaking an internship in the City. He also met his (Chinese) wife during this time who was a fellow student in Cambridge, now an academic in China.

After gaining his PhD, I100 went to the USA to work at the World Bank and then the IMF, before returning to China. He believes the Cambridge PhD directly enabled him to get those jobs (and at the IMF there was a group of ex-Cambridge economists). He commented that he found those with US Masters to be experts, but that his UK experience gave him a deeper ability and confidence to learn or research anything he needed to.

Now in a director-level role in China’s national bank, he works with the Bank of England and other international banks. This takes him to the UK professionally and to host UK visitors; he spoke of his “emotional bond” with people in the UK, and other UK HE alumni, that underpins relationships with them.

I100 thinks his international experience fostered in the UK helps his international work,

**Case study: I100**

and that intercultural relationships will be increasingly important as China's place in the world changes. He believes his HE experience has impacted on his life in many ways and expects the benefits to be lifelong, and feels some obligation to Cambridge as a result.

He keeps contact with alumni and his former supervisor socially and has other UK HE contacts in his social and business networks. He has helped to run the Beijing alumni group for his College and is clearly a strong ambassador for both Cambridge and UK HE generally.

**4.2.7 Benefit type B2: Promoting trust**

Positive perceptions held by international alumni of the values of the UK as a society and culture can assist in building up trust in the UK, leading to perceptions of it as a desirable partner in potential trade, diplomatic or developmental relationships.

The underlying basis for this benefit relates closely to the issues of mutual understanding and soft power, introduced already, but in this context there is more overt recognition of its potential in terms of national economic benefit, in addition to wider political or other impacts.

**4.2.7.1 Research evidence**

When asked during the interviews to summarise in two or three simple words what they thought characterised the UK, alumni tended to offer words like (or meaning) 'open', 'tolerant', 'fair', 'mature' (as in historic), 'considerate' and 'civilised', as well as 'organised', 'international' and 'welcoming' (and to a lesser extent what could be summarised as 'idiosyncratic'). There was also a consistent perception of an underlying entrepreneurial or 'can do' attitude within the country. Many alumni were clearly envious when they compared this with how they characterised at least some aspects of their own country.

Several reflected positively on the way of life in the UK and wished to do what they could to emulate it and foster it in their home country:

- Graduate I65 from the Dominican Republic reported that her time in the UK enabled her to realise that it is possible for things to be organised rather than chaotic: *"When you go to the UK and live in a country that's so civilised and, for example, the culture of queuing. You have no idea how big an impact that is for me. In Dominican Republic, you can't get a Dominican to make a queue for their life. They skip queues and when you're on the escalator, everyone stands everywhere, it's terrible. Those little things actually make a difference. It's a cultural thing, it's an educational thing and when you see that it can actually happen, that people actually do it, then you think, "Oh, my God! There is hope as well here." And just...seeing it, living it and you start doing it. You start telling your friends to do it and little by little you feel confident that things can change, you can change them for better, taking the example of other nations such as the UK".*



- I21 from South Africa too felt she had gained a valuable insight into how life “could be”, which she would now try to embody at home and instill in others. She now realised that you do not need a flashy car and to demonstrate your wealth to be happy, but that it is possible to be happy by being content and confident in yourself: *“I have seen how people in a first world country live, people with money and people without money as well. In South Africa there’s a huge divide between the rich and the poor, it’s evident in where people live and what they drive, and the types of houses they live in. You could just go back and earn your good salary, as you’ve got status and you’re in a good job, so you could just join the other side of the divide. But [in the UK] you could be on a train with someone who works in the city and someone who’s just a labourer. There’s no divide. In the UK, you can’t tell because people just love the way they live.”*
- Alumnus I11 went back to more senior roles at the central bank in Nicaragua, after a development finance Masters at Manchester, to which he attributes his recognition of the potential for growth, both personally but also within his developing country. He was recently financial controller for a \$400 m US-funded power investment project. His father had also studied abroad: *“My dad’s influence played a very important role you know: “Don’t settle for the mediocrity that you see around yourself.” When I landed in UK, it was like, “Oh, wow! This is how other people work and live” and so eye-opening in the sense that there is much more to go out and develop yourself, to reach higher. It’s changed me, you can always strive to think bigger and to do bigger things and know that is definitely achievable.”*

An Indonesian graduate, I84, whose family had no experience of living or studying abroad, said that she could not think of anything bad about the UK and that it was “100% good.” More importantly, her perceptions on the British perspective of her own part of the world had changed for the better *“They don’t hate Asian people or discriminate against them”*. The proportion of alumni interviewed who felt that their perceptions of the UK had changed as a result of studying here was high (around 90%, as reported in Chapter 5). From the interviews, these shifts in perception appeared to be entirely positive.

#### **4.2.7.2 Implications**

Alumni’s perceptions of the UK, as a nation and society, were articulated in much the same way as the personal or soft skills of an individual (as opposed to their technical knowledge, which at country level might equate to a particularly advanced technological infrastructure, for example). They are also many of the qualities that people tend to seek when entering business and personal relationships. Together they seem to underpin a general impression that the UK and its people can generally be trusted, as well as having an international outlook and being potentially ‘open for business.’ It would be hard to generate a more positive set of qualities (brand values) for a nation seeking to do business on the world stage.

Held by alumni, these positive characterisations of the UK are now spread across the globe and in almost every employment field and industrial sector. With that global spread and the sheer number of alumni, these very positive perceptions of what we might call ‘brand UK’ comprise a very positive potential legacy from the UK’s position as a leading provider of international HE.

International students are open to inspiration during their stay for study, and these alumni had clearly been impressed and inspired by some of the particular qualities they perceived in UK society. In addition to reinforcing a positive image of the UK, there is also the potential that the alumni will themselves endorse and embody these values and begin to embed them in their home countries, as part of their development and capacity building (benefit type D.2), which may align their countries further with the UK for mutual benefit. This would of course be particularly true of those working within education, where their UK positive experiences will be relayed not only to colleagues but also to the students.

### Case study: I65

Now an articulate and confident young lawyer, Dominican Republic alumna I65 had worked as a paralegal in a local firm after her law degree, but won a Chevening Scholarship to study an LLM in International Law at King's, London. Studying in London was an obvious choice for this subject area. She reports having made the most of London life and also travelled extensively in the UK, making many friends at King's and with other Chevening scholars. She is now incredibly positive about the whole experience and has since supported three Dominican Republic friends to apply for similar scholarships.

I65 returned to her law firm and was quickly promoted to senior attorney. She reports a different focus now in her work, and much higher confidence and credibility when dealing with her investment bank clients. Her company recognises this and makes the most of her international experience when developing business – she recently hosted UK Stock Exchange visitors. I65 also seeks out potential UK clients wishing to invest in her country, wishing to advise but also to protect them. She feels something of an emotional bond with them due to her UK experience, and has high levels of trust in people from the UK.

Personally I65 feels that she has (even) greater confidence and that HE in the UK has helped her learn to think, rather than just gain technical knowledge. Overcoming the challenges of going to the UK and setting up a life alone there have also resulted in greater independence. Although the experience has not changed her friendships greatly at home (where there are few UK HE alumni), she is very active in social networks and contacts with friends from King's who are in the UK as well as with Chevening alumni worldwide. I65 feels she is now more open-minded and can readily mix/work with nationalities she'd never have met otherwise – such as from India. She has already been back to the UK to visit those friends.

In the Dominican Republic she can now see where development needs to take place, as she feels she has seen how things can work and can be very civilised (in the UK). She wishes to foster similar attitudes in her country, partly by behaving that way herself and by influencing others. Practically she helps the British Embassy and supports their promotion of the Chevening scheme as well as incoming UK trade visits and delegations.

I65 feels that a part of her has “*stayed in London*”, and she wants to do all she can to help the UK, as well as hoping that more in her country could also benefit from what she learned from us.

### 4.2.8 Benefit type B3: UK influence during capacity building

International graduates returning to their home country after study in the UK to undertake capacity building or other societal development work do so with embedded British values, ideas and structures, which may be seeds for long-term growth of different linkages and synergies with the UK. Some of these impacts may be by design – for example Chevening and Commonwealth scholarship alumni are expected to have a positive impact on their home countries. However, many other international students are also motivated to study abroad partly to gain skills and experience that they can contribute personally to national socio-economic development agendas, including education and research. Other mobile students can also help to build capacity less explicitly, and independently, through their own personal career trajectories after their studies. These varieties of impact would be considered another format of soft power.

#### 4.2.8.1 *Research evidence*

The impact for the home country of graduates' UK HE experience in terms of capacity building and societal development is covered in benefit type D1. This includes alumni who use their HE experience as a catalyst to pursue careers in development work, education or policymaking. Given the positive perceptions held by alumni about UK society, described in the last section, it is likely that many of these 'capacity-building graduates' will carry those UK values into their work. In so doing they may be embedding UK values within their home country's society and structures, which in the long term should help to foster stronger diplomatic and cultural links with the UK, with possible economic results too.

Evidence for this activity is also described under benefit type D1, but brief examples are included here:

- Interviewee I61 was working on joint UK-Lebanon development projects to support the visually impaired in Lebanon, based on the standards and training methods she witnessed in London and work at with the RNIB;
- Alumnus I18's current work in Malawi was on nutrition standards and related education, strongly informed by his learning in the UK and subsequent joint research work;
- I15 was working with Rothamsted Research and DFID in his development and policy projects on resources, ecology and agriculture in Kenya;
- Nigerian I68 was involved in setting up work placements in his Nigerian company, in collaboration with the London Business School;
- I56 has helped to develop national healthcare policies in Colombia, based on policies and practice he studied and saw in the NHS and NICE when studying in London, and was also setting up joint research projects with London institutions in his policy development work.

One graduate considered that his ambassadorial role would help to derive a major long-term benefit to the UK. He could conceive that as a result of UK support for capacity building and development of his country, reduced immigration might ensure in the long term:

*“You help in alleviating suffering somewhere else, and your government is spending a lot of money sending assistance overseas, where people are struggling. Now people like to migrate to the UK because they think that’s where they’re going to make a living. But there will be a time when the UK will [have made] many other UKs in the world, and so then why would you go to the UK to look for a job when you can do it in your home [country]? I think the UK will benefit quite a lot in several ways. My being here, it’s like an ambassador, so we can advocate for the UK which has the aim of making sure that we are happy back in our homes. We have been there, yes, we have been taught what to do. I think the goal of the UK is to make sure that the world is somehow a better place but maybe, little by little, your government will [need to] spend less money to support international initiatives.”*

#### **4.2.8.2 Implications**

Some aspects of this benefit type overlap with the potential impact of professional networks (benefit type A3), but they may accrue over a longer term. Impact could accumulate by the embedding of UK methodologies, standards or working cultures during capacity building in the developing nation. Laying down such footprints as a nation develops could deliver substantial benefits in the long term as the nation grows socially and economically. A practical example can be seen through the adoption of UK electrical standards by most Commonwealth countries, as a result of their education systems being developed from UK curricula; this has now resulted in substantial export and licensing trade with the UK in the electrical field from these countries, whereas many non-Commonwealth nations have adopted US standards.

Although the number of examples of such activity was relatively limited across the range of interviews, the potential long-term benefit from any one of these ‘seeds’ could be high.

#### **Case study: I15**

Kenyan alumnus I15’s parents were both teachers and he chose the UK to study a science BSc – at the University of the West of Scotland – as he had obtained a Commonwealth Scholarship. He saw it as an opportunity for some international exposure, remarking that his experience at university in Kenya had been limited due to its wholly national make-up.

In Scotland he found the academic staff very helpful and there to be lots of trips and opportunities for international students. He reflected that he had had high expectations but that these had been delivered – and people in the UK were more friendly and less self-centred than he had anticipated.

Gaining the UK MSc has given him credibility and he thinks younger people see him as a role model. On his return to Kenya, he joined a consultancy firm – a change of career as he had been teaching – but then secured a PhD place in New Zealand as his primary focus had turned to ecology and agriculture; he had seen that all British people had enough to eat and could see no reason why all Kenyans should not enjoy the same right, as they have the resources. He is now on a mission to ensure that Kenyans make better use of those resources and can feed themselves.

I15’s confidence means that he feels he is becoming ‘a natural leader.’ He has

### Case study: I15

developed an international network of people who want to help Kenya develop sustainable agriculture and ecology; his links are strong and growing stronger. He plans to forge relationships between an HEI in Kenya and three UK universities, and to initiate a student exchange scheme between these universities. He wants to develop sustainable policies for the Kenyan government, and believes that his education will make them listen. In the meantime he is also working with a UK research institution as well as a UK government office in Kenya, involving the UK in his developmental plans.

## 4.3 Benefits to international graduates

### 4.3.1 Benefit type C1: Career enhancement or change

One of the main motivations for participation in higher education, especially internationally and/or at taught postgraduate level, is the potential for improved employment or career outcomes and all the advantages of income, status and influence that may follow. This section considers individual career-related benefits reported by alumni, both as enhancements to pre-existing career trajectories and changes to career paths.

#### 4.3.1.1 *Research evidence*

The majority of alumni interviewed suggested that their UK HE experience and/or qualification had directly contributed to them securing their current job, which contributed to their assessment that it had been a worthwhile and positive investment. A higher proportion (about three quarters) suggested that the qualification had enabled them to progress faster in their career than those without such a qualification, while an even higher proportion suggested it was the skills gained from the overall experience that enabled faster progress. Semi-quantitative treatment of their perceptions on these issues is reported in chapter 5. With so many alumni citing career enhancement impact, the following examples are only illustrative of a range of direct career-related benefits.

In some cases graduates returned to their former employer but secured rapid and significant progression within that organisation. Some but by no means of all these had been funded or part-funded by their employer, while some others managed to obtain scholarships to support their study:

- Interviewee I6 had worked in the Ministry of Justice in Ethiopia, but after a Masters in criminal law and justice at Birmingham, rapidly became a team leader in the Ministry. He subsequently became an attorney and consultant helping citizens obtain justice.
- Having originally been a reporter, after an MA in Cardiff Jamaican I51 was immediately promoted on return, although subsequently moved into public relations and now heads PR for Jamaica's largest bank: *"It has been an absolute passport. I left Jamaica as a reporter on the Sunday desk. When I got back, they made me editor for education."*

- I68 obtained a British Council scholarship while working for a Nigerian bank, and after a business Masters at Birmingham returned and was quickly and repeatedly promoted to become Head of HR, the youngest ever holder of such a post there.
- Venezuelan I72 who completed a Masters in Manufacturing Engineering and Management in the UK returned home to the same company. She was given a new appointment and soon afterwards promoted to Head of R&D. Generally staff progress on the basis of time served, but within 5 years she was supervising a team of 25 staff and 6 interns a year.

Others articulated the influence of their UK HE qualification and/or experiences in securing employment, either with their current employer or a previous employer:

- I21 applied to a multinational employer in finance and thought her success due to her combination of experiences – a business studies BA at Manchester within which she had done two internships, and two years work in the UK on a post-study permit afterwards. This was stronger than many others in South Africa with international degrees. She has since leapt up the ladder in sales management roles: *“I’m not sure with just the degree, without the additional work experience, if I would’ve been led into the managerial position I immediately got on my return to South Africa.”*
- Chilean alumnus I21 had been working in the finance sector but during the financial crisis sold his car and took out loans to study an MSc in finance at Manchester. On return he obtained a job elsewhere in Chile and then a more senior role in the central bank, where he earned 50% more than he had before study abroad, and has been able to pay off his loan. His level of English and his Manchester degree *“differentiated”* him.
- I48 obtained a good post with a Singaporean bank almost immediately on his return to Hong Kong after a statistics MSc at Sheffield. Citing the benefits of the content of his qualification, the well-known UK institution and his improved language skills, he expected to advance further in the financial sector.
- With an MSc in development economics from Oxford, New Zealander I64 commented that since returning she had been offered every job she had applied for, including a later change in sector. She put this down not only to the prestigious university but also her proven ability to engage and work in different international settings and overcome personal challenges.
- I78 had worked in accounting in India but came to Cardiff for an MBA. On return he got his dream job with a global consultancy and since moved to other multinationals. He felt the UK MBA had a big impact on his career progression and earnings, chiefly enabling him to think more strategically.
- After his PhD in economics at Cambridge, I100 obtained posts in the World Bank and the IMF, where he felt he had credibility amongst many other such elite alumni, before returning to his native China to work in a director level role for the national bank.
- I33 was a highly artistic student in Brazil and attended Central St Martins (University of the Arts London) for a fine art BA. While in London her work was spotted by influential

people in the art world, leading to personal international exhibits and the subsequent launch of her personal career as a video/multimedia artist, now with her own studio and label in Brazil.

Several graduates reported that their taught postgraduate course directly enabled their progression to a subsequent PhD, which in most of these cases was in a third country rather than the UK. For example, I15 had been a teacher in Kenya but won a Commonwealth Scholarship for an MSc at the University of the West of Scotland. He was now completing a PhD in New Zealand on ecology and agriculture, with a mission to return home and develop sustainable policies to ensure that Kenyans make better use of their resources and can feed themselves.

Others found that their British undergraduate degree facilitated their passage to a taught Masters course in the UK. I39 from Brunei studied for a B.Ed at Stirling and then moved to a Masters in EFL at Birmingham, before returning to become Head of the Inspectorate section of the Islamic Education Department.

Those who were working in their family's businesses understandably did not see their UK HE experience as directly contributing to securing their employment. However, several of them reported that they felt they were able to operate at a more effective and mature level with that experience, and to bring new insights to these businesses.

As may have been noted within some of these examples, another career impact for alumni was the influence of their study in UK HE as a catalyst for a change in career direction. This was reported by nearly as many graduates as reported enhanced career progression, so only a few of the many examples can be given here. Some had set up their own businesses, as a result of the greater self-confidence and broader perspectives that resulted from their HE study, but for most others the experience appeared to catalyse them into pursuing a more personally satisfying career direction, which in many cases also had a distinct societal aspect. In some cases the content of the HE course directly supported the new career direction, but this was by no means always the case, suggesting that the overall experience could be equally or more important.

- Interviewee I2 worked for a multinational financial firm for two years back in India but then opened his own company, citing a large rise in confidence as a result of his study in the UK.
- I8 had been a journalist in Brazil before undertaking an MA in fashion journalism at University of the Arts London. On return she obtained a fashion job but then decided to set up her own fashion label and company: *"The MA was related to what I really would like to do, working with fashion. And I just had the courage to, when I got back to Brazil, to decide okay, I think I really would like to work with it, it's not a dream anymore, so I can have it. I opened my own company with this partner... Also I think the UK culture is really [you can] do it yourself' and 'go ahead'."*
- Chinese I47 had intended to work as an engineer in his father's factory in China but after his advanced engineering MSc at Manchester developed a career in education and consulting, working for the largest provider of educational services in China. He put this down largely to his UK experience which made him a much more open-minded person, as well as one who thinks more critically.

- Colombian medical doctor I56 studied an MSc in London in health policy planning and finance as he hoped to have a bigger impact in Colombia by moving into health policy. On return he obtained a job in the ministry and was able to utilise his understanding of the UK health system in policy work in that local environment: *“When I came back to [Colombia]...then I started working here in the ministry. Here I really applied what I studied [in London]. So it was very important for me; now, my life is completely different than what I did before. A very, very big impact.”*
- I62 was a successful mid-career civil servant in Brazil but came to Loughborough to study development, accompanied by his young family. He worked temporarily in the UK in technical consultancies but then returned to Brazil to become a university professor.
- Having worked in Mexico in television, I73 undertook an MA in communications at Westminster. He returned to recession-hit Mexico but after a period working in the largest university was hired as a PA to a Senator, and then returned to the HE sector to head up a university’s cultural affairs department.
- I72 was another relatively ‘mature’ student, coming to the UK from China having been an art teacher and working in government. After a Masters at the London College of Communication, she obtained a job with a US company in China but subsequently became marketing director for a multinational fashion retail company, earning at 5-6 times her previous level and enjoying worldwide travel.

#### **4.3.1.2 Implications**

As exemplified here, many of the graduates reported profound impacts on their own career and progression, almost universally positive, due directly to their HE course or the wider experience of studying in the UK, or both. In some cases it was the specific content and qualification that enabled them to obtain enhanced career progress, or a change in career direction. However, in other cases it was the deeper personal benefit of overcoming the challenges of travelling to another country, setting up remote from home and studying. In some cases what they saw in the UK inspired them to see new possibilities at home.

Although the detailed benefits vary, two consistent trends appear to be present. First, there was almost universal career-related benefit, which is to be welcomed since so many had cited career-related motivations to study in the UK in the first place. Second, there was great variety in the type and extent of impact, due to the individual nature of the alumni and their pre-existing social or cultural capital (including the opportunities open to them), although impacts were not always predictable as some alumni were inspired to follow directions they had not conceived before. Much of this impact relates to personal development and growth, which is also covered under benefit type C4.

In some cases career benefit resulted from perceptions, inherent in certain countries of origin, that graduates from overseas HE have a higher ‘status’ than local HE graduates. This was reported by some graduates from India, China and some developing nations, but may well be diminishing overall as the market for international HE expands and becomes global, potentially to be replaced by more discerning attitudes and greater understanding of the variety of international HE available. As that is the case it will be beneficial for alumni to be able to articulate the particular benefits of studying in the UK.



Evidence for improved employment outcomes after a period of overseas study tends to relate immediate benefits secured and/or employment in host countries rather than long-term progression in their country of origin. Some host countries collect data on the employment outcomes for skilled graduates, but if they only work for a short time they may not be included in any datasets. Data on career progression once international students leave the host country as alumni are very limited, as it is often difficult to track students as they move around during their early careers. In the case of the UK, national studies of employment outcomes for graduates (HESA's Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education surveys) have been restricted to UK and EU graduates. The i-GO study (BIS 2012) concluded that UK-educated graduates from non-EU countries achieved markedly higher salaries on return than the average in their country of origin, and that potential for career progression had been the dominant factor in their course selection.

However, as we have seen, career-related benefits of overseas study are not always immediate or short-term or easy to realise, and as some studies focused on the employment experiences of Chinese students have demonstrated (Gu, 2012). In the case of Chinese students it can often take time for them to re-acclimatise into their native labour market and to recognise how best to utilise their overseas experience in their local context. This can especially be true for students who were already had careers in their home country before studying overseas.

Equally, future projections of career enhancement may have to be tempered somewhat if the number of internationally educated alumni in a country becomes high. It has been considered that there may be an inverse relationship between the proportion of such graduates in the workforce and extent of enhancement they might experience.

However, our interviews provide unequivocal evidence for the strong and positive career enhancement directly or indirectly enjoyed by alumni of UK HE.

### Case study: I21

The thought of studying in the UK came to South African interviewee I21 when she had visited her mother who was working here. Having studied at a German high school in South Africa, Germany was another HE option, she felt a more natural affiliation with the UK through Commonwealth connections, but also felt a UK degree would be highly valued by employers at home. She chose a business studies BA at Manchester Metropolitan, as she thought the fees and cost of living would be lower than in London.

Arriving in the UK aged 23 she considered herself a mature student, but had to work part-time during terms to subsidise her costs, including as a night-time care assistant and serving in the university canteen. That and being very studious (she knew that she was paying, ultimately) she did not have much time to get into student life, but developed close European friends through sharing a house with other mature students. Her course contemporaries were from all over the world and she maintains many of those friendships now through Facebook. In the summer breaks she undertook internships with major financial firms, and reflects overall that she enjoyed the course.

I21 was able to work for 2 years in the UK on a post-study permit and then returned home. She joined a finance company headquartered in Europe (to capitalise on her UK experience) and has leapt up the career ladder as a sales manager. She feels that this

### Case study: I21

would have been impossible on the degree alone, as more and more people have an international degree in South Africa, but her experience of both degree and work in the UK differentiated her. She finds it easy to talk to European customers and Head Office.

Reflecting on her overall experience, I21 feels it made her more confident and independent but especially that she now feels different, having a different frame of reference now. *“I have seen how people in a 1<sup>st</sup> world country live”* but crucially she saw how the divide between rich and poor does not have to be stark, and difference classes can work alongside each other. She now feels naturally drawn to people who have also studied abroad because they too think differently.

At home she watches UK TV, supports Manchester United, and mail orders her clothes from Debenhams and Marks & Spencer. At weekends she does voluntary teaching in a township, and encourages them to dream and see beyond South Africa. She has revisited the UK socially and expects to begin to do so professionally as well soon.

I21 recommends talks about the UK all of the time, espousing in particular the tolerance she experienced: *“Britain is an asylum for people to be who they are”*. She observed that some British stereotypes were true – the stiff upper lip and some other idiosyncracies – but felt that these added to its character and uniqueness.

## 4.3.2 Benefit group C2: English language proficiency

One of the of the main ‘pull’ factors for international students who choose to study in the UK is reported to be the opportunity to study in English, and to improve their English language skills, whilst based in an English-speaking country. Irrespective of the course of study, many alumni whose first language was not English reported that their greater command of the English language was an asset that was valued on return to their country of origin.

### 4.3.2.1 Research evidence

The level of spoken English in the interviews with alumni varied somewhat but was, in most cases, higher than had been anticipated and was very rarely problematic. This could of course partly be a result of some bias in the emergence of volunteers, as those who were less confident in communicating in English might have been less willing to volunteer. In some cases, alumni’s command of the language was somewhat humbling to the interviewer; many apologised for perceived inadequacies in their grasp of English and yet succeeded in answering most of our questions with fluency and intricacy. This was in spite of the fact that some of them had returned to communities and employment where only a minority would have proficiency in English.

The majority of the alumni interviewed who were not native English speakers commented that their greater proficiency in English was appreciated by their employer in their country of origin. Some were clear that this directly assisted in securing their job, while for others it led to them being deployed into a role in which they would use their greater proficiency to the benefit of the company:

- Interviewee I19 believed she has added competitive advantage to her family's aviation supply business in Hong Kong through her fluent English, having been educated in the UK at both school and HE level.
- Both I23 and I24 undertook Masters courses in England which gave them fluency in English which is highly valued in their native Chile, in order to trade with North America and elsewhere. I23 regularly assisted senior staff in his company in presentations for potential work in the US: *"Well, here in Chile, the English is so appreciated, you know. We have different companies, for instance the company where I am working now, they are usually trying to trade with the US or with the UK or with Europe in general, and with Asian markets, and also they are trying to raise capital in other markets. So, English is always a very, very important topic when you are trying to get a good job in Chile."*
- While at Kingston for a business degree I 26 deliberately socialised mainly with British students, so that when she returned to Indonesia her English was very strong. She believed this assisted in getting a job with a multinational banking organisation when it set up a new office in Jakarta, as its operating language worldwide was English.

#### 4.3.2.2 *Implications*

The extent to which greater proficiency in English was related as a motivation and benefit of studying in the UK, understandably, varied strongly with the country of origin. It was most consistently reported by alumni from South America, China and SE Asia. The alumni whose English was least developed were mostly, but not exclusively, from China, but those who had tended to have spent relatively little time in the UK other than was strictly necessary for their course, and had 'narrower' experiences while in the UK.

In a world of increasing mobility and global employability, the facility to communicate fluently in a major world language is a considerable advantage. The extent of that benefit in relation to the English language has been evidenced both by the success of the English-speaking HE host countries in recruiting students to their English medium programmes, and by the clear motivation of 'competitor' countries to teach certain courses at tertiary level in English (many EU countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands and selected courses in Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea).

The return to home countries of a large flow of high-achieving alumni, who potentially enjoy enhanced career trajectories as well as influence in their home societies, assisted by global professional networks of English-speaking contacts they have made, can only add further cement to the role of English as the language of business.

#### Case study: I23

Chilean alumnus I23 and his wife both came to study at Birmingham University, in his case a Masters in construction management, with a loan from Chile. They chose the UK over the US on the basis of its European location and their expectation of a more international outlook. As a married couple they did not join student societies but he played recreational football; they also travelled extensively in the UK and Europe.

### Case study: I23

On return home, he found the Masters did help him get a more senior job but the advantage progressively wore off. It was the experience of study abroad, particularly in the UK, that he believed will sustain him with his career, as he is known to have been “*brave enough to put two feet out of the country*”. For him the wide intercultural experience was also highly valuable.

His company’s work is largely in Chile and other Latin American countries, but no direct professional connections with the UK. However, good English is really helpful to him and he speaks and thinks in English; not too many people in Chile speak it well. His employer uses his English proficiency, so when his boss went to the US last year he helped with the presentation and the papers. For leisure he reads books in English and will encourage his children to do the same.

They would definitely recommend the UK for university study and would like their children to attend. As a family they have retained many friendships with people in the UK and plan a holiday here in 2013. As well as UK friends, they have a network of friends made in UK now all over the world.

### 4.3.3 Benefit type C3: Cosmopolitanism and intercultural sensitivity

Through their experience of study on UK HE programmes with fellow students from many different countries, many alumni reported increased sensitivity towards other cultural perspectives and improved ability to understand and communicate with people from a wide range of different national and social backgrounds. These attributes help alumni to work and operate in other cultural contexts, and are sometimes described as the characteristics of global citizenship. This benefit can also be described as developing a more cosmopolitan outlook.

#### 4.3.3.1 Research evidence

Striking comments were made by some alumni during interview in relation to the highly cosmopolitan composition of the student body on their HE course, especially at Masters level. In general this was seen to have been a highly beneficial aspect – perceived as unique – of their UK HE experience. Most alumni had encountered a wide variety of nationalities and cultures in their classmates, and most believed they learned and developed greatly from those interactions. Some articulated a particular benefit in being part of an international and multicultural group, which collectively had to overcome the challenges of living, coping and studying in a ‘strange’ country and environment.

- Mexican interviewee I28 commented on the effect of the international make-up of her communications MSc course at Coventry: “*We were like 40 countries and many were Chevening scholars. The others were from a specific programme from China and others from India. Because so many people from so many different countries were put in the exact same situation as I was, the friendships and the relationships were stronger. You are left alone with 40 other people and you don’t have any friends, so you became friends very, very soon and lasting ones. My best friends are from the Masters*”.

- Hawaiian I58, who had previously studied in Japan, deliberately chose the UK for his Masters course on globalisation, feeling that the UK itself had a unique historical legacy of globalisation. He was particularly interested in both the international nature of the student body on the course but also the evidence all around him for multiculturalism, and its shortcomings, in British society.
- I60, a Colombian graduate studying law, commented on the strong friends she made at Liverpool and how the cosmopolitan student body impacted on her as she overcame her own prejudices: *“I got to live in one of the oldest residences for postgrads in the Liverpool university campus but how was I supposed to know that I would see the world through living there? I lived with the Turkish girl, with the Chinese girl, with an Indian girl, and with the girl from Holland. I still have strong relationships with them; they have become the friends of my life. So that also was very, very special. Because when I moved there that mix of culture was shocking, but at the same time you learn a lot about tolerance and how to make peace with your own devils, to be able to have a good time.”*
- Commonwealth scholar I64 was one of 25 nationalities amongst 30 students on her MSc in development economics at Oxford. This forced the New Zealander quickly to meet people with many different backgrounds, cultures and thinking, and she learned hugely how to engage with them.
- I86 from India found that the engagement with other students was highly significant for him during his MBA at Cardiff: *“The most important thing is just not the education in the UK but mixing with a lot of people of different culture, diversity, caste, creed, and religion basically. I interacted with people from foreign countries...you get to know about the culture, you will get to know about them, and then you learn so many things from them? And befriended a lot of people, learning their way of life was an amazing experience for me”*
- Argentinian I96 studied a first degree at University College London, and reported both short-term difficulties and long term benefit on return home, due to her personal intercultural development: *“I interact with people in a different way [now]. I’m more used to meeting new people even if they’re not from my country. I get along much easier because I’m more open to things from the outside. I got more international which sometimes it’s a good thing or sometimes it’s bad. Here in Argentina, we are not multicultural. We don’t have a mix of ethnic backgrounds, it’s a very closed society and it’s very national. I mean they all dress the same way here, they all think the same way. When you’re a bit different, you really stand out. At the beginning it was [strange]. When I came back from the UK, after living abroad for five years, I came back and you know, I realised I lost my friends, the ones that I have from school. I didn’t feel I belong to my country so the first month was very, very difficult for me. I didn’t understand what I was doing here, the way people think, how they dress, I didn’t understand anything. I was so used to this multicultural, everyone can do whatever they want or I mean, keep their religion, their style, their whatever and everyone accepts everyone how they are, and here they don’t. So, yeah, at the beginning it was very difficult. I’ve been here for four years now. I love my country and now I understand how it is here, I understand how it is abroad and I can adapt. So, now I’m okay. I’m happy here.”*

However, several alumni commented on the absence or small number of British students in their classes, which they felt detracted from the overall nature of the UK HE experience and its potential social benefits (these were particularly on Masters courses). Others commented, some adversely, on the practice of some universities then to house international students together separately from UK students, as this hindered integration between host country and international students:

- I15 enjoyed the experience of meeting many nationalities on his nutrition MSc at Glasgow but felt there was a downside in not meeting local students: *“They had given us a place where normally there are international students, so that made it possible for us to interact with many people from other countries. So most of the people I interacted with were not Scottish, but I have good friends from Greece, the US, parts of Africa, China, all over. I must admit, I didn’t have Scottish friends to be honest, maybe because of the way the accommodation set up.”*
- American graduate I69 had lived in Australia before doing a taught Masters in economic development at Manchester: *“Most of us actually came from overseas so, I don’t know whether we did this to ourselves or what, but we were quite isolated from the rest of the university. We had our own building, and we did a lot as a group because we were all new to Manchester. A lot of our courses were like this; we had our own computer labs, our own library, our own everything. It made it easier for me to meet people and less daunting, but with respect to having any sort of contact with people outside my course through the university, I didn’t really.”*
- I20 from China had a rather similar experience, also at Manchester, during his Masters funded by the European Commission: *“In my case, I was staying at one of the university dormitories which was three miles outside the city centre and most of the people living in that community were internationals. I think there were only a couple of British students living there, so that became a natural barrier for us to better integrate ourselves with the UK students.”*
- I93 studied financial management at Stirling, living in a hall of residence with many others from her university in Shanghai that had formal partnership links with Stirling, resulting in her rather interesting view on ‘foreign’ students: *“I make some new friends when I go to UK. But most of them are my classmates from the Jiao Tong University since we studied together and together go to the University of Stirling. And I lived in a dormitory; all my roommates are all Chinese but from other provinces. So I also made some new friends from Beijing and one friend from Taiwan. There’s not many foreigners [i.e. non-Chinese] in my class, because I think more Chinese students like to study finance; there’s only about four students from other countries.”*

#### **4.3.3.2 Implications**

Supported and managed well, the highly cosmopolitan nature of student bodies studying UK taught Masters courses, in particular, can offer a powerful long-term impact to those international students who embrace it. Many related their personal development towards ‘cosmopolitanism’ – and the ability to engage and interact sensitively with those of other cultures – to be amongst the most valuable benefits of their UK HE experience. For some it was the most highly valued aspect. The ability to communicate and work effectively with

others globally is of high potential value in society and also to many international employers.

There is of course a second potential benefit inherent in the diverse international student body, which is the 'internationalisation at home' benefit mentioned as context in Chapter 2. The presence of international students adds to the cultural diversity of UK HE, which can enhance the experience for home and international students, the institution itself and HE as a whole. This benefit can be inferred from the evidence of the alumni, although not uniformly as we have seen, but was not a focus for our primary research as it is relatively well understood and interviews with alumni are not the best route to investigate it.

There can also be a potential flipside to the influx of international students, particularly where there are negative societal attitudes to international students and their presence in large numbers in towns and cities. In Australia there have been cases of violence against international students, and in some countries there are concerns that international students could engage in terrorist activities, so they are sometimes closely monitored.

However, course cohorts are not always healthily diverse and a highly international (or even single-country dominated) composition of course participants can have negative implications for integration with home students and the overall student experience (ECU, 2012). This can be the case with some 1-year Masters programmes where many students are international, due partly to UK students' preference for part-time (2 year) programmes instead. However, most UK universities now attempt to mix nationalities in campus accommodation and provide opportunities for social and academic interactions between both host country students and international students. Some institutions are more successful at achieving integration than others, and it should be remembered that the alumni recollections presented here relate to campus life 5-7 years ago; many institutions may well have improved their support for integration since that time.

There appears little evidence in the literature for the impact of cosmopolitanism and graduates' employability in an increasingly globalised employment market, perhaps surprisingly. What evidence there is suggests that mobile students are somewhat more likely to be employed abroad and in internationally-orientated jobs (Bracht et al., 2006).

Some student bodies in UK HE are probably uniquely cosmopolitan – although further research is needed to demonstrate statistically that this is the case – and this may be a unique selling point for the UK on the basis of the impact described here. However, the UK's very success in attracting so many international students requires careful management so that these intercultural benefits are gained but not at the expense of other impacts. Not only will international students have a lesser experience if they do not also interact with UK students, but if they leave the UK with networks of solely overseas contacts then the potential gain to the UK is also markedly reduced.

Many interviewees stressed the closeness of their friendships with other non-UK nationals as a key positive element in their living and learning experience, probably more than those who commented on particularly warm UK friendships, which may indicate the balance of this tension when they were students. Almost all, however, spoke warmly of the UK culture both within their institution and in wider society. The opportunity created by the UK institution to come together in friendship with other non-UK nationalities was seen as a positive factor, reflecting Storti's (1989) *The Art of Crossing Cultures*:

*“The overseas experience profoundly transforms all who undergo it, whether they interact successfully with the local culture or not. Such is the impact of the experience on so many levels – physical, intellectual, emotional – there is no possibility of a moderate, much less a neutral, reaction. You either open yourself up to the experience and are greatly enriched by it, or you turn away – and are greatly diminished”*

It is perhaps also noteworthy that ‘limited’ interaction with UK students tended to be reported somewhat more by Chinese and SE Asian alumni than others, which could also partly result from some inherent cultural shyness or reticence to mix with other nationalities.

### Case study: I86

Indian alumnus I86’s father had worked in the UK and several family members had studied here, so it was not entirely surprising that after 4 years working in finance and accounting, he studied for an MBA in Commerce in Cardiff. He found the course very practical, based on real-life economic and industrial scenarios, and employment-orientated which included what is expected in the real industrial world, with many industrial visits to London.

He deliberately did not undertake any part-time work in order to focus on his “one golden year of study” which he knew would change his life. What he did not expect was that the biggest impact on him personally turned out to be the interaction with a highly diverse and multicultural body of students: *“The most important thing is [...] mixing with a lot of people of different culture, diversity, caste, creed, and religion... You get to know about the culture, to know about them, and then you learn so many things from them... Learning their way of life was an amazing experience for me.”*

His overall experience was very positive and he says he recommends UK HE to others all the time.

He returned to India and got a job with a multinational management consultancy – a dream job with good pay compared with his peers. He has since moved to other blue-chip companies and recognises that his UK MBA has had a great impact in terms of steepening his pay progression. He feels he is now a different person – very focused and disciplined – with changed habits and a different day-to-day life. The change in the way he thinks has been profound – he has a different perspective and has acquired the ability to think strategically. He sees this quality in others who have had a UK education.

Most of the students on his course were international (many from Asia and the Middle East) and he remains in social contact with many. He loves keeping up with news from the UK and closely follows the cricket.

At work some of his main clients are in the UK and he was recently assigned to a large UK contract due to his UK experience and especially knowledge of the UK business world; this led to a major acquisition of a British firm.



### 4.3.4 Benefit type C4: Personal growth and wider experiences

Alumni reported other aspects of perceived personal and social development while they were students in the UK, beyond their academic learning, improved English language proficiency and intercultural awareness. An expected impact of international study is that students change and grow as individuals both through their on-campus activities and wider interactions with the host country society. Key facilitators of these impacts include part-time work during the study period and volunteering activities.

#### 4.3.4.1 Research evidence

A very common example of personal growth reported by many alumni interviewed was through having to overcome personal challenges inherent in overseas study, particularly at its outset when they had to cope with setting themselves up a new life in an alien country and environment, in some cases initially with less than adequate language skills. Some, like I22 from Chile who came to the UK with his wife, believed that when the distinctive advantage of his PG qualification had ‘worn off’, it would be his self-confidence that would continue because he had been “*brave enough to put two feet out of the country*”.

These challenges are presumably common to all overseas study, and arguably the more geared up the HE institutions are for international students, the less these challenges should be.

Perhaps more interesting here is that some alumni related feelings of genuine hardship during their stay in the UK, which they had to overcome. Particularly for those who had been professionals in their home country (attending UK HE), transition to student life in the UK could be quite a shock. Some had to live very frugally as they had insufficient funds to cover ‘normal’ living costs, particularly where their currency was weak, and took on very menial work (relative to their former professional employment) where they could. Some findings relating to those work experiences are described later in this section. Examples of these ‘hardship’ challenges and the personal benefit that alumni perceived in coping with them included:

- Young Brazilian professional I8 moved out of student halls to a shared house to integrate more deeply and understand UK culture, but the costs were difficult. She worked as a waitress in a tearoom in order to eke out her funds. She also found dull and damp London a shock compared with Brazil, which contributed to some medically confirmed depression. However, when interviewed she saw that this had increased her personal resilience and confidence, which had contributed to her taking the step to set up her own business in Brazil.
- South African I21, from a professional and politically active family background, also undertook rather low-status work part-time: “*Night-time care work wasn’t that heavy at all, while the rest of them were asleep, [so] I could do my work and study and the pay was fairly good. There’s a limit I remember, 20 hours only that I could work. I also worked at the university canteen and I remember the manager saying, “Oh, how are you going to feel about serving your fellow students?” They were aware of who I was; it was actually quite inviting for them, I think to see like “Wow, here’s one of the top students and she is working in the canteen.”*”

- Mature Colombian graduate I56 had been an established medical doctor and his wife and young daughter joined him in London. Despite a scholarship, and doing some paid part-time research work as well as studying, they could only afford a single room in Wanstead, a 1.5 hour commute from LSE. To save on fares he would only take the tube part of the way, and they had to adopt a “*Tesco value lifestyle*” to make ends meet. Now he looked back philosophically on the whole experience, which had opened his eyes in many ways: “*we had to live in a room, to share the toilet, and to share the bathroom, and the kitchen. It was hard for us. But it was good...yes, it was a very big, very, very big change. I was expecting to have some difficulty but it was harder than we thought.*”

Where alumni felt they had overcome these hardships or other challenges themselves, they saw this as personal growth, feeling proud that they had coped and had developed the resilience to do so. This instilled additional self-confidence and led to self-belief that they could face future challenges. For some it translated to a new-found ‘can do’ attitude, which seemed to be reinforced by their perception of a British culture that supported enterprising behaviour (and perhaps also by study pedagogy which invited challenge).

A few alumni related difficulties in relation to their course – for example where it had changed since they had applied – and many initially found the style of teaching and learning unexpected. Some struggled in early months due to their relatively poor language skills, for example I84 from Indonesia in a northern university who struggled with local accents:

*“I recall my first day at the university shocked me because I hardly could not understand my lecture, basically [because of] the Yorkshire accent.”*

Others found aspects of the alcohol-fuelled British student social culture very off-putting, particularly those from certain cultures. One graduate (only) reported that she had directly experienced racial abuse from people in her university’s city. Some accepted the less commendable aspects of UK life as inevitable, for example Mexican mature PhD student I42 who came to Belfast with his family and thought: “*the UK is a good place to live and work....it has dangerous zones.....but that is true everywhere.*” In fact some of his most positive experiences were of the primary school for his children and the friendships they made with other parents.

As students, alumni had taken very different approaches to undertaking work during their stay in the UK. Some took the view that they should not undertake work or other activities that might detract from focus on their studies, possibly understandable where it was a single-year course. More than one stated that their father (who was presumably funding them) would not allow them to do any such work.

More commonly, perhaps approaching half, the alumni said they had no option but to undertake part-time work on or off campus in order to generate funds to pay their costs of living. In most cases this was low-skilled ‘subsistence’ work, in a fast-food outlet, restaurant (sometimes of their own nationality) or in the kitchens, or as a sales assistant in a shop. For some this was also something of a culture shock, as I4 related:

*“I was working at Debenhams which was a novel experience, because coming from India you cannot imagine yourself working there. If I tell my parents—actually from the*

*professional class of people where I come from in India— that I worked in a department store, one of them will definitely have a heart attack.”*

Another Indian alumnus (I7), who studied Fashion and Design at Nottingham Trent, retrospectively valued that experience of types of part-time work. He said that his nature had changed as a result and that he now valued things in a different way – *“like respecting every person”* – as in the different work settings he had come to view all workers as equal.

Perhaps 1 in 5 alumni had undertaken internships or work placements either integral to their course or separately, on recommendation of course tutors or their own initiative, to make the most of their overall study experience:

- Malaysian interviewee I32 at the London School of Fashion relished the placements she had obtained with London designers during her BA course, as well as doing other work behind the scenes at the London, Paris and Milan fashion weeks. Without a work permit she was not allowed to take up an impressive fashion house job offer that resulted, but became a lecturer in fashion in Shanghai and did freelance design work. She felt it was the work experiences allied to her course that placed her ahead of peers who also all had Masters degrees.
- I22 undertook two internships with major firms in summer breaks during her Manchester business degree, which she believed had greatly helped her to progress very rapidly back in the finance industry in her native South Africa.
- Chinese graduate I21 studied microelectronics at Southampton and focused on his studies during term-time, but undertook three internships with law firms on patent work. He has subsequently changed career to become a patent lawyer.

Relatively few of the alumni reported that they had undertaken volunteering activities while in the UK. Volunteering appears to be much more established as part of the home student HE experience in the UK than in other countries, at least as reported by these alumni. For the few (perhaps 10) that did discover volunteering, it could be quite profound for them personally, and many of them have gone on to set up voluntary activities and/or volunteer in their own countries, which they had not before. It also gave them a wider viewpoint on UK society, bringing them into contact with new people and types of people. The impact of volunteering activity after return to alumni’s home countries is included in benefit type D2.

- I99 from Turkey was inspired by the volunteering she saw in the UK: *“I saw lots of charity works in UK. I really like it. In my home country, we don’t have these charity groups enough. I am happy to work with the British community who [are] very hardworking in this rehabilitation centre. They are helping children and raising funds for the children’s needs.”*
- Chevening scholar I80 had worked for Oxfam while studying in the UK and commented on the rarity of volunteering back in Nigeria: *“I’m [now] involved in a lot of civil society organisations and NGO’s. I help with this, I did volunteering which is something that [is needed for] change in Nigeria. But that is something that I picked up from the UK working with Oxfam at the time.”*

In general, however, the greatest direct impact from undertaking employment in the UK was obtained, perhaps unsurprisingly, by those graduates whose circumstances and visa conditions permitted them to remain in the UK to work after their degree. For many of these graduates it kick-started their career progression, although by the time of interview many had returned home or were elsewhere in the global labour market, as they had become highly mobile with their workplace experience. Some working in STEM fields, especially, did expect to stay in the UK long-term, but this was a minority. The issues of skilled migration and the additional career enhancement benefit perceived from post-study work have been addressed in earlier sections.

#### **4.3.4.2      *Implications***

Personal development impacts from study abroad can accrue before (organising their study period away), during and after the study period. The two aspects of impact focused on here are, broadly, perceived personal growth through overcoming challenges (or even hardship) encountered during UK study, and benefits through wider experiences such as work or volunteering.

Many of the challenges faced by international students entering the UK are germane to any study abroad, i.e. settling into unfamiliar accommodation, studying under a different pedagogical regime, meeting new people, coping with a new language and environment and so on. It is hard to assess which aspects might be unique to study in the UK, or the extent to which they are different here, other than on an individual basis for every graduate taking into account their particular background and culture. This issue of individuality is considered further in the next chapter. It is tempting to suggest that the more substantial the challenge the greater the potential personal gain in the long term, provided the student copes and stays the course. However, deliberately imposing hard challenges would appear to be a somewhat high-risk approach, and runs counter to other recommendations here about assistance with integration. Indeed, many alumni reported that they had found the UK generally ‘welcoming’ as an incoming student, and the support of a scholarship was particularly appreciated where it obviated or lessened the need for subsistence work.

International study is expected to help students to improve confidence, foster independence and develop new friendship groups and social circles. Study abroad can leave them profoundly changed, transformed not only through the challenges of living and studying in an unfamiliar context, but also through awareness of their increasing difference from their peers at home. This difference may help them to stand out from other students without overseas experiences, but can sometimes make cultural readjustment and re-entry more difficult, or even in more extreme cases make it difficult for them to return to their previous lives and careers.

Many international students work in their host countries, prior to, during or after their study period depending on the in-course and post-study work regulations that are in place. Host country working experiences also provide them with different insights into their host country’s culture and values, and its people and the lives that they lead. The majority of students that work in the UK are self-financed, many originating from SE Asia and Africa (according to i-GO statistics, BIS 2012). Host institutions facilitate some of this activity, in the form of on-campus employment, engagement with local volunteering opportunities or work placements. However the majority of such employment is organised by the students themselves and comprises low-paid ‘subsistence’ work in the service sector. In this way

international students also contribute to the wider UK economy by filling gaps in the local labour market, although there can be perceptions that take such jobs from local people.

There is likely to be different potential for these personal benefits dependent on the individual, unsurprisingly. Arguably, those with the least cultural connection with the UK might have the greatest challenges to face, but if they do so successfully then they might have the most gain in the long term. However, our evidence if anything tends to suggest that this is probably not the case, but that the deepest benefits were obtained by those with somewhat less cultural difference but the personality and strongest personal drive to maximise their experience. This variety also supports the notional wisdom of having a diverse international student body.

The vast majority of UK undergraduates undertake some form of part-time work, and it is now an established expectation of student life (Purcell & Elias, 2011). Indeed it has recently been recommended that all HE students should undertake some form of structured experience of work as part of their study programme, to support long-term employability (Wilson, 2012). This presumably should apply to international students, and it would seem ironic if they did not have such entitlement given that more of them cite directly career-related motivations for attending HE than of home students. There is currently an entitlement to work for many courses of study where work placements are integral. Some visa restrictions have changed since our alumni studied in the UK, so inferences from their perceptions have to be made cautiously. There is now no post-study route but the Tier 2 (General) visa route does exist for non-EU applicants to work in skilled occupations.

It is increasingly understood that employability-related benefits can be gained through part-time work or volunteering, and many HEIs have schemes to recognise and support that learning. It would again seem illogical for this not to be open to international students. In summary, although the nature of work undertaken (and its relation to their course of study) varied strongly, alumni who had experiences of work in the UK seemed universally to think it had added to their overall experience and benefit, and regarded it as a valuable element of their study experience in the UK.

The ability to undertake more 'substantial' work for a year or two after study was clearly a strong motivation for some to study in the UK, given their career-related motivations. Such work was seen to build naturally on the immediate course benefits and consolidate career-related impact, even for those who fully intended to return home afterwards. Perceptions of any loss in entitlement to post-study employment would have a negative effect on the attractiveness of UK HE for such students, as reported in the press from certain source countries, and some alumni raised this issue directly with us (see Chapter 5).

### Case study: I56

Interviewee 56 was a successful medical doctor in Colombia in his mid 30s working in intensive care, but felt he wanted a career change so that he could help a larger number of people than those he directly aided in hospital. Working in health policy or planning could enable him to help develop its national healthcare system. He saw that Europe had better expertise than the US in this area and gained a place on a joint LSE and London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine course. He managed to win a Chevening

### Case study: I56

Scholarship and a local scholarship.

Initially he left his wife and 2 year old daughter behind but then brought them to London. They could not afford the small flat he had initially rented moved out to a single room in Wanstead, sharing a toilet, bathroom and kitchen – a massive shock after living as a professional in Bogota. He found the tube fares too expensive to ride the whole way into central London, resulting in a 1.5 hour commute. They could only afford ‘Tesco value’ food because paying for his daughter to attend nursery decimated his original budget. His (nurse) wife had reasonable English and eventually found some work. Stretching the money, living a ‘low-quality’ life generally, was much harder than he had expected. Despite this, wanting to make the most of the course, he took all 14 options although only 8 were examined, and also did some paid research work. This left little time for a social life.

I56 now looks back on the hardships and the experiences as invaluable as a learning exercise, gaining lots of new personal skills he’d not previously learnt as a doctor. He also found the multicultural nature of London and his fellow students very eye-opening.

Back in Colombia he worked initially again as an A&E doctor but by a somewhat circuitous route obtained a Ministry job – to which his UK experience was a passport. He was able to articulate how the NHS, NICE and other UK health system elements worked, of which his US-educated colleagues knew little. This was invaluable in reviewing Colombian healthcare options.

#### 4.3.5 Benefit type C5: Social benefits and networks

Almost every graduate interviewed articulated social benefit through the development of new friendships while they had been in the UK, with fellow students in the UK or elsewhere and other contacts they had made. Many of those relationships had sustained, providing alumni with a wide network of social, and potentially some professional, contacts. Some of these social relationships will last a lifetime, including marriages/partnerships. In a few cases this led them to remain in the UK permanently, while for others it determined when they returned to their home country or led them elsewhere.

##### 4.3.5.1 Research evidence

Alumni reflected almost uniformly that a positive aspect of their experience of UK HE was the friends they had made, in most cases including some based in the UK. However, the nature and extent of the social benefit and their ongoing social activities varied widely.

As we have noted, many alumni commented positively on the highly international composition of their student body (*“25 nationalities amongst 30 on my course”*) or in their student accommodation which in many cases was specifically for international students. For some, campus life with students of numerous other nationalities and cultures had been a highlight of their experience (described in benefit type C3) and they maintained friendships worldwide as a result:

- I68 from Nigeria kept in touch both with other Nigerians he'd met in the UK and also British friends, mostly through Facebook, as well as through the Birmingham international alumni association.
- For Indian graduate I87 it was fellow students largely from Asia with whom he maintained contact: *"From, the Middle East, from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and SE Asia, with Malaysia, China, and all these places. I have many friends and, yeah, I do kind of keep in touch with quite a few, just...truly as friends"*
- South African business studies BA I21 described her contacts: *"So my social life, it was around international students in my immediate circle of friends because I found that we could relate to each other a lot, while we all worked at that part-time job as opposed to just waiting and receiving funding. So I didn't participate as much as I would have liked to in the uni societies for example, because I had a job really, and if I wasn't at work, I was very studious because you realise you're paying so much. I found that the friends that I hung out with, we're still friends now, via social networks like Facebook, [were] students from China, fellow students from Africa, and all the Europeans I lived with"*
- I99 maintained strong contact with her former fellow students, both socially and where they had common professional interest: *"Yes I have so many friends over there [UK] and all over the world at the moment, lots of my international friends in their own countries; some of them now are very well known lawyers in their countries"*.
- I19 now travelled widely in her work and made use of friends she had made in London: *"I've met friends from everywhere while I was in London, actually a lot of countries I travel to, I have people there who I know and who are good friends. I find it much better and easy if you have friends in the country you travel to."*

Many alumni had integrated well with the wider student body, including UK students. This could result from a course in which there was a higher proportion of UK students, or by deliberate participation in generic campus-based social activities, or due to their chosen living arrangements. Where students had involved themselves in off-campus activities, they made friendships in the wider community. For example, two Sri Lankans had played cricket for local cricket clubs, which had provided an enjoyable immersion within and broader understanding of UK culture. Students who had enjoyed wider activities tended, notably including those few with accompanying children who were in school, had the greatest depth of experience of UK life – and reported it very positively. These alumni also tended to have developed some of the strongest friendships with UK nationals.

- Indian PhD graduate I1 and his wife now kept touch most regularly with friends made through parents at his daughter's school at Southampton and also through his wife's job as a doctor when she had worked there, although he also kept professional contact with colleagues in the university itself.
- Thai graduate I70 was in regular touch with people in her PhD research network but the strongest friendship was with her neighbour when she lived out in Colchester – whom she still visited annually with her daughter.
- Argentinian I96 only maintained contact with a handful of her friends from University College London but expected a lifelong friendship with her English flatmate: *"She came*

*here to Argentina many times and stayed in my house. I still keep in contact with her and when I go to the UK I always stay at her place.”*

Digital social media networks, especially Facebook, were widely cited by alumni as the means by which they maintained continued contact with fellow students and other personal contacts made in the UK. Most of this appeared to have been driven by the alumni themselves, informally, but some was facilitated by their HEI or scholarship provider:

- I36 from Iran: *“Facebook [...] then mostly through e-mails and nowadays with iPhones and all the apps that we have on them. It’s just so much easier to keep in touch. Although a lot of them have moved back to their countries but we are still in touch and we have so many good memories I guess. The course was so tough on us that it made our friendship so much stronger”*
- New Zealander I64 reported: *“There are lots of benefits for Commonwealth scholars and ex-Commonwealth scholars on Twitter and [online] forums”.*

Many alumni had felt welcomed by their institution when they arrived in the UK and had appreciated provision of campus social events to help them meet fellow students and share exploratory experiences. Student union activities were mentioned regularly, and many had participated in a range of student-focused societies. Most Asian students in particular mentioned joining their respective national or regional society, while others fondly remembered taking up anything from ballroom dancing or badminton to amateur dramatics. Those funded by a UK scholarship such as Chevening or Commonwealth reported very positively on the supporting social and cultural programmes.

Although perhaps half of the alumni interviewed mentioned that they received some communications from their HEI as alumni, the proportion reporting that they participated actively was very much lower. It was not always possible to distinguish between social media contact facilitated by the HEI for its alumni and that existing informally, but the firm impression was that it was mostly alumni-driven and informal. Few alumni reported that they actively attended alumni dinners or events in their home country. On the other hand Chevening Scholarship alumni in particular seemed to maintain very active contact with each other in their networks, facilitated by the FCO and/or through locally agencies such as the British Council (or equivalent organisation) or purely amongst themselves. Very few reported that they were making financial donations to their alma mater, but this could increase as their careers progress.

Some alumni, particularly from India and a few other countries, perceived that anybody with an overseas HE degree (but especially the UK or US) was automatically in an elite social tier. Several Chinese alumni mentioned that as many of their peers were obtaining overseas degrees, the extent of this perceived benefit was beginning to diminish. Although that feeling of being in a social elite seemed partly to relate to increased earnings and career progression, it could also be portrayed as a societal status.

A few alumni reported that their ‘enhanced’ social standing was manifested in their development of different networks of contacts once back in their home society, as in the case of interviewee I80 in Nigeria:



*“By some stroke of luck, stroke of fate, the generosity of the British government, you are now elevated to a certain position in society. The interaction is at a higher level these days... and placed me at a position to be able to access certain areas, certain places, have a relationship with certain people that I ordinarily wouldn’t have had anything to do with”.*

However, he also considered that with this came additional responsibility:

*“The truth is having that sort of qualification in this society, people expect leadership from you and look up to you. Because they think your appreciation of international issues would be wider, more in depth, clearer. So they look up to you for guidance and for leadership on some issues. And that confers on you, inevitably, a lot of credibility, and with it some prestige; I think it makes you more prominent, sort of stand out even without meaning to, a privilege that comes with it. And it’s been wonderful for me, it’s been amazing. I reflect on what my life would have been if I hadn’t had that opportunity”.*

While relatively few alumni said that they had moved in these different circles, rather more tended to socialise more with others who had also studied abroad (and were perhaps like-minded), such as:

- I11 from India: *“There were a few people from my town who went to the same uni that I’m friends with. There are many people that were studying in the UK at that time that I like to hang out with. Otherwise, the type of city that I’m living in, it’s a very closed city. So, the thinking is very limited and closed. So, [you] cannot mingle with those people who do not share the same wavelength...you need like-minded people.”*
- And I89 from Kenya: *“I think it does make a difference on who you tend to be friends with because when you come back you [socialise with people] who have either studied in the UK or outside of Kenya, so it does affect what sort of social circle you end up in.”*

For some, a heightened social profile was related to the commitment they had made as part of a UK scholarship; Chevening stresses the idea of the alumnus as leader and ambassador, while Commonwealth Scholarship holders commit to development of their country as part of the selection procedure. We saw evidence from alumni in both these groups that these responsibilities had extended their networks of contacts in their home countries.

A small number of the alumni had only socialised quite narrowly, due to personal shyness, some degree of intercultural inhibition, or other factors such as the presence of accompanying families or partners or other factors. Most – but not all – of the ‘shy’ examples were graduates from Asia, including China, some of whom tended mostly to socialise within their own national student group and/or focus very strongly on their studies. A small number reported that they found the presence of alcohol within many student social activities difficult, which steered them into the safer company of fellow nationals. Others had largely excluded themselves from university-based social life due to their personal living circumstances, for example some mature students who brought their family or partner with them and lived off-campus as a discrete family unit.

### 4.3.5.3 *Implications*

It is expected that international students will enhance their social capital both during and after their study overseas, and their time abroad can help them to develop and enhance their academic, business and social networks. These networks can develop further once they are alumni, providing access to other networks to support their social and other activities. For some students, gaining access to such networks whilst studying in a high-income country can be major driver of their choice of country (and/or institution) of study, as these networks have the potential to increase their standing as citizens in their country of origin.

The interviews provide plentiful evidence that alumni are proud of the social benefit of studying in the UK, in terms of new friends made and personal relationships, and the global nature of those contacts. This is almost certainly enhanced by the global composition of many current UK international student bodies.

It also seemed clear that there remains in many countries potential social prestige in having a UK (or US, and certain other overseas) HE qualification, although this may be changing as the global HE market develops and mobility increases. The extent of this apparent prestige appeared strongest in less developed countries.

#### Case study: I29

Indonesian interviewee I29's academic family had an international outlook – international interns with her family – and the UK seemed the natural place to study, as there were several world-ranking HEIs that offered suitable courses. She chose a Masters on innovation and law, supported by a Chevening scholarship.

She reflects on a very rich and varied student life, making the most of opportunities and the support from the scholarship scheme but also working with AIESEC on international projects on issues such as HIV, poverty alleviation and entrepreneurship. She also edited a law publication which brought her into contact with interesting people and eminent professors, as well as visiting a family in Scotland under the 'hostUK' scheme. She found the whole year very tough but had a great time – and especially loved meeting people from a range of cultures.

Unlike most interviewees, I29 only graduated in 2011. Having returned to the government job she had previously, she feels that it does not use her new skills; her UK experience has opened her mind and she is yet to decide which direction to take. She wants her work to have an impact on policy, probably in Indonesia, working for the government or for an international organisation, perhaps on privacy law and data protection as this is currently unregulated so Indonesians are vulnerable.

This graduate had an international outlook even before she came to the UK, but she is even more international now; she also reflects that she is more 'straightforward' – she can say what she means. She has a wide network of people, including professional and social contacts through fellow Chevening alumni as well as her many UK activities. She is still in touch with professors and her supervisor, who was particularly supportive, and socially is in regular touch with the friends that she made who have dispersed all over the world, including in the UK. The British Council organised a reception on her return to

**Case study: I29**

reunite all local Chevening scholars, which cemented some of her networks even more.

Those friends have gone into all kinds of different sectors, providing her with insights into many possibilities for her own future career.

## 4.4 Benefits to countries of origin

### 4.4.1 Benefit type D1: Capacity building and societal development

From the stories and reports of the alumni interviewed, we can infer certain impacts within their countries of origin ('home' countries) resulting from their outward mobility as international students in the UK. These impacts were largely as a result of their professional activities, ranging from the direct labour market benefit of their up-skilling and acquisition of new skills, through to broader impacts within societal or economic development and capacity building, or even political impact.

#### 4.4.1.1 *Research evidence*

The personal career enhancement benefit reported by alumni was covered in some detail in an earlier section. In many cases this will also have been manifested in benefit for their employer and, in turn, for their country's labour market and economy, strengthening their nation's skills capability. There was widespread evidence from alumni that they had secured more advanced roles and higher earnings in the labour market on return home, presumably reflecting higher performance and value in their labour market in business-critical roles. That higher performance should be reflected in growth or success for their employer and overall national economic performance. Rather than repeating many specific examples, they can be summarised briefly into some sub-categories:

- Alumni who gained progression to enhanced roles in the companies for which they had previously worked (a few of which had specifically funded the graduate to attend the UK HE course), including some within their family businesses;
- Alumni who moved 'up' from prior lower-tier employers to join blue-chip and other higher-tier organisations, both national and multinational, deploying their improved knowledge, confidence and other skills, and especially their new-found international communication and intercultural expertise;
- Alumni with little previous employment experience who immediately on return joined either high-profile or international businesses, or else took up international roles within other businesses;
- Alumni who were already or became very entrepreneurial and set up new businesses themselves, many citing increased self-confidence and inspiration from the enterprising spirit and 'can do' culture they perceived in the UK, while others were instrumental in

developing new satellite operations for existing businesses using their international experience;

- Alumni who had worked before overseas study but on return changed career sector and entered organisations and occupations, in many cases roles in which they had great personal passion, which would presumably result in high professional impact.

In all of these scenarios, employers and the home country's economy stood to benefit from employment of an international graduate who had acquired a combination of cutting-edge academic or technical expertise as well as a powerful range of enhanced personal (or 'soft') skills derived from study abroad.

For the employers and economies, amongst the most significant of these 'employee-derived' benefits are almost certainly the additional global outlook, international credibility and greater intercultural sensitivity that the international graduates offer, in addition to more industry-specific and technical capabilities. In an increasingly global economy, the ability to develop trade internationally is important for more and more enterprises. In support of this, many of the alumni also now had their own contacts with fellow alumni in other countries with whom they had studied, and might in some cases develop business. In the same way that participation in global professional networks is of potential value to the UK, this too is the case for home country.

Many of the alumni interviewed also reflected that they now thought more strategically, and could bring a more widely informed and critical view than they had previously; again this will be of value to their employer in the senior business or management roles that they typically now entered.

There was evidence too for a large number of alumni returning to take up technical roles in key industry sectors, both knowledge-based and infrastructural or developmental. Although relatively few alumni had been sponsored by their employer, there seemed to be many cases where a returning graduate entered employment in one of these key sectors readily and then progressed quickly, presumably indicating that they were injecting key technical skills of high value into these organisations.

Some of the most memorable and inspiring interview conversations were with alumni who had personal commitments to capacity building and societal development in their home country. Many demonstrated this commitment through employment, or in some cases their intended employment, some relating to a career change. These were mostly but not exclusively alumni of the Chevening, especially, and Commonwealth scholarship schemes. Examples included:

- Commonwealth Scholarship alumnus I18, from a humble background in Malawi, who studied nutrition at Glasgow and was completing a PhD in Finland. His career aim was to change government policy and broaden understanding of nutrition in Malawi, and he had already been working on a nutrition syllabus for schools with the University of Malawi where he would soon be based. On return he expected also to resume work with the President's Office, to develop partnerships with NGOs, volunteers and communities to disseminate good practice. He wished to 'pay back' for his personal UK HE experience by making Malawi a better and more self-sufficient place, ultimately reducing its dependency on the UK and other aid providers.

- Interviewee I38 worked in a teaching hospital back in Nigeria, running her own lab and raising scientific standards, having been inspired by her biomedical science degree at Roehampton. Determined to make a difference in her own country rather than forging a comfortable career abroad, she was trying to set up organisations facilitating students to undertake volunteering (almost unknown in Nigeria) and promoting environmental awareness: *“If I’m lucky enough, get a PhD because I want to go to the university and bring back my experience from the UK and impart it on to the students here in Nigeria. At least give them a chance, if they’re not able to seek that sort of knowledge and or be taught in the way they’re supposed to be taught. So I can bring it back to them and teach them the way I think they should be taught, and give them the attention I think they should be getting, and expose them to resources they would otherwise not be exposed to.”*
- Visually impaired graduate I61 was completing a PhD at the Institute of Education, London, having come to London for a Masters and then worked for the RNIB for 2 years. Her aim was to influence policymakers in her native Lebanon to improve access to education and opportunities for visually impaired people, and to advise and support the mostly unqualified care workforce who support those with disability. She had built a wide international network and set up a partnership between her HEI and a Lebanese university, and travelled widely to international conferences despite her complete blindness.

#### **4.4.1.2 Implications**

Correlation of outward international student mobility with increased economic output or capability at national level is clearly beyond the realms of this study. However, seen through the lens of alumni experiences, it seems feasible to infer that countries of origin do and will in future benefit from economic and developmental impact as those who study overseas return home and forge their careers. This should, in turn, result in further positive perceptions of the benefits of overseas study in the UK, potentially in a virtuous circle to the benefit also of the UK.

Many of the alumni who had been funded by the UK intimated that they had a commitment to pay back some personal debt they felt to the UK, either through ‘ambassadorial’ work for the UK (as reported earlier) or in developing their country. In some cases this related to their participation in schemes intended to support national capacity building. This could well take the form of a career change for them personally, moving to work in government, education or an NGO, or through social or voluntary activities outside their professional life. The extent to which they would be successful in these longer term developmental ambitions, or be limited by subsequent personal circumstances or other issues, could obviously not be determined at this stage of their career and life trajectory, but would require investigation further into their careers. Interviewed around 5 years after graduation, it was still too early to test the genuine impact of these personal commitments that had been inspired by UK HE experiences, but they were very powerfully articulated.

The observation from alumni that they had encountered volunteering for the first time while in the UK was particularly striking, with several commenting that it was all but absent as a concept in their home country. In some cases this had inspired them on return to volunteer personally and/or set up schemes supporting others to do so. This could potentially amplify greatly the impact of their personal development through UK HE; other personal multiplier effects were covered in benefit type D1.

### Case study: I80

After National Service, Nigerian graduate I80 had worked as a parliamentary reporter on a national newspaper, but after some years was drawn to development work, and ideally hoped he could eventually research or teach it for the benefit of his country. Winning a Chevening scholarship, he went to Reading for an MA in Applied Development Studies. He travelled widely from there to see as much as he could of the UK, living with families he met around the country. He also did some part-time work and undertook volunteering for Oxfam.

Returning home he got other jobs, including for the BBC, but then changed career and joined a multinational oil exploration company to head its public affairs work. He saw this as a way to support the local communities amongst which the multinational worked, and to help steer their development through its corporate social responsibility programme. Although in doing so he uses many of his development study skills, when interviewed he remained uncertain about whether ethically he had done the right thing to move and work “on the inside”.

He sees many benefits of his UK HE experience; learning about other cultures, opening his mind globally, becoming tolerant of other peoples and how to interact with them. These all help his work for the multinational, and he cites his ‘high level credibility’ as enabling him to get the job in the first place.

His time in the UK clearly impacted deeply on his life and he now feels a distinct responsibility – he feels people expect leadership from him and look up to him; it confers prestige and responsibility, making him more ‘prominent’ even if this is not deliberate. Reflecting on what life would have been like without it, he feels he would “*still be trapped in the old circle*” and feels lucky to have escaped it. He considers he has an ‘elevated’ position in society and meets people he would never have met otherwise, giving him more strategic responsibility (essentially power and privilege). This will endure for the rest of his life; “*it changes everything*”.

He also sees a large multiplier effect, through interactions with his family, his employees and others, and intends that society will also benefit from his good fortune, through his professional work but also his volunteering work for NGOs. He promotes this concept through unpaid teaching work with university students. He also helps at British High Commission events and mentors both Fulbright and Commonwealth applicants and scholars.

Although he does not feel a burden to ‘pay back’ the UK’s investment in him, instead it has instilled a deep personal commitment – an obligation for people like him to inspire better development in Nigeria and to help people escape the poverty trap.

#### 4.4.2 Benefit type D2: Personal multiplier effects

In addition to the impact brought about by the activities of the alumni personally, building on the skills and personal development obtained through their international HE experience, additional benefits to others in their home country could be inferred through a variety of multiplier effects.

#### 4.4.2.1 Research evidence

A very distinctive benefit, although limited in its extent overall, was reported in interviews with alumni who had brought their families with them when they studied in the UK. In perhaps 1 in 10 of our interview cases, the student had been accompanied to the UK by their spouse and, in some of those, by their child. In most cases in fact this turned out to be one child, who had been of school age. A period in the UK clearly had impact on the spouse and child involved.

In these cases the alumni, as parents, thought that the impact on the child had been very significant. This also seemed to reflect the thought that young children are very adaptable in new environments and able to learn sufficiency in a new language very quickly:

- Indian interviewee I1's daughter had three years in school during his PhD at Southampton, learned to speak fluent English and absorbed UK children's and educational culture. Now in Bangladesh, this seemed greatly to have enhanced her progress in her education. I1 reported that if she retained the current interest she eventually she too would HE in the UK. His wife was also still in touch with friends she had made in the UK.
- Graduate I42 was of a similar age and brought his wife and children to Belfast during his PhD. Once they settled in, his son in particular thrived at a local school and, other than having to catch up on the Mexican history curriculum, was more than up to speed when they returned home: *"So he has to work double when he came back on that subject. But with the other subjects, the sciences and mathematics, that was fine. I think my son take better advantage of being over there, for the English. I think he can speak much better than me"*.
- I62 came to Loughborough with his wife and 6 year old son for a development Masters and then worked for two years prior to return to Brazil. He considered that his son had been the most transformed by their experience (although he had had the advantage of being bilingual beforehand). The son seemed to have gained many values in tune with the UK: *"I think that he was one in our family that benefited the most. I mean, the way that [...] British values into him because he was a tender age, six years old. Let's say personality traits that he got from the experience in the UK; it is great and it's curious to see him with his friends – sometimes they call him 'the little lord', because of the way that he thinks"*.

Although overlapping with the professional capacity building impact described as benefit type D1, other personal multiplying effects could be perceived where the alumni returned to an existing or new career in education or another field in which they had very personal influence on others. The deep changes in their thinking and attitudes could impact on others through their personal, social or volunteering activities. Many but not all these cases had been UK-funded scholars, who at times appeared to be almost evangelical in wishing to spread their learning:

- Interviewee I15 was developing plans to set up a student exchange scheme in his native Kenya so that far more could benefit from an experience similar to his in Scotland, in addition to his professional mission to reform Kenyan resources policy.

- IT strategic manager I28 expected to leave her current job in the UK and return to Mexico in order to teach in a university “*in the English style*” she had seen on her Masters in Coventry, encouraging students to think and challenge ideas rather than passively absorb knowledge, as well as to help reduce the gender bias in the ICT sector back home.
- I80 did voluntary teaching in a local university in Nigeria in order to spread the personal benefit he felt he had gained from his development MA at Reading, as well as working professionally on rural development schemes funded through the corporate social responsibility activities of his multinational employer.
- I99 had been inspired by the volunteering she saw in the UK: “*I saw lots of charity works in UK. In my home country, we don't have these charity groups enough*”. She now volunteered in a rehabilitation centre herself and was helping Rotary to raise its profile to gather funds for other projects.

Several graduates from developing nations reported that in the UK they had seen that there was ‘a better way’ for society, and now wished to promote this message in their home country. This generally related to greater tolerance and compassion for others, as opposed to always thinking only for yourself, and greater ‘civility’ perhaps, than they saw prevailed in their own country. As such they were active ambassadors promoting the UK’s values as much as the UK itself.

The very common action of alumni recommending others to study HE in the UK, and/or their own alma mater, has already been covered, in relation to its impact on further UK education exports. However, it potentially has a multiplying impact in increasing the number of students who both gain individual benefits and also the ‘knock-on’ impacts to their country of origin through these personal multiplying effects.

#### **4.4.2.2 Implications**

The ‘additional’ impact of UK experiences on family members who had accompanied international students to the UK is clearly very modest in scale (and tiny in comparison with the scale of some other benefits), but is included as it was so distinctly articulated. Family members and friends who do not accompany international students also travel to the UK, either to visit the student or after they have returned home, offering further modest economic benefits through tourism.

Alumni who recommend others to participate in HE study in the UK are taking part in a multiplying effect, albeit discussed in more detail elsewhere. However, there are clearly impacts where graduates’ more general personal activities bring them into contact with others in their home country, in education or other fields, whom they influence. These secondary effects may add considerably to the net overall impact, with potentially multiple beneficiary groups in the home country.



### Case study: I61

Interview I61 has severe visual impairment with no vision at all. She had attended university in Lebanon, obtained a teaching diploma and had been working in a school for the visually impaired. Winning a UK-funded scholarship, she came to London for a graduate diploma, then subsequently undertook a Masters and when interviewed was completing her PhD.

She initially had lots of support from the Chevening scheme – providing her with support workers, transport, and assisting generally with equal access – as well as from another foundation. She found the first year very challenging but coming to London completely changed the way she worked and lived. For the first time in her life she achieved independence, because the UK infrastructure takes account of people with a disability. In time she no longer needed a support worker; she had “*built herself.*”

She wants to challenge the idea in Lebanon that visually impaired people should only aspire to study a restricted range of subjects in education. Having also worked on projects for the British Council and for the RNIB, her experience and HE study have equipped her to return to the Lebanon to advise, train and support others who work in the field of disability – most of whom are not qualified. Another of her aims is to influence policy-makers in Lebanon to improve access for people with disability.

I61 has developed a wide and varied international network, with which she is in constant contact – and in which her institution in London is pivotal – and she hopes to build a partnership between it and a university in Lebanon to spread the learning at home.

She also now presents regularly at conferences by invitation on issues such as orientation and mobility, equal access and inclusion, all over the world, and is inspiring others with disability to have a powerful and international voice.

## 5. Other research findings

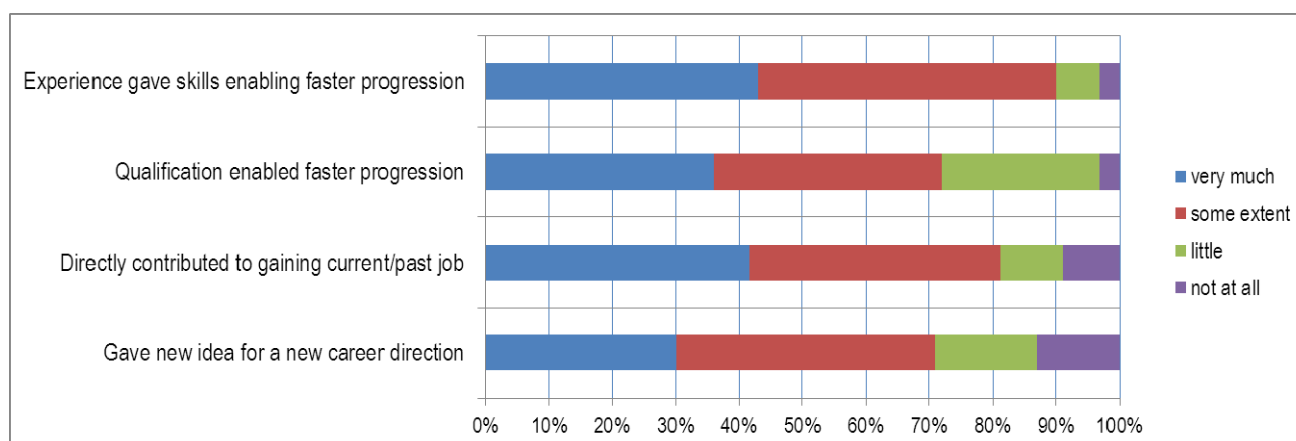
### 5.1 Results and observations

#### 5.1.1 Semi-quantitative results of interview preparation questions

Within the research process, alumni who had agreed to be interviewed were asked to respond to a short online questionnaire, as outlined in chapter 3, encouraging them to think about certain topics relating to the interview. 80 interviewees provided these responses. Although this was not intended to be a representative sample of international graduates who have studied in the UK, there is nevertheless some value in presenting their responses as a broad indication of the thinking of the alumni as a group.

The substantive career benefit most widely recognised (by over 90%) was the influence of skill development during their UK HE experience on their progression (Figure 4). This was somewhat more commonly cited than the influence of the qualification itself (just under 75%). Over 80% suggested that their UK HE experience had directly contributed to gaining their current or a previous job. Nearly a third (and this included most types of graduate) had been prompted to consider a new career direction as a result.

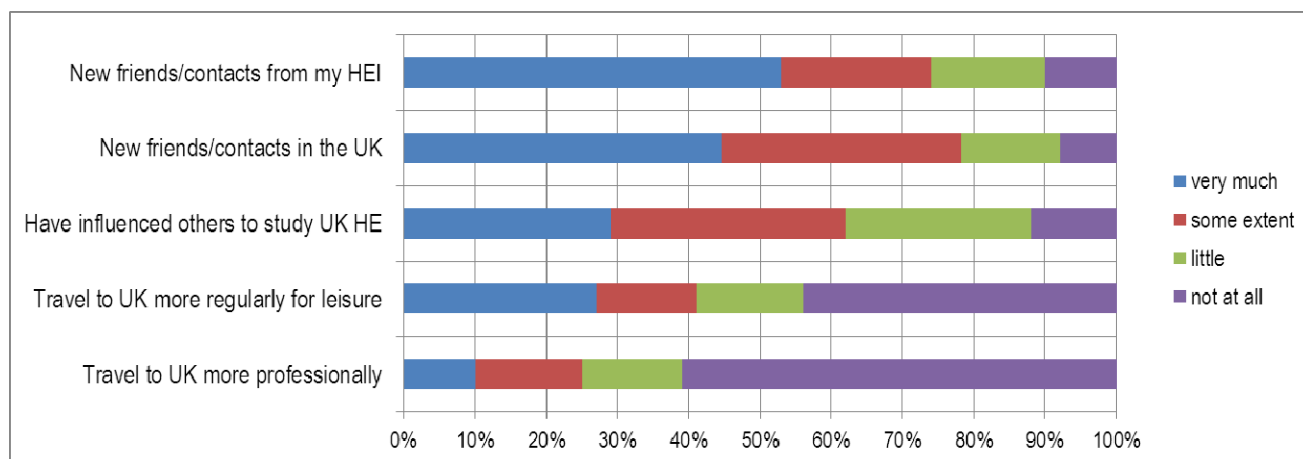
Given the dominance of potential career benefit in motivations for international study, these figures reflect positively that such enhancements were being perceived by the majority of the alumni interviewed.



**Figure 4** Perceived extent of influence of UK HE degree experience on aspects of graduates' careers (N=80)

When asked about how their UK HE degree experience had influenced other aspects of their life, beyond career, the proportions reporting impact were somewhat more varied (Figure 5). About 75% reported substantive impact in terms of new friends and contacts from their UK HE institution, and slightly more new friends/contacts based in the UK made during their stay in the UK. Although only around 25% travelled back to the UK more regularly as a result of their UK HE for professional purposes (which could presumably

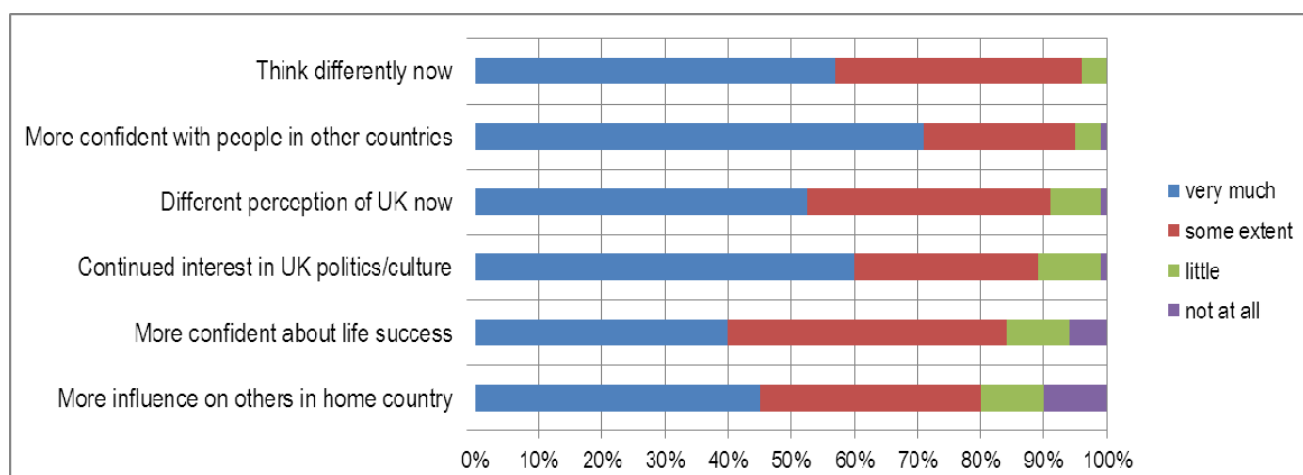
also be impacted by visa issues), this was over 40% for leisure or social purposes. Over 60% reported that they directly influenced other people to study in UK HE. It should be noted that this questioned whether they had actually influenced people, rather than just whether they would influence people (which has elsewhere been considered as a proxy for overall satisfaction with their experience).



**Figure 5** Perceived extent of influence of UK HE degree experience on other aspects of graduates' lives ( $N=80$ )

The influence of their UK HE experience on the alumni themselves as individuals had been very strong (Figure 6). Over 95% of the group felt that they now thought differently as a result, and a similar proportion was now more confident in working or communicating with people in other countries. A large proportion (over 80%) now had a different (more positive) perception of the UK as a result of their experience, and almost as many continued to take interest in the UK culturally and politically. Perhaps most critically, over 80% perceived a substantive impact on their confidence to make a success of their lives, which had presumably been a dominant underlying motivation for them. This was reflected in a similar proportion expecting now to have more influence on others in their home country.

These very positive results reflect the very positive attitudes and perceptions of almost of the alumni in the interviews. This was not believed to be the result of bias in the sampling of international alumni, for the reasons outlined in chapter 3. Previous research suggests perhaps 95% of international graduates were satisfied with their UK HE experience (BIS, 2012), which is similar to the proportion with positive perceptions here.



**Figure 6** Perceived extent of influence of UK HE degree experience on aspects of personal development (N=80).

### 5.1.2 Semi-quantitative analysis of interview information

It was possible to codify very simply the main attitudes and issues reported by the alumni, using the interview 'portraits' and transcripts. This gave broad trends of results across the 100 alumni interviewed, a sample thought to reflect the range of types of international graduate but not aimed to be representative numerically. This also enabled some potential trends to be observed between different groups of graduates.

On this basis, the following very positive issues were recorded from the sample of interviewed alumni's UK HE experiences:

- Over 90% reported perceptions of greater personal credibility (over 65% to a large extent). This correlated closely with those who identified career benefits;
- 95% reported that they felt the whole experience had been beneficial to them (60% to a large extent);
- Over 80% indicated some extent of positive emotional attachment to the UK (about half to a considerable extent), and this was almost universal amongst those with UK-funded scholarships;
- Up to 90% had recommended UK HE study to somebody else (60% to a large extent), across all the university types attended;

Lower but still very substantial proportions cited other positive outcomes. In each of the following areas, about half of the alumni reported that, as a result of their UK HE experience:

- They now had some HE alumni in their professional networks (much higher amongst scholarship holders);

- They had changed their perception of the UK positively (all nationalities but especially amongst those from outside the Commonwealth);
- They travelled back to the UK for social purposes (higher amongst female graduates);
- The experience had enabled them to undertake a career change, especially common amongst those who had undertaken a taught Masters course (but somewhat less so for Chinese graduates);
- They had a particular desire to develop or improve their own country. This was very strongly the case for scholarship alumni and also correlated with those reporting a career change;
- They believed there was an economic benefit to the UK, again especially amongst scholarship alumni and also those reporting the highest perceived personal benefits;
- They were involved in their HEI's alumni network to some extent.

Of the 100 alumni interviewed, 27 had prior family experience (i.e. a parent, grandparent or sibling) of UK HE. This was seen across all of the nationality groupings used, other than the Chinese alumni (of whom none had such prior family experience).

Only 15 alumni related any significant negative aspect of their experience at any time, but in several of these cases they now felt that an earlier negative impression had not been well-founded and did not sustain it. Most of these were male graduates from China and India, and a small number of mature graduates from high-income countries (who might have had high expectations) and related to Masters courses.

Based on their recollections and descriptions of their HE and campus experiences, we judged that 15 or so alumni had had rather 'narrow' experiences while in the UK, such as very limited integration and/or little interaction with wider aspects of UK society. The majority of these alumni were from the Far East, including China, which could also reflect some cultural shyness or very high devotion to study. Many of them did report some positive personal benefits, including new friends made, but few of them tended now to 'think differently' or had changed their perceptions of the UK.

A number of these observations are considered later in this chapter in discussion of emerging trends.

### 5.1.3 Distinctive pedagogy: A motivation for study in the UK

Alumni's original intentions for study in the UK were not investigated systematically during this research, partly because this had been covered quantitatively in the preceding i-GO study (BIS, 2012). However, as part of our investigation of how their UK HE study was positioned within alumni's career trajectories, in the interviews we sought some information about study motivations and, in particular, reasons for choosing the UK for it.

The alumni were roughly evenly split between those who applied only to the UK and those who applied to the UK as well as other countries, dominantly the USA and less commonly

Australia (and also Spain, mostly by Latin Americans). The reasons most popularly cited for selecting the UK (only, or over the USA) were:

- Expected personal ‘fit’ with the UK culture and environment – the graduate (and/or their family) had felt that they would personally be more comfortable in the UK, sometimes on the basis of direct family experience. Several cited the perceived safety of the UK and its HE environment, in comparison with their perceptions of the USA. Others had thought the fit would be better as they were not very outgoing or extrovert, or due to their particularly thoughtful personality.
- Expected ‘fit’ with the UK education system – some from Commonwealth countries thought it would be easier to be apply successfully to a UK HE course, and that it would be more straightforward to undertake it, due to the greater congruence of education and qualifications between their country and the UK.
- Perceived quality of HE – some graduates had simply felt the UK offered the ‘best’ HE opportunities, again particularly amongst those from Commonwealth countries. This was rarely articulated with much concrete understanding of how UK HE might be different or better from other options, but International Student Barometer research suggests that teaching quality or (perceived) learning experience are the biggest differentiators for international students when comparing potential HE providers, along with perceptions of HEI reputations.<sup>3</sup>
- Format and cost – the single-year format of UK taught Masters courses was very attractive to many, in comparison with the 2-year courses offered by most competitor nations. Most citing this factor had seen the benefit as a major financial saving, in comparison with costs over two years, even if the annual fees were somewhat higher in some cases. Some also stated that they had preferred to be away from their home country for the shorter period.

One American graduate applied similar reasoning to her choice of a 3-year BA course in the UK, as even with international fees this would be cheaper than home fees for a 4-year course in a US institution of (as she saw it) comparable quality.

Many alumni reflected on what they perceived to be the distinctive pedagogical style of their UK HE studies, in comparison with their prior HE in their home country. They articulated this style as less formal, more open and more participatory, and especially the deliberate invitation of discussion and challenge. While some had found this disconcerting when they first encountered it, almost all who mentioned it now considered it to have been a very positive characteristic of their study, and something from which they personally benefited. Several compared this style with the more directed learning on offer in their home country (where students expected to “*sit back and be given knowledge*”).

Perceptions of this distinctive style did appear to have permeated into some graduates’ motivations for choosing study in the UK, as they alluded to perceived differences with courses in the USA where they felt postgraduates might well “*receive more knowledge*” but not develop their own ability to analyse, challenge, research and ultimately learn further.

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished feedback to Kingston University

This also applied to those considering PhD programmes. This perception was held by more graduates than had actually experienced US HE for themselves (which was very few). It was also interesting that these graduates assumed the style was generic to the UK, and applied the argument irrespective of their chosen HE institution.

A number of alumni, reflecting on their experience of UK HE, were sufficiently positive about their learning experience to harbour personal intentions at some stage to teach “*properly*” (i.e. in a same way) at a university in their home country, so that others could benefit from the same style of learning.

The combination of a shorter course format and ‘better’ (as some perceived it) potential personal learning benefit comprised much of their rationale for recommending UK HE to others, in addition to the more generic benefits of study overseas.

#### 5.1.4 Experiences of work

The issue of employment during or after study in the UK was introduced under benefit type C4. As indicated briefly there, employment played a different role for different graduates, ranging from a primary purpose for their UK experience to a necessary part-time activity purely to offset living costs, while it was simply not on the radar at all for many others. Where it was positioned could also, to some extent, be dictated by visa conditions.

Around half of the alumni interviewed had undertaken part-time ‘subsistence’ work, which not only supplemented their income but also provided additional social and cultural interactions which often greatly broadened their experiences. For those from relatively privileged backgrounds, who had not personally undertaken low-skilled work before, it opened their eyes to occupations – and the people working in them – of which they were previously unaware. There are also of course elements of personal employment- and career-related learning to be gained from such experiences.

Although this could be affected by visa regulations and other factors, relatively modest numbers had undertaken internship or work placements directly related to their study programme, which are widely known to enhance employability (and have recently been recommended as an integral part of all HE programmes, Wilson 2012).

More important to this discussion is the issue of full-time, career-related employment after completion of the degree programme. For a relatively small number of alumni, the prospect of being able to undertake high-skilled employment in the UK, opened up by their HE study, had been an integral part of their career-based rationale for coming to the UK to study. Obtaining a postgraduate degree and a few years of experience in a relevant occupational role in a respected UK organisation could together provide a very substantial enhancement to their career prospects once they returned home. However, this was available only to some, and others perceived that more recent visa restrictions might constrain or prevent this (even though workers who qualify for a Tier 2 (General) job can be employed in that role provided they meet the criteria. When the Tier 1 (Post-Study Work Route) was closed the policy design allowed non-EU graduates to apply to Tier 2 (General) to work in an employer-sponsored job). While there are perceptions that limitations on post-study work options reduce the attractiveness of postgraduate HE study in the UK, the Home Office suggests that working in the UK after studying at a UK HE institution is an available option, and that it is only the [visa] system that has changed.

A handful of alumni perceived that the US system might be more flexible and enable combinations of study and employment that were not available in the UK, but such issues would be more accurately investigated with those who studied in the USA rather than those who chose the UK.

Although quite a large proportion of the alumni were living in the UK when interviewed (17 of the 100 interviewees) some 5 years after graduation, this rarely seemed to be a result of a pre-determined plan to do so. Recent research by Hobsons (Matthews, 2013) suggests that only around 6% of international students are motivated by the prospect of working in the UK permanently. Certainly there was no case where we perceived that undertaking HE was a device purely to obtain long-term employment in the UK. Those who were working here when interviewed could be seen to fall into three essential categories:

- Working in skill shortage occupations such as science, IT or engineering, where skilled migrant labour is deliberately welcomed as an asset to UK labour market capacity;
- Working for a defined period before return to their home country (or alternatively remaining in the UK to undertake postgraduate research or postdoctoral study);
- Working as a result of marriage to or partnership with a UK citizen or another foreign national temporarily or permanently resident in the UK.

There were one or two individuals whose personal reasons for eligibility to work were not revealed during the interview, but this seemed more likely to be due to their lack of clarity on the issue, or limitations of their language skills, rather than anything more clandestine.

### 5.1.5 Formal and informal alumni networks

As noted in benefit type C5 on social benefits, almost all the alumni interviewed were still in touch with friends and contacts they had made during their stay in the UK, and especially fellow students. The vast majority were maintaining such contacts informally rather than through formal or 'supported' networks. Facebook, especially, and LinkedIn were cited as mechanisms through which they kept in contact with other alumni, but again largely on an informal and personal basis rather than through groups moderated by their university alumni office. Twenty of the alumni specifically mentioned that they were involved in one or more formal alumni networks, of whom perhaps half were scholarship scheme alumni – which was disproportionately higher as a proportion. Their primary affiliation seemed to be to their scholarship scheme network rather than that of their university. Only half a dozen mentioned that they had taken part in alumni group events, such as dinners, in their home country. Notably these were not exclusively scholarship alumni, nor were they only from the 'oldest' universities such as Cambridge which have very established overseas local networks.

It should be remembered that these alumni had mostly left UK HE in 2007 and 2008, and in some cases earlier. UK HEI alumni operations may well now be more sophisticated and tuned to the social networks that international alumni use, than had been the case when these particular alumni graduated. The level of engagement between HEIs and their more recent alumni could well be higher.



However, the interview evidence was quite clear that far more communication between them was taking place informally than through channels facilitated by their HE institutions, and much supported by digital social media networks. On the other hand there was significant use of facilitated alumni support amongst those who had held major UK-funded scholarships.

### 5.1.6 Visa issues

The issue of study visas and restrictions was reported by some alumni in relation to post-study employment opportunities (or their perceptions of recent restrictions on this), but also by a few positively in the sense that they had appreciated the permission to conduct subsistence work during their time in the UK.

The politically sensitive issue of current visa regulations, especially recent changes, was quite deliberately not raised by us within the interviews, in order to assess how many alumni would raise it themselves without any prompting, which might provide some indication of the extent of international views of the UK situation. Thirteen interviewees, almost all from Commonwealth countries (particularly India), mentioned that they had heard about recent ‘tightening’ of UK study visa regulations, essentially that they perceived that these now prevented post-study employment. They saw employment as important either in the sense of gaining post-study work experience that could enhance the potential career benefit of their study, or necessary to raise income to offset their fee and cost outlay. They felt that the policy changes, as they understood them, and perceived lack of employment opportunities were regrettable, and that this would ‘harm’ the UK. Several indicated that they would no longer recommend the UK a provider of international HE for this single reason.

A handful of this group of interviewees felt sufficiently strongly about the issue that they stated overtly that part of their rationale for participating in an interview was so that they could air their view on this, and they hoped that it would be reported in the project:

- 15 (Pakistan): *“I just hope that by being a part of this interview, and, you know, giving a positive feedback, a positive outlook, and sharing my own view, I hope that the fact that they are there [Government reading the research... because] they’re not letting people come, they’re restricting visas for students and all.”*
- 145 (China): *“I have to say that I’m a bit disappointed with the way things are going with barring students from staying on to work. I believe the post-study work visa now is cancelled. [Working is] a good way of keeping the skill that you’ve learned, I think it’s a premium education. By me staying on and working, I am not entitled to any benefit, so to me keeping foreign students in the UK is not a bad thing if you’re high value.”*
- 153 (Nigeria): *“The work experience here was paramount because you have to have money to leave and come and study here... If I haven’t had this experience of working here apart from this [studying] abroad, the actual experience that I need back in my place will not be there... together you’ve got the knowledge to take that back and make a difference. Let me make it very clear, the reason I said I don’t recommend people to come now is because of the [visa] scheme. I have a friend that wanted to do it. I said, ‘Right now, no’.”*

The extent to which changes to visa restrictions, or perceptions of them, (which potentially hinder the attractiveness of UK HE to international applicants) were raised by alumni was lower than had been feared, given the high profile of the issue in some international press. However, the proportion amongst certain key target nationalities was higher, particularly Indian interviewees, and multiplier effects could well increase the impact of negative perceptions. It is unclear whether this relates to particular desire amongst more of this group to undertake post-study work. However, whether the perceptions held are accurate in relation to the actual regulations is also somewhat unimportant, as it will be the more emotive perceptions that are publicised and communicated widely, rather than any potential 'correcting' information that might be issued by the UK in response.

The recent Hobsons survey (Matthews, 2013) reported that most international applicants had chosen the UK as a study destination because of the international recognition of qualifications, perceived safe environment and enhanced job prospects on return home. The ability to work while studying was ranked as more important than improved job prospects in the UK, a finding that may provide some comfort to the sector after the Tier 1 route was closed and applications procedures changed. More recent changes may have helped by lowering the salary threshold required for post-study work.

### 5.1.7 Negative experiences

Responses obtained from potential interviewees during sample stratification identified a number of alumni who apparently held negative views of (at least some aspects of) their UK HE experience. We deliberately selected and interviewed a number of these alumni, in order to obtain a more representative range of views and experiences.

Within the 100 interviews conducted, fifteen alumni expressed some negative attitudes towards certain specific experiences or issues, or overall. However, what became clear during the interviews was that in perhaps half of these cases, their attitudes had shifted over time, almost invariably to a more positive position. Thus only half a dozen alumni sustained negative views at the point of interview. Further consideration of that 'evolution' of perceptions over time is in the following section on trends.

The alumni reporting negative perceptions, either sustained or previously, fell into small groups citing problems of some distinct types, although some sense of a mismatch between expectations and experiences underpins them all:

- Three felt their course curriculum did not match or live up to the way it had been advertised, leading to disappointment in the knowledge gained or learning experience. In two cases this related to a course being less practical than they had desired, while one was shocked to be in a class of nearly 80 students and felt she obtained no personal contact or support from the academics leading the course. This could reflect unrealistic expectations, created by others or themselves. There were also a few cases where the course for which they applied was not actually being run once they arrived in the UK, but these were all resolved relatively quickly, which prevented long-term negative perceptions;
- A similar number were disappointed either not to be supported in their search for related employment opportunities (such as an internship) or simply being unable to

obtain employment when they had tried to do so. They perceived this as a lack of support from their HE institution, or the UK educational structure, and would not recommend UK HE to others as a result;

- There were two cases of strong personality clashes, or similar problems, with a supervisor or an influential colleague, which had not been resolved and rumbled on throughout their studies. In one case the graduate obtained a very low grade, which he believed was due to these issues, and filed a formal complaint (which was not upheld), and he remained bitter. It is presumably inevitable within any large-scale system that there will be such personality issues at times;
- A slightly larger group (but still only four or five) complained that they had not integrated well into the student body, and now felt little attachment to the institution and perceived that they had obtained fewer benefits than they had hoped for. They had seen this at the time as a failing of the university in not supporting them more, but several now saw that they had themselves contributed to this.

When these issues were discussed at some length in the interviews, those with prior negative perceptions about a 'narrow' or somewhat limited social or cultural experience tended to have changed their thinking. They voluntarily admitted that their limited experiences had largely been due to their own attitudes or personality at the time (two had brought partners to the UK and lived independently off-campus, while others admitted that they had simply missed out through shyness or indifference, or over-devotion to study), and that with hindsight they probably bore responsibility for this themselves.

The sustained negative views that remained tended to relate to course content issues (or perhaps unrealistic promotions), lack of associated employment (or support for it) or rare personality issues. However, it was interesting to note that almost all of these 'negative' alumni had at least some positive perceptions about their experience, and in many cases happily reported many different social and other benefits. The number of cases with pervasive negative experience was almost vanishingly small.

### 5.1.8 Inferred academic benefit – internationalisation at home

The lens through which our primary research investigation took place was exclusively the reported perceptions, attitudes and circumstances of alumni. This provided potentially unique insights into the benefits and impacts they obtained personally, while other benefits for the host or home country could be inferred.

Almost all the alumni would recommend UK HE study to others and many had actively done so, which suggests a future economic benefit to the UK through additional HE exports on the basis of the alumni sharing their positive experiences. These will take the form of future fee income, which in turn should lead to a greater extent of many of the wider benefits described here. However, continued or increased participation of international students in UK HE itself brings substantial benefits to the HE institutions too, as introduced very briefly earlier as 'internationalisation at home'.

The presence of international students within an HE institution, including physically on campus, adds to the diversity of the cultural and educational experience of all its students, including home students. The alumni's testimony demonstrated the diverse nationalities

and cultures of their fellow student body, and often within their particular course group, from which they felt they gained enormously in terms of intercultural sensitivity. It is only logical from this to suggest that UK (and for that matter other EU) students would also gain in this way. The issues around any lack of integration between UK and international students would also apply in relation to this local benefit. International students are also reported to have some effect on their local community, as they may be invited into local schools or voluntary groups to demonstrate and explain their own cultures.

A further benefit for UK HEIs from the presence of international students has been cited as their role in achieving critical mass for teaching on some courses, including some which may have declined in popularity with home students. In some STEM subjects especially, the proportion of international students may be relatively high in some institutions, and without the presence of those students the course would become unsustainable, thereby reducing the range of courses available to UK students at certain institutions. The make-up of some course groups reported by the alumni supported this view. Any such reductions of course availability could have potential long-term impact on the UK stock of strategic skills. These issues also arise in relation to postgraduate research study.

## 5.2 Emerging trends

### 5.2.1 National differences

Overall, as had been anticipated, alumni's experiences were strongly shaped by their individual contexts, prior to and during their HE study. The same applied to understanding their perceptions of benefits and predictions of future impact of their UK HE experience. As a result, there were substantial differences in the extent of some perceptions held as well as activities reported by different alumni, which means trends, generalisations and conclusions have to be drawn cautiously.

That said, the interview results were analysed and compared against certain key characteristics, particularly alumni's nationality, level of study, university type and subject of study. From that brief analysis it is possible to propose the existence of some broad trends, and the apparent absence of trends relating to other characteristics.

As expected from anecdotal prior knowledge, most (but not all) of the Chinese alumni interviewed had studied for Masters degrees, many in business or finance. They tended to be self- or family-funded and chiefly motivated by career enhancement potential; none had had any prior family history of HE study in the UK.

Graduates from India, in particular, and to some extent SE Asian nations tended to be somewhat similar in motivation and funding to the Chinese group, but a substantial minority were now working in their families' businesses. However, notably more of them had parents or siblings with experiences of UK HE.

It has been noted already that some alumni had rather 'narrow' experiences during their UK HE study, as they had tended to socialise mostly within their national or regional student groups, where they were perhaps culturally more comfortable. These were almost exclusively from China, Taiwan and SE Asia, while others who had 'narrow' experiences due to living with a partner or in their family unit encompassed many other nationalities.

There were many very positive stories from alumni from low-income Commonwealth countries, most of whom had been in receipt of UK-funded scholarships. Several of these were powerful personal articulations of the stated aims of the scholarship schemes – that is to say highly talented students, some from rather humble backgrounds, who had now returned to their countries and either very rapidly climbing to influential career positions or were dedicating themselves to improving their country and the lives of their fellow people, often changing careers to do so. However, such zeal was not confined only to those with Chevening and Commonwealth scholarships, but could be seen in alumni with other forms of funding too, albeit usually to a somewhat lesser extent.

Those from South America comprised a wide range, from a number who used an arts or fashion degree in London to kick-start an art or design career, to others reshaping their careers and dedicated to ‘improving’ their country on return working in areas like health or civil engineering. The small group from the Middle East and Turkey were mostly career-motivated Masters students, although with one or two notable exceptions.

Alumni from our ‘high income’ group of nations were also very mixed, with some mature graduates studying liberal arts degrees, including at research level, but others who for a whole variety of personal reasons chose UK HE over opportunities in their own country.

Although these broad trends were evident, and several of them seemed to support anecdotal national group characteristics or stereotypes, the range of stories within any single nationality grouping was generally greater than their similarities. This confirmed the importance of individual circumstances in shaping the alumni’s experiences and perceptions of impact. However, a much larger sample would be required to confirm this statistically, as the sample was modest in size and somewhat purposive in nature.

### 5.2.2 Other characteristics

Perhaps the key finding from our analysis of alumni’s experiences and perceptions of impact against personal characteristics was the absence of clear trends, subject to the rider of the modest sample size. For example, we saw very little difference in experiences or reflections between those who attended high-prestige, research-intensive universities and those who attended other institutions such as Post-92 universities. While some did recognise a number of unique attributes and benefits of their study in, say, Cambridge, the majority of the benefits perceived appeared to be independent of the broad type or mission group of the HE institution. Some of the most powerful stories of impact were from graduates who studied at relatively less well-known institutions.

In much the same way, the geographical location of the HE institution seemed to matter little, as there were wide ranges of stories from all UK nations and English regions. One exception to this was some of those who studied arts and fashion, who had very deliberately chosen London due to its cultural importance, and benefited greatly from being there specifically.

Almost two thirds of the alumni interviewed had studied Masters courses but the remainder had studied for longer periods in the UK for a first degree course or a postgraduate research degree. While there was some evidence for greater integration and socially-derived benefit from those who had been in the UK for several years, many of the most ‘positive’ stories were actually from graduates on Masters courses who had been in the UK

year for a year or less. The length of stay, at least beyond that single year, did not appear to be a major driving factor in terms of extent of perceived impact. For some graduates who had remained in the UK for post-study employment, that additional experience could be very valuable – but due to the nature of the experience rather than its duration.

Brief analysis by subject of study did not reveal distinct differences in terms of alumni's experiences or perceived benefits, although many who studied business and finance courses had done so rather directly for career-related motivations, as might be expected. However, their perceptions of impact were much wider than this. Another notable grouping of graduates was those who had studied international development-related Masters courses and were now working in capacity-building and societal development roles in developing nations. There was also a small but quite prominent group of alumni who had studied art and design courses in London, several of whom were now pursuing successful arts careers in self-employment. However, again, the overall picture was much more of great diversity within any single subject grouping, suggesting that subject of study was not greatly influential in the experiences and benefits gained.

### 5.2.3 Changes in perception over time

It might be expected that perceptions of a positive UK HE experience might gradually diminish over time, with an initial 'high' on graduation and then decrease with time perhaps with a 'half-life' type of curve. However, if anything there was some evidence that the reverse was the case, as some perceptions of benefit had emerged or grown stronger with time since graduation, although this could not be tested robustly in this study in any longitudinal sense. Although nearly three quarters of the interviewees had taken part in the i-GO survey since graduation (BIS, 2012), and their survey responses were available, due to the differing styles of the two research studies there were no directly comparable quantitative questions.

However, the issue of whether alumni would recommend UK HE study to others is a possible proxy for overall satisfaction. Of the alumni interviewed who had also taken part in the i-GO survey, 76% had at that earlier time indicated that they would recommend others to apply to the UK. In 2013, over 90% indicated that they had actually influenced other people to do so, at least to some extent, which (although not strictly comparable) suggests greater positivity with time.

When looked at on an individual case basis, this overall shift was at least partly due to changes in attitude by some alumni, a few of whom had been somewhat negative in the short term but now expressed positive views. We attempted to probe such apparent changes of view during the interviews where possible.

In one or two cases it transpired that the graduate had misunderstood the question previously, but in the majority of cases they admitted that the passage of time and their evolving circumstances led them to shift their view. Certain shortcomings in a specific aspect of their study experience, such as a disappointing grade or even a problem with a landlord, could have led to a more negative (or less positive) perception soon after graduation. However, over time, their evolving lives offered them opportunities to derive new and deeper impacts of their UK HE study and experience, of which they had not been aware soon after graduation. Equally, for some, it could simply be that with maturity and time for reflection on the overall experience, they were now more aware of the benefits. These individual shifts in attitude, where we could recognise them, were almost always

positive (other than those few who changed certain attitudes as a result of perceptions about recent visa restrictions).

Within the i-GO results (BIS 2012), it could also be seen that for several different questions relating to overall reflections on value or benefit, the results obtained 2½ years after a cohort had graduated were slightly higher than those obtained six months after graduation. Although those differences were small, in most cases they seemed to reflect somewhat greater positivity with time since graduation. However, one exception to this seemed to be the value of their specific qualification in terms of career progression, where the opposite trend was observed. This could relate to the increasing need in many labour markets for greater differentiation than offered purely by an academic qualification. However, the i-GO study seems to lend some support to our clear observation that many alumni's perceptions of the impact of UK HE study grow stronger with time rather than diminish.

## 6. Overall findings

### 6.1 Reflections on impact beyond student experience

Hitherto most studies considering the benefits of UK international higher education have focused on students and their perceptions of their student experience. Our new study extends the evidence base to perceptions from alumni, building on recent quantitative research with non-EU international graduates around three years after graduation (BIS, 2012), which reported very positive perceptions of their career benefits after graduation. Our study provides deeper, qualitative evidence from alumni who are further into their career and personal trajectories (over five years post-graduation), but also on a much wider range of benefits and impact in their lives, from which we can also infer benefits more generally to their home countries and especially to the UK.

For the alumni themselves, we have identified tangible personal benefits in relation to their career progression and/or change, their position in society and especially their personal growth, not least the development of extensive networks of social and potentially future professional contacts. As higher-performing and more highly skilled employees they bring benefits to their employers and home countries' economies (or indeed to any country in which they choose to work). They bring impact in the form of societal development where they work in education, development and capacity building and which will grow as they progressively become more influential members of their society, and amplify some benefits through their personal influences.

For the UK itself we have identified, through the alumni:

- tangible economic benefits of additional trade with existing UK enterprises, and the establishment of new international partnership ventures and new overseas offices for current UK businesses;
- the potential for far more future benefit through the global network of links between the alumni and with contacts they have made in the UK;
- existing active international collaborations in research and education, and the potential for more in future;
- continued support for future HE exports, as they personally recommend others to participate, on the basis of their own positive experiences, for economic benefit but also allied academic benefits;
- additional trade from the alumni and those they influence through allegiance to British brands, including tourism to the UK;
- enhanced perceptions of the UK, its people and culture, especially increased trust in the UK which supports cultural and political ties but also future economic benefits;

The very large and growing global network of UK alumni, predisposed to trust the UK, its people and enterprises, based on their positive personal experiences, offers huge potential



to deliver great impact to the UK over time, as they progress in their careers to more senior and influential positions. That trust is crucial, as it is known to underpin trading relationships, collaborations and mutual understanding (British Council, 2012). This army of ambassadors seems to embody Nye's notion of soft power (Nye, 1991), enhancing the UK's reputation and extending cultural and diplomatic influence.

Given the qualitative nature of the research, we have not tried to estimate the economic value of either known tangible benefits to date or potential economic impact. However, given the early career stage of these alumni, and the individuality of progression and circumstances, it is likely that the overall potential future impact from alumni will be far greater, although its extent is well beyond simple economic calculation.

## 6.2 Positive impacts and attitudes

What seems to stand out most strikingly from this research is the overwhelmingly positive views held by the vast majority of international alumni who participated. We are confident that this is not merely an artefact of a positively-biased sample, as other studies show similar positive perceptions on the basis of reflections on student experience (BIS, 2012). On a personal note, one of the interview research team commented that as a result of conducting the interviews she "felt more proud to be British" than she had done before.

Our study has identified UK alumni who have embarked on a wide variety of career trajectories and, five or more years after graduation from UK HE, have mostly made good career progress in their chosen field and are highly satisfied with the contribution that studying in HE in the UK has made to this. Five years post-graduation is still relatively early in career for many, other than those who attended UK HE as mature students after an established prior career. As a result, for most, their HE experience may have delivered some tangible benefit in launching their career, or enhancing their rate of progression, but much impact is yet to come. As they progress into more senior roles, many will see other longer-term benefits emerge, particularly from their wider experiences during study in the UK rather than the qualification itself, such as increased confidence, international outlook and intercultural empathy. There is evidence that alumni's attitudes become even more positive with time since graduation, and the impacts they derive may well continue to increase with time as their circumstances evolve.

As many alumni progress to more senior positions in their careers and more influential roles in society, wider benefits to their home country and to the UK will develop from the largely potential impact we identify at this stage and become more tangible impact. In their home countries, or others in which they may choose to live and work, this will grow with time as they have greater personal influence and multiplying effects on capacity building and societal development, including education.

For the UK, a variety of economic impacts will grow as the alumni enter more senior and influential business roles, beyond the specific early examples identified already from a few graduates. It is possible that tangible benefits are seen more quickly from those working in family businesses, who may from an early age be in relatively more senior positions than their peers in other employment. The alumni as a whole comprise a myriad of positively-minded ambassadors, potential business collaborators and consumers who are predisposed to trust 'brand UK' and its elements – citizens, organisations and the UK itself.

This presents enormous long-term potential, particularly when the recent scale of international alumni of the UK is considered (2.5 million new ambassadors over 10 years).

It should of course be remembered that most international students in the UK are self-funded and thus are from more wealthy sections of society in their home countries. In addition, to have gained entry to a UK HE programme they will already have been relatively high educational achievers. Perhaps it is not surprising that they are already embarked on successful career trajectories, but what is important is that they chose the UK, have great experiences to report of the country and for the longer-term will maintain a relationship with us that will likely manifest in many beneficial ways.

It is known that some well-disposed international alumni make financial donations, and donations in kind, to their alma mater (Miller, 2013). The value of this direct benefit has not been attempted in this study as it is likely that the career stage of many of the alumni is earlier than that at which many will be in a position to donate.

### 6.2.1 Sustaining positivity

Some of the alumni interviewed now reflected more positively about their overall UK HE experience than was apparent the case when they had been surveyed two or so years previously, and/or than immediately after graduation. For some this seemed to be progressive growth in perception of the value of certain aspects of their experience over time, as their careers and lives developed and they encountered situations where they could put their learning to use. This ‘increase’ in positivity over time is slightly counter-intuitive as it might be expected that highly positive immediate perceptions might diminish with time, as longer-term memories become less significant amidst alumni’s evolving lives. Such a hypothetical decrease might also be affected by a fall in the extent of contact with fellow alumni once they have left HE, which might also be anticipated. However, evidence from the interviews suggests that positivity may increase in some respects for many.

If most alumni do remain positive or even grow more positive with time, they should continue to be receptive to HE institutions’ efforts in alumni relations and network support, although there is evidence to suggest that the most pervasive inter-alumni contacts are informal rather than through HEI-supported channels. Most welcomed the idea of keeping in touch with each other and to some extent with their HE institution.

This raises interesting questions about what more might be done to build on the positive individual experiences and warmth of feeling for the UK that international alumni exhibit, given nearly half a million international students in UK HE annually of whom the large majority return home or move elsewhere. Many UK universities have alumni associations operating internationally and, where sufficient numbers exist, specific country branches. There are also various associations and networks of British scholarship scheme alumni and ‘British scholar’ or alumni groups<sup>4</sup> in a few countries. Some of these have been initiated or supported by the British Council. However, there has never been any targeted research to assess how these ad hoc activities might more effectively be enhanced to increase benefit to the UK, although there is currently some discussion about a potential national ‘UK HE alumni’ network.

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<sup>4</sup>For example, see <http://www.abschennai.org/> and <https://twitter.com/AlumniUK>

Support for alumni of the main UK scholarship schemes is more substantial and, from our evidence, apparently more effective than for other alumni. However, it would be worthwhile to consider, for a relatively modest investment, what targeted interventions could be implemented to engage with alumni more widely to sustain and optimise long-term UK benefits – and to enhance the benefits perceived by those who have themselves invested in their education in the UK. Further consideration would be necessary to understand what such a national scheme might offer, beyond that available through individual HE institution alumni networks and informal channels.

However, a ‘national’ approach has been adopted by some countries, notably Japan and China. For example the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) employs some of its funds to keep in touch with foreign alumni of Japanese institutions, even inviting them back to Japan for short training and other programmes; it also supports follow-up offices in a number of countries including Nigeria, Jamaica and Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>.

### 6.3 Individuality

While a number of broad trends have been identified, the absence of other systematic variations that might have been expected is perhaps as noteworthy, although the sample was of modest size. There appeared to be relatively little difference, for example, between the positive benefits perceived by those who attended research-intensive universities or institutions in other mission groups.

Investigating HE benefits through the experiences of alumni some years after they have left UK HE offered insights into their evolving personal circumstances as well as individual backgrounds. This confirmed the importance of individual circumstances as a major factor, as the impact of HE experience is perceived in the context of alumni’s lives in their chosen or home countries. In the same way that their motivations will have been a highly individual combination of career aspirations and other factors, the benefits and impact from their UK HE experience are highly dependent on their individual circumstances.

So while we could categorise alumni by nationality, level of study or other grouping, we tried to look at them as individuals. This meant considering not only their career trajectory and motivations for study, but also their social background and mobility capital (i.e. were they well-prepared for study overseas) as well as current family circumstances. All these factors and more contextualise and affect experiences as students and memories and perceptions as alumni.

Some alumni have chosen to progress along conventional linear career paths, and make use of certain benefits that support that trajectory, while others have been either inspired or assisted to make changes of direction, often towards running their own business or, especially, working in societal development. The benefits that they gain, and those that may accrue to their home country and the UK, will be very different depending on which path they pursue. However, despite different motivations and expectations, UK HE seemed to have provided a transformative experience for almost all.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.jica.go.jp/bangladesh/english/office/others/alumni.html> and <http://www.jicaalumni-eg.com/about-us/>

Any quantitative estimate of impact or benefits of studying HE in the UK is made much more complex by these individual differences and evolving circumstances, as the benefits are overlaid upon a highly uneven base. Recognition of the importance of individual circumstances also suggests that any analysis of impact has to take this major factor into account, otherwise any conclusions may be invalid within many groups and certainly in relation to individuals.

## 6.4 The UK as a destination for international students

Future alumni streams and education exports, and the wider benefits these prompt, depend on the UK continuing to be an attractive and welcoming destination for international students. The alumni interviewed related a variety of motivations for choosing the UK for their international HE, ranging from educational (chiefly familiarity with or concordance of qualifications, reputation of institution or perceptions of learning style, including the UK's distinctive Masters course structure and research-only doctoral programmes) to cultural or social reasons. The UK had been perceived by many as a safe environment, both on campus and more generally, in comparison with perceptions of certain competitors. Others made judgement more pragmatically or economically, based on relative fee levels and especially the availability of 1-year Masters courses.

As alumni reflecting on their student experience, graduates' responses were almost unequivocally positive and this underpinned their recommendations of the UK as an HE destination to others. These positive views were based partly on perceptions that their earlier motivations had been reasonably well founded, and on other personal experiences too. Most had felt welcomed in the UK, not only within HE but also within the country itself. Many expressed admiration for the tolerance within UK society, and some that previous fears (of being unwelcome foreigners, or discriminated against) had not been borne out. Added to these values were their reflections on a rather distinctive pedagogy within UK education, inviting discussion and challenge, which enabled them to grow personally and become capable of greater learning, as well as the sheer cosmopolitanism of their experience. Collectively these factors instilled in the alumni strong bonds to the UK.

## 6.5 Cosmopolitanism (and integration)

'Come to the UK and meet the world' could be a potential promotional strap line for UK HE, based on the perceived benefit of cosmopolitanism on which alumni reflected very positively. As indicated in the previous chapter, the majority of alumni stated that there had been many different nationalities on their course, and within the HEI student body. They had universally considered that this was a positive feature of their experience, even those who had restricted themselves somewhat in the range of their social interactions.

Alumni of Masters courses especially reported a wide variety of nationalities in their course groups, although sometimes this could impact on the extent to which they interacted with UK students. Certainly some alumni articulated powerfully how they felt transformed personally in learning to engage with those of different nationalities and cultures, and to understand and tolerate differences. In gaining this intercultural sensitivity, which they believed would help them greatly in future international work and relations (and is a known global employability benefit, CBI 2011), a few went so far as to admit this involved overcoming previously held prejudices.

While it is unlikely that this cosmopolitanism is unique to UK HE, it may be that the UK's position within international HE has led to it being more strongly established here and/or to a greater extent than in competitor host countries such as the USA or Australia. Some statistical research could valuably be attempted to determine whether numerical evidence demonstrates this to be a unique aspect of the UK offer. This would require analysis at a very granular level (i.e. at institutional or preferably course level, rather than national) as the potential benefit occurs at that local level.

## 6.6 An optimal width of experience

While alumni perceived very positive benefits from their HE study and qualification, which were mostly career-related, the most positive stories were from those who also had wider experiences while in the UK. Some of the richest reports of personal development were from those who undertook significant off-campus activity, in the form of volunteering, employment (including post-study) or other social or cultural activity, such as playing local league cricket. Such activities enabled greater integration with a wider variety of people than met in the campus environment, which for some was dominated by interactions with other foreign students. That integration developed deeper and better informed – positive – perceptions of the UK as a society, but also offered new opportunities for informal learning.

Where some alumni had reported that they had somewhat narrow experiences during their stay in the UK, such as restricted social activities by remaining largely within their nationality group or with a pre-existing friendship group or partner, or living in halls entirely populated by international students, they now perceived that this was a sub-optimal HE experience. With reflection some realised that they had contributed to this themselves through shyness or reticence, or their choice of accommodation with a partner or current girl- or boyfriend.

Others reflected that their inherent outgoing nature had enabled them to throw themselves fully into a wide range of experiences, and now appreciated the range of benefits that had ensued. Although many HE institution practices and the nature of support for international students will have moved on since these alumni were students in the UK, there are clear messages here about the benefits of maximising integration, which will contribute to the experiences of UK students too.

The issue of employment has been highlighted. Without repeating much of that detail, it is clear that perceptions of the opportunities for post-study work are all-important for some alumni in whether they feel they can recommend the UK as a host for HE. With career-related motivations uppermost for the vast majority of potential applicants, perceptions that the enhancement of benefit through related post-study employment is not possible will be a significant detraction. Even if in reality visa restrictions are not as draconian as some perceive, that message is potentially hard to purvey overseas in an age of widespread social media through which any negatively-minded alumni can have a powerful voice.

The position in relation to work experience for UK students is now unequivocal. Most students undertake part-time ('subsistence') work to offset costs of living and study, and the value of structured work placements or internships in contributing to employability as to be recommended as an integral part of all HE courses (Wilson, 2012). It would seem illogical to place restrictions on international students for part-time or at least some course-related employment, when the prime motivation for most participation in HE courses is

career- and employment-related. The question of the extent of post-study employment is more contentious politically, but it was clear from the alumni we interviewed that the overwhelming majority undertook HE in the UK with the long-term goal of making a success of their lives in their own country. On the other hand many would appreciate at least the option to work in the UK for a period post-graduation, to maximise and consolidate the benefit of HE study in terms of career enhancement.

From several of these angles, it seems clear that participation in employment in some form in the UK should be welcomed, to respond to applicants' motivations but also as a part of current good practice in higher education.

## 6.7 Ambassadors including scholarship alumni

The very positive personal stories we heard from many Chevening, Commonwealth and other UK-funded scholarship scheme alumni have been prominent in this research. Based on their reflections and reported current activities, there seems to be strong evidence that the aims of these schemes are being fulfilled by at least some of their alumni. Chevening scholarships, accessed by the 'elite' in target countries, are designed to build relationships between the UK and these countries and to foster wider socio-cultural, diplomatic, political, and developmental ties and impacts. For this reason they are funded by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. Many of the Chevening alumni interviewed were very actively working as just such ambassadors. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission supports international study in order to foster impacts in developing Commonwealth countries in terms of, inter alia, health, educational capacity-building and infrastructure development. Several of the Commonwealth Scholarship alumni we interviewed were actively pursuing careers with great personal commitment in just these areas.

What was also clear was that these alumni's relationships with the UK and their HEIs, and with fellow alumni, were strongly reinforced by the sense of belonging to that scholarship scheme's alumni group. This was the alumni grouping that they cited foremost, rather than that of their particular institution.

It was initially tempting to conclude that the 'emotional bond' with the UK articulated by many alumni was something unique to those with UK-funded scholarships, perhaps directly related to a perceived obligation to 'pay back' to the UK. However, the intensity of the personal motivations they articulated and reports of tangible activities undertaken felt much more than 'pay back'. More importantly, similar emotional connections with the UK, and personal commitments to societal development or capacity building agendas, were also held by some alumni who had not had UK scholarships, although they were most powerfully demonstrated and more pervasive amongst the UK-funded scholarship holders. Emotional ties of some kind with the UK were in fact commonplace, to varying extents and articulated in different ways depending on the individual circumstances of many other alumni.

The combination of factors underlying positive experiences of HE study in the UK led to a feeling of trust in the UK, its institutions and products – UK HE is clearly one the UK's strongest cultural assets. This trust, in conjunction with the influencing power of soft diplomacy, creates support for the UK and its products, culture and language. It results in brand loyalty for UK goods, travel to the UK and Europe as preferred tourist and holiday destinations, the promulgation of UK pedagogic style on return home, recommendations to

family, friends and employees over whom alumni have influence to study or train in the UK, and in the choice of UK partners when national businesses and networks expand into international partnerships.

## 6.8 Other student mobility and internationalisation at home

The parameters of this study allowed deep investigation of the views and experiences of non-EU international alumni who had studied in the UK, from which we have described a range of benefits to the UK and to the alumni, who overwhelmingly hold positive views of the UK and its higher education experience. However, this particular lens of focus limited or prevented investigation of certain other potential benefits and, especially, the potential benefits from other forms of international education or student mobility.

We were able to infer benefits to UK HE of the participation of international students who bring cultural richness and diversity to the HE community, as well as supporting the provision of some courses or research that could be unsustainable without international student participants. The experience of home students here will also be ‘internationalised’ to some degree by the presence of overseas students; through this the benefits of cosmopolitanism and intercultural sensitivity reported by international alumni will also extend to some degree to UK students on the same courses and campus.

Our study only investigated graduates who had spent at least an academic year physically studying in the UK. It was agreed at the outset, largely for the purposes of simplicity, that other forms of student mobility, transnational education and distance learning, would all be excluded, such as:

- Those undertaking transnational education (TNE), i.e. obtaining a UK HE degree but with no physical attendance, or very little, in the UK. Since 2010 the number of students studying for a UK degree outside the UK has been greater than the number of international HE students in the UK,<sup>6</sup> so this would be an interesting and very significant sector to explore. What strength of feeling do TNE alumni experience towards the UK, or to an HE institution that they have never physically visited, or via an overseas campus where there may be few UK students? New research, as yet unpublished, suggests economic benefits for participants and host countries<sup>7</sup>, but that there is little data with which to assess comparative impact.
- Students undertaking UK distance learning programmes, potentially a sector of increasing importance as massive open online course provision (MOOCs) becomes more viable, again raises questions of the extent to which wider positive benefits might develop and be retained;
- Students taking part in international exchange activities as part of their HE study programme, which can be of short duration but for some take the form of an intercalated year, which could offer significant development of UK experiences and potential long term benefits;

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<sup>6</sup> Information from HEGlobal: <http://heglobal.international.ac.uk/tne.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Preliminary findings from research project on impact of TNE on host countries, British Council, 2013

- The approximately 150,000 current EU students enrolled in UK universities, who were not sampled in this research – logically, it might be expected that these graduates would provide similar evidence in relation to personal, economic and certain wider benefits;
- The several hundred thousand international students and trainees (totals unknown) in institutions and practical programmes outside the state HE sector. These could include professionals such as surgeons, accountants or applied engineers, those in technical skills training or following programmes in performing arts, and those on English language courses as well as those enrolled in private sector HE institutions in the UK. None of these groups were covered in this study yet, again, they comprise another substantial group of potential 'influencers' on behalf of the UK.

Finally there is scope separately to consider the wider benefits of outward mobility of UK students, both as impact to the UK (which presumably might to some extent parallel the benefits we ascribed to 'home' countries) and to the graduates themselves. With a new outward mobility strategy in the UK, this aspect of student mobility must become a growing issue for UK HE in future. It should be informed by the experiences of international alumni of the UK, and/or potentially delivered with some linkage to those international alumni.



## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The overall findings from this study of the perceptions and experiences of international alumni of UK higher education, which are believed broadly to reflect the range of non-EU international students in UK HE, lead to some key conclusions.

- The overwhelming majority of alumni are very positive about their experience, and consider that the mix of skills and experiences gained during their UK study period directly contribute to enhanced career progression and wider personal development. The mix of experiences exerts greater influences than the acquisition of the HE qualification itself. The impact of the overall experience was described in ways suggesting that as UK alumni they 'feel different' and are more confident and more enterprising, as well as particularly adept at working or communicating with people in other countries.
- Cosmopolitanism shines through as a major strength of UK HE, and the majority of alumni maintain a network of international friends met during their time in the UK. For some, these friendships and networks have already led to joint business and related activities, often to the benefit of the UK. Many more are likely to develop in future.
- The combination of positive HE experiences and positive perceptions of the UK, its people and culture, result in an emotional bond between alumni and the UK, extending the UK's power of soft diplomacy. The trust created underpins support for the UK and its products, culture and language, resulting in brand loyalty for UK goods and travel to the UK for leisure, the promulgation of UK values during capacity building at home, and in the choice of UK partners when entering international business collaborations.
- Many of the most active and articulate ambassadors had been supported by a UK-funded scholarship, and were embodying some of the developmental and diplomatic aspirations of the schemes.
- Alumni returning home are actively influencing the next generation of international students (and thereby future alumni) – the great majority of those interviewed reported recommending the UK as a study destination to others. Together these influences result in both short and longer term benefits (economic and soft power) to the UK.
- Although many alumni are involved in some form of contact through their university or scholarship scheme, the most pervasive communications between them are taking place informally, particularly through digital social media and networks. It seems inevitable that the impact of these social networks will continue to grow.
- The great majority of international students are not seeking to study in the UK as a route to long-term employment and migration into the UK. Although most are career-motivated they seek an optimal combination of academic and related work and wider experiences in the UK, so as to derive maximum enhancement of their career when they return home or move elsewhere in the mobile global economy.

## 7.1 Recommendations

For Government:

- Stronger and clear promotion of allowable opportunities for post-study employment and work experiences during HE study would help to alleviate growing perceptions that UK international HE provision is less attractive due to recent changes to visa structures and processes.
- There is a growing evidence base in relation to the impact of international student mobility, to which this study adds a new dimension through alumni. Future research tracking alumni as they progress further along their career trajectories would be valuable to understand whether their positivity sustains or continues to grow, and to illustrate realisation of many potential longer-term benefits.
- The present study was restricted to the ‘traditional’ model of incoming international student mobility, but the majority of international students of the UK follow education programmes without campus enrolment in the UK. Extending this research so as to understand the wider benefits of other models of international HE study, including TNE, would provide a more complete picture of benefits and impacts. What is the impact when the student does not physically visit the UK?
- Given the unequivocal benefits perceived here from international student mobility, it could be useful to consider the extent and range of impacts on the UK of a strategy to increase UK student outward mobility, potentially to provide measures of the value of implementation of that strategy.

For HE providers:

- The flipside of UK HE’s strong international and intercultural cosmopolitanism is that it can result in sub-optimal integration of international and home students. HE institutions should continue to review and improve their support for international students, so as to strike the right balance of integration.
- Wider experiences off campus clearly deliver many benefits to international students; HE providers would do well to support and promote these further to students in order to maximise their overall experience and in turn foster their own positive reputations.
- The extensive use of digital social network media worldwide provides new opportunities for alumni to communicate and potentially collaborate. Alumni offices need to continue to experiment and make appropriate use of such networks, and potentially review the effectiveness of a variety of models of alumni contact and support.

For UK stakeholders in international HE:

- There is a growing ‘army’ of alumni as informal ambassadors for ‘brand UK’ and UK HE in particular, potentially increasing by hundreds of thousands annually, whose influence will increase in their home countries with time. HE providers and the wider HE sector should consider how this goodwill can best be utilised for optimal benefit, within the

constraints of effective soft power. This could add to current promotional efforts, including recognition of existing best practice and use of positive personal alumni stories.

- Consideration of a 'national' network of support for international alumni of the UK would be welcome, as well as other opportunities for appropriate integrated effort, to help all parties to maximise the effective support of their alumni and reinforce positive reflections and memories amongst them.

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# Appendix 1

## Rationale for groupings of graduate characteristics

As indicated in Chapter 3 on the research method and sample, it was necessary to use a small number of groups with which to classify each of the key characteristics of graduates interviewed. This was due to the restricted number of interviews (100) to be carried out, within which the range of graduates interviewed had to reflect reasonably the full range of characteristics of graduates in the real international cohort. The rationale chosen for each grouping is given in Table A.1.

Variable	Grouping	Target %	Rationale
Country of origin	China	17	Combination of reflecting the numerically largest 'sending' nations, certain established country groups, and regions of particular economic interest
	India	17	
	Other Asian nations	16	
	Middle East	10	
	Low income nations	20	
	Latin America	10	
	High income	10	
Current country of residence	Country of origin	80	'Returned home' are main focus but some others to consider differences in possible benefits
	UK	10	
	Other	10	
Gender	Female	50	Equal split: enables identification of any differences by gender
	Male	50	
Level of study	Undergraduate (UG)	25	Reflects UK international student population; PGRs may have particular benefits and also strategically important
	Taught Masters (PGT)	65	
	Postgraduate research (PGR)	10	
Subject of study	STEM (& medicine)	30	Very broad breakdown to reflect concentrations of international students in the UK and some key subjects of interest (e.g. art/design)
	Business/finance	30	
	Arts & humanities	15	
	Social sciences	15	
	Other	10	
HEI type	Research-intensive	60	Very broad classification to identify potential differences in impact/benefits by HEI type/reputation
	Other	40	
HEI location	England	80	Representation of HEIs in all four home nations
	Other UK nation	20	
Funding source	Self-funded	60	Very broad breakdown to enable differentiation of benefits with different motivations/funding; scholarship alumni over-sampled as likely to provide good case studies
	Scholarship	30	
	Other sponsor	10	
Current occupational sector	STEM/manufacturing	20	Very broad classification based on industrial sectors; certain key sectors highlighted
	Education inc HE	15	
	Business/finance	15	
	Health/social care	10	

Variable	Grouping	Target %	Rationale
	Media	5	
	Government/public	15	
	Law	5	
	Retail/logistics/services	5	
	Other	10	
Positive experience	Yes	50	Deliberate inclusion of some 'negative' examples to avoid possible positive bias in interview sample, based on pre-interview survey responses
	Somewhat	40	
	No	10	
Extent of links	Professional and personal	60	Inclusion of some 'less linked' examples to avoid possible positive bias in sample; based on pre-interview survey responses
	Only personal	30	
	Few/none	10	

**Table A.1** Groupings of graduate characteristics and rationale

### Detailed characteristics of the interview sample

The countries of origin of graduates interviewed, and the HE institutions from which they had graduated, are listed in Tables A.2 and A.3 respectively.

China	India	Other Asia	Middle East	Low income	Latin America	High income
China 15	India 16	Brunei	Iran 2	Bangladesh	Argentina	Australia 2
		Hong Kong 3	Israel 2	Dominican Rep	Brazil 3	Canada 2
		Indonesia 3	Jordan	Ethiopia	Chile 2	New Zealand 2
		Malaysia 4	Lebanon	Ghana	Colombia 3	Norway 2
		Russia	Syria	Jamaica	Mexico 4	South Africa
		Taiwan 3	Turkey 3	Kenya 2	Nicaragua	USA 2
		Thailand		Malawi	Venezuela	
				Nigeria 5		
				Pakistan 2		
				Sri Lanka 2		
<b>Total: 15</b>	<b>Total: 16</b>	<b>Total: 16</b>	<b>Total: 10</b>	<b>Total: 17</b>	<b>Total: 15</b>	<b>Total: 11</b>

**Table A.2** Countries of origin of graduates interviewed (number indicates where more than one interviewed)



Research intensive	Number	Other	Number
Birmingham	5	Anglia Ruskin	2
Cambridge	3	Bolton	1
Cardiff	3	Bournemouth	2
Edinburgh	1	Coventry	1
Glasgow	4	Derby	1
Institute of Education	1	Essex	1
King's College London	1	Kingston	2
Leeds	3	Leeds Metropolitan	1
Liverpool	3	Manchester Metropolitan	1
London School of Economics	1	Middlesex	1
Loughborough	1	Nottingham Trent	1
Manchester	8	Roehampton	2
Newcastle	2	Salford	1
Nottingham	7	Sheffield Hallam	1
Oxford	1	Staffordshire	1
Queen's University Belfast	1	Stirling	1
Reading	1	Strathclyde	2
School of Oriental and African Studies	1	Sunderland	1
Sheffield	4	Teesside	1
Southampton	3	University of Arts London	8
Sussex	4	University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	2
University College London	1	West London	1
York	2	West of Scotland	1
		Westminster	1
		Winchester	1
		Wolverhampton	1
Total: 23	61	26	39

**Table A.3** HE institutions from which interviewees had graduated (numbers indicate where more than one graduate was interviewed)

## **Additional alumni groupings accessed**

In order to augment the potential sample of volunteers who were eligible and available for interview, invitations were issued to targeted subsets within the following alumni groups. The research team are most grateful for the assistance of the respective alumni offices for enabling us to access their alumni, by sending invitations on our behalf to selected alumni.

- FCO Chevening Scholarships
- Commonwealth Scholarships Commission
- Cambridge Gates Trust
- Anglia Ruskin University
- Kingston University
- University of the Arts, London
- Edinburgh University.

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**BIS/13/1172**