Transnational education and employability development

Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne, Professor Elspeth Jones and Steve Woodfield
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1. Executive summary

Internationalisation and employability development are important themes for UK higher education (HE) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). One aspect of many UK HE institutions’ internationalisation strategies has been to increase the number and range of UK programmes delivered ‘offshore’ as transnational education (TNE) – through overseas partner institutions, international branch campuses or distance learning. There has been increasing attention within the UK HE sector to enhancing the employability of students, either as development embedded in the curriculum or in other ways, and assessing its effectiveness, most prominently in the form of measuring its impact on the employment outcomes of graduates.

There is a quality assurance requirement for institutions providing TNE programmes that they offer the learning and development, academically and through other experiences, that is comparable to those within their UK programmes. This means that any enhancement of employability within a UK programme should also be provided in the equivalent TNE programme. This research was commissioned to discover the extent to which this is the case. It was investigated through an international literature review, a call for evidence from UK higher education institutions (HEIs) of examples of such activity, and participant perspectives through TNE alumni (who had studied first degree and taught postgraduate programmes).

Previous reviews indicate that there is little evidence of the incorporation of generic employability skills as graduate outcomes, in international HE or TNE. Our review reveals a paucity of literature relating to:

- graduate outcomes from international education and TNE in particular;
- support for enhanced employability, and specifically the incorporation of employability development in the curriculum, in TNE programmes.

This confirms the distinct research gap as far as outcomes of TNE are concerned and, more specifically, the need to assess the development of generic, transferable employability skills in TNE programmes. We also contend that the distinction between employment skills and employability skills is as important in TNE as it is for other forms of provision, perhaps even more so in some country contexts where TNE is designed to address key skills gaps. Employment skills relate to qualifications and credentials for specific jobs or professions, while employability indicates transferable skills which are not job-specific but support employment generally.

The existing literature and our primary research indicate complex variations in how the value of TNE programmes is perceived and how this relates to the motivations of those studying TNE programmes. Generally, it is clear that overseas study tends to be seen as the ‘gold standard’ by employers, and to some extent societally, and TNE study is commonly seen as a ‘second best’ option. On the other hand, there are strong variations, geographically, in perceptions of its value relative to types of local provision, and some variations in relation to the value of different countries’ TNE provision, meaning that each country context may need to be considered separately. A further implication of this is that despite current perceptions that may suggest otherwise, it cannot simply be assumed that an overseas TNE qualification carries any inherent ‘employability’ beyond what it provides in practice.

When it comes to the motivations of TNE students, the relatively limited literature suggests that these are largely career-focused or employment-focused, either ‘positional’ (more directly work-related or job-related) or more ‘transformative’ (more developmental personally). Interviews with
the alumni confirmed this range, although relatively few had studied in order to acquire specific short-term employment outcomes. Rather, they viewed studying via TNE as part of a wider approach to progressing their career, either in their current role or in another sector or profession. Few understood the difference between employability and employment, and many believed there was no need to develop greater employability than would be afforded to them by achieving the qualification. On the basis of these alumni (who mostly graduated 3-5 years ago), this suggests that TNE students at that time had a much less nuanced view of employability than comparable UK students.

The interviews confirmed that the distinctive profile of TNE students, particularly their study circumstances. Other than those at international branch campuses, many were working either part-time or full-time while pursuing their programme (including many programmes labelled as full-time), particularly those studying at Masters level. This suggests that UK notions of mode of study do not apply well in TNE contexts. Their study circumstances (i.e. if they are already employed) impact strongly on their motivations and their perceived need for employability development, but also (if they are working full-time) their ability to access opportunities beyond the core timetable.

Personal circumstances strongly impacted on selection of a TNE programme in the first place, with many alumni reporting that it was the only option available to them, as they needed to continue working in order to fund their programme. Although many had perceived higher potential value in studying overseas, that option was not open to them practically, so an overseas degree through TNE was the best achievable option for them. Some were not able to travel overseas for other personal reasons.

The majority of TNE alumni interviewed had achieved some positive employment-related or career-related outcome. Most of those who had studied a first degree believed their qualification had helped them gain a job or progress to further study, although a significant minority had not done so and felt negatively about their TNE programme. For a few this was because the qualification was not recognised in their desired profession (and they had not researched this beforehand). Among those who studied a Masters or other postgraduate programmes – most of whom had already been and continued working – only a few had obtained a different job subsequently, but most felt more confident of career progression at some point.

There was evidence from some UK institutions of employability development initiatives within their overseas provision, but rarely examples where inclusion of embedded transferable skill development into both the UK and TNE curriculum was mandatory. Formal work-based learning programmes also seemed to be relatively rare. An example in the literature of an Australian university’s work-integrated programme with a Vietnamese partner was notable in being considered innovative, while it would be considered as standard practice within a UK domestic course.

Few of the alumni interviewed believed that development of employability had been an overt aspect of their programme, although many did not understand this conceptually, and believed it was the qualification itself that constituted such development. Over half of them reported no experience of any learning-element, activity or support that we suggested might enhance employability.

Employability (including transferable skills) development that was embedded in the curriculum was rarely reported by the alumni, other than those at international campuses where provision appeared to be quite similar to that in the UK – in one case it was clearly matched to its UK campus provision – and in one partnership with a local university. Other than these cases, there were only sporadic instances where alumni reported learning activities that (we would understand
would) develop transferable skills such as team-working, communications or leadership skills, and these tended to require a period of study in the UK as part of the TNE programme. There was some evidence for this kind of support in online (distance) learning programmes where skills-focused modules are designed to be applicable to learners irrespective of the location of their learning.

Alumni were somewhat more familiar with the concept of co-curricular support, such as careers advice or help with CV writing, suggesting that they understood this type of employment-related support more than employability development. However, only a minority reported having been offered such support or knowing it was available, although it was almost universally reported by those who studied at international branch campuses. Those who had studied at one such campus were a unique group in using the term “university careers service”. The low awareness of this type of support could partly be related to their study circumstances, as those working full-time might not feel any need to seek out such support. Several alumni noted that a careers officer had been appointed for the first time during their period at the campus or partner institution. In much the same way, engagement of TNE students on campus with employers was rarely reported, although somewhat more common for those studying MBA programmes. One or two MBA graduates reported contact from employers through the alumni network of the UK university.

Extra-curricular activity such as student societies, work placements or volunteering was rarely reported other than by those at institutions where curricular and career support was similar to that in the UK. Volunteering, in particular, was conspicuous in its absence as a student activity, and internships and placements (although present in a small number of programmes with strong employer engagement, particularly in Malaysia) on the whole appeared to be very rare. Only those studying at a branch campus or with a partner that was itself a university had a ‘conventional’ campus-type experience, which could include student activities that develop a wider range of skills. As before, study circumstances will impact on these wider activities; those working full-time will have limited opportunity to access them if they are available, if they do actually seek them in the first place. The relative rarity of these activities was common among both first degree and postgraduate alumni.

This evidence suggests that employability development in the curriculum, as co-curricular support or through extra-curricular activities, is less widespread in TNE programmes than UK domestic programmes. This raises the question of quality assurance in relation to the comparability of learning provision and experiences between institutions’ home and overseas provision.

The clear trend observed is that these strategies are most closely aligned with UK provision at international branch campuses but rarely visible in partnership arrangements, although the position is likely to be better where the partner is itself an established university. Potential reasons for this trend of difference could be:

- programmes and opportunities at a branch campus can be much more closely controlled by the UK institution, than through an external partnership;
- within partnership provision, delivery of teaching or co-curricular support is dominantly by local staff – they (and their organisation) may not have the same conceptualisation of employability development as UK staff and institutions, and may not be able to access professional development necessary to achieve it;
- many partners operate physically from environments that are less conducive to offering wider activities;
- many TNE students on partnership programmes are employed so they perceive less value in, and are less able to participate in, co-curricular or extra-curricular activities.
The position for unsupported distance learners is distinct, as the UK institution is in direct control of provision, but the opportunities to facilitate employability development are more limited than for those attending a learning institution. Many institutions have long histories of using this delivery mode (e.g. the University of London and the Open University) and have developed ways of embedding employability content and support for learners located in many different contexts.

Intercultural sensitivity is an issue of rising importance in relation to employability skills, as the ability to engage well with clients and colleagues internationally is increasingly important to employers. Overseas study, often undertaken among a widely international student cohort, is known to support strongly such development. The TNE context is no exception to the need to develop international and intercultural skills within HE programmes. However, evidence from the alumni in this study suggests that their student cohorts were mostly not multi-cultural but monocultural, with a few exceptions where they studied at institutions in known international education hubs. This suggests that most TNE programmes do not currently offer inherent development of intercultural skills, unless part of the programme is undertaken overseas (cases of which were rare among our sample).

Beyond these observations about the variable and limited availability of employability development provision within TNE programmes, we infer that communicating the value of employability skills may be particularly important in the TNE context. While it is known that this can be hard with some UK-based students, it is likely to be far harder for students who are often highly instrumental learners, and whose profile is such that they have limited time to study around their work and other commitments.
2. Introduction

2.1. Background

Internationalisation has become a high priority for universities across the globe, and one aspect of this is an increase in the number of programmes delivered ‘offshore’ either with partner institutions, through international branch campuses, via distance learning or a combination of these. Usually referred to as transnational education (TNE), growth in such programmes has been substantial, not least in Australia and in the UK, where a recent report (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014) puts the number of active enrolments at over 335,000\(^1\) and the income from TNE to UK universities at £496 million per year. Notwithstanding this report, there still appear to be inadequate sets of data on TNE and the evidence base is limited (O’Mahony 2014; British Council 2013a; Ziguaras and McBurnie 2015).

In contrast, an increasing breadth of activity in the internationalisation of higher education (HE) more generally has been reflected in a growing body of research into its many dimensions. However, it has been argued that the research focus has been more on the process than on outcomes. Studies relating to policy and strategy, curriculum, pedagogy and student experience are in greater evidence than those that consider academic or personal transformation outcomes for students and their post-study transition into further study or employment (Robertson et al. 2011). This is beginning to change to some extent but there are still relatively few studies on outcomes in the literature, and, where they exist, the emphasis is primarily quantitative, market-driven, and large-scale (i.e. sector or institutional), such as reports from Banks and Olsen (2008), Australian Education International (AEI 2010) and the British Council (2013a). O’Mahony (2014) reviewed literature on TNE specifically. She found that the dominant themes relate to globalisation, trade, quality and regulation and that teaching and learning issues have a lower priority in the current body of TNE research (2014, p. 4).

As far as employment outcomes are concerned, Fielden (2007) argues that the intersection of internationalisation and employability has only been evidenced for a relatively short time and there are gaps in implementation, research and practice. From a review of the literature, this is even more the case for employability in relation to TNE programmes, where studies are very limited in number, and the link between TNE programmes, processes and employability outcomes has rarely been drawn. Of the 219 research records on TNE identified since 2005, O’Mahony (2014) did not mention a single item that incorporated the theme of employability.

One exception to this lack of research into outcomes concerns the impact of study, work and volunteering abroad. This has received a lot of attention, especially in the US, but also in other parts of the world, for example the recent large-scale European Commission report (2014) into the impact of the Erasmus programme. Such studies largely focus on either the resulting personal transformation and academic benefits – an International Unit study is due to report soon (IU 2015) – although there is now acknowledgement of the link with more ‘positional’ outcomes (i.e. work-related and competitive, see Pyvis and Chapman 2007) which impact on employability (e.g. Crossman and Clark 2010; Jones 2010, 2012; and European Commission 2014).

Although no physical mobility is involved in many TNE programmes, TNE clearly has the potential to enhance employment-specific skills that are relevant to the local context of global professions and the award of qualifications which demonstrate these credentials are an important driver for students to undertake TNE programmes (British Council 2013a). For example, Chan (2011)

\(^1\) Excluding enrolments at Oxford Brookes University on its ACCA programme
discusses the role of TNE in developing professional skills for pharmacists. Yet, this review indicates that there is little evidence of the incorporation of generic employability skills as graduate outcomes, which have been a feature of domestic curricula in recent years in the UK and in other countries. We also contend that the distinction between employment skills and employability skills is an important one; the former relating to specific professions for which qualifications and credentials are a key factor, while the latter indicates development of transferable skills that are not job-specific.

In summary we will show that there is a paucity of literature relating to (a) general graduate outcomes from international education and TNE in particular; (b) teaching, learning and assessment in TNE and specifically the incorporation of employability in the curriculum; and (c) the link between internationalisation and employability. This leads to the conclusion that there is a research gap as far as the outcomes of TNE in general are concerned and, more specifically, that the development of generic, transferable employability skills is almost entirely absent from studies into TNE.

2.2. UK trends in TNE activity

According to O’ Mahony (2014):

At present, over three-quarters of UK higher education providers are delivering some form of TNE; 87% of transnational education is delivered outside the European Union, and 13% within. The most common type of delivery is through partner arrangements (60%), followed by distance, flexible or distributed learning (20%), or through some form of collaborative provision (17%); overseas campuses make up 2.7% of TNE provision.  

(O’ Mahony 2014, p. 9)

Table 1 shows the trend in the number of students studying wholly overseas on a UK HE award from 2008 to 2013 – at all levels and all locations. However, caution is needed because students enrolled on the Oxford Brookes/ACCA programme distort the data. Excluding those students, there was still an average growth of over 12% per annum during this period.

Table 1: Total numbers of UK TNE students, 2008-13, and totals excluding Oxford Brookes students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total TNE students</th>
<th>Total excluding Oxford Brookes</th>
<th>Year on year change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>196,750</td>
<td>192,205</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>388,135</td>
<td>220,150</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>408,685</td>
<td>241,880</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>503,795</td>
<td>258,670</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>571,010</td>
<td>313,400</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>598,925</td>
<td>337,255</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), put the value of TNE to the UK economy at £230 million in 2010, forecasts an increase to £356 million in 2015, and to £849 million in 2025 (Conlon et al. 2011, p. 11, cited in O’ Mahony 2014), while Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) puts the value of TNE to UK universities at £496 million. It is thus a key aspect of UK higher education, and brings a range of socio-cultural benefits as well as economic (see, for example, British Council 2013a), along with some of the wider benefits of international education to the UK as identified by Mellors-Bourne et al. (2013).
Evidently, TNE in its various forms is playing a significant role in the delivery of international education, and it is crucial that we should understand its post-study outcomes and the link to future employability.

2.3. Project aims and approaches

The HEA is supporting a large number of higher education institutions (HEIs) as part of a strategic enhancement programme to embed employability into the curriculum using the HEA employability framework, resources, and tailored support from HEA consultants. The HEA has established communities of practice in internationalisation and TNE. Discussions within these communities have identified a lack of knowledge and research evidence regarding the employability development of TNE students, as well as in relation to the student experience.

Findings from new research in this area will also inform the further development of the HEA’s internationalising HE framework that is focused on teaching and learning within international HE. The project builds on the HEA’s recent research into enhancing TNE provision and the resources it has developed. More generally, knowledge in this specific area contributes to better understanding of how different models of international student mobility and international HE intersect with aspirations to develop employability skills and generate positive impact in the form of graduate outcomes.

The principal aim of the research was to understand the extent to which curricula, and planned study-related experiences, for students on current and recent TNE programmes of UK universities are supporting the development of employability. This aim could be achieved by answering a series of linked research questions:

- How is employability embedded within existing TNE programmes in terms of curriculum design and pedagogy? Are there instances of known good practice?
- Are TNE graduates aware of the contribution of these aspects of the programmes they have undertaken in relation to their employment or other outcomes?
- How do the answers to these questions compare with what is known from previous research on similar issues based on models of international HE?
- Is there a need or scope for the HEA to help institutions to improve their support for employability within TNE programmes?

2.3.1. Project methodology

Three linked phases of work were planned. These comprise:

- a literature review, carried out by Elspeth Jones;
- a short exploration of current HE institutional strategies and practice within UK TNE programmes in relation to employability development, by Steve Woodfield of Kingston University;
- an investigation of UK TNE alumni perspectives on their experiences and the impact of their TNE programme, led by Robin Mellors-Bourne at CRAC.

More detail on the methodologies and participation in the research is given in Appendix 1.
3 Definitions

3.1. Transnational education

The Council of Europe (2002) defines transnational education (TNE) as:

All types of higher education study programme, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the educational system of a state different from the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system.

(Council of Europe 2002, p. 1)

O’Mahony’s definition of TNE is adapted from this statement and is a simpler and more readable variant:

Award- or credit-bearing learning undertaken by students who are based in a different country from that of the awarding institution.

(O’Mahony 2014, p 8)

McBurnie and Ziguras (2006, p. 1) take a more institutional perspective and define TNE as “any education delivered by an institution based in one country to students located in another.”

The definition by O’Mahony (2014) emphasises both learning and the student, alongside the governance question of programme ownership, and meets the remit for this particular project. It will therefore be taken as our accepted definition.

Table 2: Responses to question, “What other words or phrases do you use for TNE?”

| • transnational education                     | • external programmes                       |
| • collaborative provision                    | • overseas education                        |
| • overseas collaborative partnerships         | • the X programme                           |
| • collaborative programme                    | • collaborative partner                     |
| • joint PhD programme                        | • PhD without residence                     |
| • overseas partnerships                      | • supported delivery                        |
| • international partnerships                 | • off-campus education                      |
| • partner institution                        | • international programme                  |
| • international education                    | • country partnership                       |
| • split programme                            | • international approved academic partner   |

Source: O’Mahony 2014, p. 21

However, it is worth noting that, in her research, O’Mahony asked respondents about other words they used for TNE and these are listed in Table 2 above. This is a good example of the range of terms and concepts covered by the definition. It was also noteworthy in our research that many respondents (in institutions, as well as previous participants) were not familiar with the term TNE or what it meant.
3.1.1. Typology of TNE programmes

Robin Middlehurst (personal correspondence) has provided a helpful typology of TNE programmes and awards, as understood by key agencies, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), British Council and BIS (Table 3). This offers an example of some types of programme included in the term. However, Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) claim that many institutions find it difficult to allocate their TNE programmes into the current HESA Aggregate Offshore Record categories, with particular issues identified in supported distance delivery and blended learning categories. The same report finds that programmes delivered primarily by a distance learning model (supported or unsupported) accounts for 40% of all TNE enrolments of UK institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Category/Mode</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Location of study</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| HESA 5 categories | • Registered at UK HEI, studying for award at UK HEI overseas campus (UK overseas campus)  
• Registered at UK HEI, studying for an award other than at UK HEI overseas campus (franchise, validation, dual/joint award, twinning)  
• Registered at an overseas partner organisation – studying for an award of UK HEI (as above)  
• Registered at UK HEI – studying distance, flexible and distributed learning (distance learning)  
• Any other student studying for an award of a UK HEI | UK | Students studying for UK awards outside the UK | Aggregate Offshore Record (HESA 2014) |
| British Council 4 categories | • International branch campuses  
• Joint degrees  
• Double degrees  
• Franchise/license arrangements | UK | Students studying for UK awards outside the UK | Shape of things to come (British Council 2013a) |
| BIS 7 categories | • Distance learning (with or without face-to-face teaching support)  
• UK overseas campus/Branch campus  
• Twinning programme  
• Dual/joint award  
• Franchising  
• Validation  
• Articulation | UK | Correspondence or web-based delivery In-country delivery | International Education – Global Growth and Prosperity (BIS 2013) |

Source: Middlehurst, R., personal correspondence.

The complexity of programme type is acknowledged here, but is not explored in more detail. As noted in section 2.1, TNE literature is in any case very limited as far as curriculum, learning and teaching or outcomes of programmes are concerned, so the emphasis has been on seeking out whatever is available.

3.1.2. TNE typology in practice

The approach taken in the primary research phase of this project was to use only very broad groupings of TNE delivery model (typology), as it was not in practice feasible to distinguish between different forms of collaborative or partnership activity.
Within the interviews, it quickly became clear that alumni (i.e. previous participants in TNE programmes) had no knowledge at all of the terminology used within the UK HE sector. Many considered that they were distance learners as they were ‘distant’ from the UK institution and at least some of their work was conducted online rather than fully face-to-face.

Some who had studied at a local institution (through a partnership arrangement) referred to it as a branch campus, although we took a more specific definition of an international branch campus which includes its organisational structure in relation to the UK institution (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014). However, some of the partnership or collaborative ventures featured were indistinguishable from branch campuses without research into their ownership arrangements.

It was not possible to distinguish distance-learning programmes that had some element of local support from the range of other types of partnership programme on the basis of alumni experiences. This reflects the contention that there is a continuum between many different types of partnership delivery models (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014) as much as any limitation in understanding by the participants.

As a result, when considering the type or model of delivery of programme, the only categories used were international branch campus, unsupported distance learning and partnership (or collaborative) delivery. Any programme that could not clearly be distinguished as a ‘genuine’ international branch campus or unsupported distance learning therefore fell into the broad ‘partnership’ category. At times, quite detailed questioning was required to understand the delivery type of the programme in which they had participated. However, different TNE models are likely to have an impact on how employability can be embedded, for example, branch campus models and online/distance learning provide greater control over content and delivery due to the absence of a delivery partner. Collaborative arrangements also vary in the level of engagement and responsibility for delivery by host- and provider-country partners, with validation arrangements designed and delivered by partners.

### 3.2. Employability skills

As noted in the introduction, there is a difference between employment-specific skills and more generic employability skills, which have been defined as:

> A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. (Yorke 2006, p. 8)

These skills go by a range of names, including transferable, soft, generic or transversal skills. The latter term gained particular prominence in the recent Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission 2014), which found that they were developed through programmes that involved physical mobility across national borders, and specifically (as might be expected from such a report) through Erasmus. Whichever term is used, these skills relate to generic personal and interpersonal qualities that are independent of the field of study. Knight and Yorke (2003) describe employability as a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence) and reflectiveness (or metacognition). For the purpose of this report, the term ‘employability skills’ will be used, and the Yorke (2006) definition accepted.
4. Employability skills and internationalisation

4.1. What skills are employers looking for?

According to the OECD, “Skills have become the global currency of the 21st century” (OECD [n.d.], p. 1). Yorke (2006) suggests that employers in the UK tend to value employability skills more highly than disciplinary-based understanding and skills. This was echoed by the ‘Employability Skills Project undertaken by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES 2008), in which 81% of employers rated employability skills as the most important factor when assessing potential candidates. More recently, the Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission 2014) found that, across Europe, 92% of employers were looking for ‘transversal’ (or employability) skills.

As might be expected, there are many different lists of employability skills. However, these are largely similar wherever in the world research has been undertaken into what employers are looking for. They include:

- knowledge, intellect, willingness to learn, self-management skills, communication skills, teamwork, interpersonal skills (Harvey et al. 1997);
- effective learning skills, self-awareness, networking and negotiation skills, transferable skills, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, team-working ability, decision-making skills and the capacity to cope with uncertainty (Knight and Yorke 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: What skills do employers want?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sought-after skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teamwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>problem solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>communication</td>
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<td>time management</td>
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<tr>
<td>IT skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>numeracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>customer awareness</td>
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Source: Prospects graduate careers website.

The UK’s graduate careers website Prospects offers useful advice for graduating (and graduate) students, including the ‘Work-Ready Graduates’ initiative aimed at better preparing graduates for the world of work. Under a section called, “What Skills Do Employers Want?” they claim that ‘intrapreneurialism’ (being enterprising within an employed role) is fast becoming a sought-after attribute”, and list skills relevant to this as well as other, more generally sought-after skills (Table 4).

In a report looking at future work skills, Davis et al. (2011) identify six key drivers of change which they claim will be important as we look ahead to 2020:

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2 http://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying_for_jobs_what_skills_do_employers_want.htm
Extreme longevity;
The rise of smart machines and systems;
Computational world;
New media ecology;
Superstructed organisations;
Globally connected world.

Given these drivers, they list the top ten skills for 2020 as:

1. Sense-making
2. Social intelligence
3. Novel and adaptive thinking
4. Cross-cultural competency
5. Computational thinking
6. New media literacy
7. Transdisciplinarity
8. Design mind-set
9. Cognitive load management
10. Virtual collaboration.

While the sets of skills listed in these different studies may differ slightly one from another, it is clear that they are relatively similar and that they go beyond subject-specific knowledge or capabilities. Leggott and Stapleford (2007) report on a longitudinal study into student perceptions of their own transferable skills before and after a mobility period and then a year or more after graduation. As part of this they reviewed lists of generic employability skills (which they found could include up to eighty different skills) in a range of countries across Europe and China, and claim that “employers’ requirements seem to be broadly consistent internationally.” (2007, p. 124). They suggest this means that:

On the whole, employability interventions in the curriculum which are devised for home students planning to work in one country are largely appropriate for both home and international students who are planning to work in another. (Leggott and Stapleford 2007, p. 124)

This is an important point in the TNE context as it suggests that if the employability skills development incorporated into domestic programmes is also delivered in the offshore version of the programme, the skills gained will be equally valid for those students who seek employment locally on graduation. It also means that students who undertake TNE programmes outside their home country will develop a valuable skillset for employment on return to their home country.

4.2. How do employability skills link to internationalisation and TNE?

In a three-way study of students, universities, and employers, Crossman and Clarke (2010) found that all stakeholders identified clear connections between studying and/or working overseas and employability. Attributes developed through mobility included the forging of networks, language acquisition and the development of soft skills relating to intercultural understanding, personal characteristics and ways of thinking. A British Council survey (British Council 2013b) found that employers highly value foreign language skills, whereas Fitch and Desai (2012) found that in the field of Public Relations, an awareness of cultural nuances and protocols was more important than language competence as such.

Jones (2013) highlights a set of key skills, which she divides into self-sufficiency/self-efficacy skills and personal skills that are developed through study abroad, international work placement, volunteering or service learning (see Table 5). She makes the important point that:

many of the skills developed through international student mobility initiatives are precisely those generic transferable skills sought by graduate employers. (Jones 2013, p. 8)
This is supported by both the Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission 2014) and a Finnish report (CIMO 2014), both of which argue that learning mobility helps improve employability. An innovative contribution from the CIMO study (ibid.) was the finding that productivity, resilience and curiosity are also skills developed through mobility. They argue (2014, p. 27) that curiosity is the “definitive virtue of the current decade” because it:

- helps us to benefit from new influences and opportunities;
- is a dynamic and regenerative pre-requisite for society;
- is motivational.

Curious individuals are interested in what happens globally and how these global events can have wide-ranging effects … curious employees prioritise success in the global problem-solving competition. (CIMO 2014, pp. 28–9).

Jones (2013) argues the need for employers, universities and students to be better aware of this link, a point emphasised by the CIMO study (CIMO 2014), which asks:

How can we make employers better understand the learning outcomes of international mobility? How can we make students and others more aware of the skills acquired during their international experience? (CIMO 2014, p. 6).

While all these studies point to evidence that transferable skills and capabilities are developed through international mobility, equally it may be the case that international mobility programmes appeal to students who already possess, or have an advantage in developing, these skills. For example, in a Norwegian study, Wiers-Jenssen (2011) showed that those who have studied abroad represent a select group in terms of social origin and mobility capital. Furthermore, through testing before and after mobility, Erasmus students were found to show higher values for certain ‘personality traits’, which were even more pronounced on return. These included tolerance, confidence, problem-solving skills, curiosity, knowing one’s strengths/weaknesses, and decisiveness when making a recruitment decision, which increased by an average of 42%, compared with non-mobile students (European Commission 2014).

Noting that to be an issue, the key message of reaching 100% of students— not merely the mobile few, who may already display these kinds of skills and traits (Jones 2013) — has even greater significance:

a more important challenge is to consider how internationalisation of the curriculum ‘at home’ might offer similar opportunities for the static majority of students, who do not take part in an international experience as part of their programme of study. (Jones 2013, p.6)

Table 5 offers a summary of the key skills requirements of employers.³

The question of internationalisation of the curriculum at home raises several points as far as TNE is concerned. Firstly, some TNE environments are very diverse, hosting international students as

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³ There are many similar lists produced by universities and employers around the world. This list is based on two sources, chosen to offer different national perspectives.

- Prospects: The UK’s Official Graduate Careers Website: http://www.prospects.ac.uk/job_applications_what_do_employers_want.htm

It has been grouped into two broad themes by the author. Also cited are literacy, numeracy, commercial awareness and technology skills, which have not been included here.
well as local, domestic students. This is particularly the case in countries such as Singapore, which
have set out to be viewed as education hubs. Secondly, and as a result of this, the answer to the
question of who is ‘at home’ and who is ‘studying abroad’ is complex. Those deemed
‘international’ by dint of coming from another country to study a TNE programme, may thus be in
a position to develop transferable, employability skills through being in an ‘international’ location in
the way that studies noted above have made clear. Thirdly, there remains the issue of TNE
students who are ‘domestic’ to the local delivery centre where they study their programme. What
can be done through the curriculum and the wider study experience to provide similar support to
access the benefits of HE internationalisation and to help develop employability skills for this group
of students in particular (who are the great majority in relation to TNE programmes)? These are
policy, design and delivery issues which need to be c
onsidered in TNE programmes and which do
not appear to have been explored, as far as can be identified, in the literature.

Table 5: Key transferable employability skills and international experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key skills requirements of employers</th>
<th>Key skills developed through international work placement, study, volunteering or service learning (with relevant reference shown in brackets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Self-sufficiency/ self-efficacy skills | • Self-awareness  
• Initiative and enterprise  
• Willingness to learn  
• Planning & organising  
• Integrity  
• Commitment/motivation  
• Problem-solving  
• Flexibility  
• Self-management | • Self-awareness, self-confidence, sense of identity, and personal independence (Black and Duhon 2006; Hadis 2005; NUS 2012; British Academy 2012)  
• Being informed, greater interest in global affairs and cross-cultural perspectives (Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones 2010; Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus 2011)  
• Organisational skills, project management, decision-making, creativity and taking on responsibility (Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones 2010, 2012; NUS 2012)  
• Vision, independence, experience, broader outlook and attitude (NUS 2012)  
• Problem-solving, coping strategies and risk-taking (Jones 2010, 2012)  
• Patience, flexibility, adaptability, open-mindedness and humanity (Williams 2005; Black and Duhon 2006; Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones 2012) |
| People skills | • Team-working  
• Communication skills  
• Foreign language  
• Networking  
• Leadership  
• Customer service  
• Interpersonal skills  
• Intercultural skills | • Team work and team leadership skills (Jones 2010, 2012; NUS 2012)  
• Fluency, accuracy and appropriateness of language competence (British Academy 2012)  
• Mediation skills, conflict resolution, sensitivity, humility and respect (Jones 2012)  
• Forging of relationships and networks (Crossman and Clarke 2010)  
• Challenge to personal stereotypes, cultural relativism (Sutton and Rubin 2004; Jones 2010)  
• Enhanced intercultural communication, conducting business interculturally (Hadis 2005; Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones 2010, 2012; Gu 2012)  
• Cultural empathy (Williams 2005; Black and Duhon 2006; Crossman and Clarke 2010; Jones 2010)  
• Non-judgmental observation, respect for local values without abandoning one’s own (British Academy 2012)  
• Cultural understandings, ways of thinking and adaptation to complex cultural milieus (Crossman and Clarke 2010; British Academy 2012) |

4.3. Skills gaps
An Australian government study (AEI 2010) found a mismatch between employer and graduate perceptions of key employability attributes. Archer and Davison (2008) also found a mismatch but this time between the key skills requirements of employers and the actual capabilities of graduates, for example 86% of employers consider good communication skills to be important, yet many employers are not satisfied that graduates can express themselves appropriately.

It is important to be reminded that many employers place the overall employability of graduates, and the skills they have gained, more highly than the degree subject, although some discipline-specific or sector-specific employability skills may be particularly valuable in certain professions. In their Employer Skills Survey 2011, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES 2011) found that 81% of employers view employability skills as the number one factor in assessing potential candidates. However, they also noted applicant skills gaps, including:

- planning and organisation skills;
- good customer service;
- oral and written communication skills;
- problem-solving skills.

Of 37,000 employers in 42 countries and territories participating in ManpowerGroup’s (2014) ninth annual Talent Shortage Survey, 36% reported difficulty in filling jobs. Bilsland et al. (2014) note similar concerns with graduate employability skills in the Australian commercial and higher education environment. They point out that the question of whether graduate attributes match Australian employer requirements, and the consequent implications for curriculum, has been the subject of research since 2001 (see for example, Barrie 2006; Barrie et al. 2009; Vu et al. 2011).

Beyond the UK and Australia, the literature also indicates a mismatch between graduate skills and employer expectations. Problem solving, team skills, communication and management skills are seen to be in greatest deficit. Such research includes examples from New Zealand (Hodges and Burchell 2003), Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe and Perera 2010), South Africa (Pop and Barkhuizen 2010), Japan (Sugahara and Coman 2010), China (Rose 2013) and Malaysia (Daud et al. 2011).

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As far as ‘international students’ are concerned, a growing body of literature relates to the challenges that international students face in relation to developing and articulating their work-ready employability skills. These include students from non-English speaking backgrounds studying and subsequently seeking work in Australia (Patrick et al. 2008; Gamble et al. 2010; Robertson et al. 2011); students returning to their home country after overseas study (Robertson et al. 2011); and students in a TNE context (Sin 2013; Hoare 2012).

An Australian government study (AEI 2010) found that international students in Australia were
unaware of the importance of these generic employability skills when seeking work, believing that credentials or qualifications alone would be key to future employment. As we have seen above, this is largely the opposite of what many employers are looking for, although needs may vary between the private and public sector and the professions. Thus the so-called skills ‘gaps’ may be more to do with the graduates’ lack of awareness of employability skills or their importance; their inability to articulate their importance to potential employers; or that some employers believe that these skills cannot be developed via HE, and less to do with a lack of skills on the part of graduates.

In the TNE context, some research (British Council 2013a) suggests that while much of the market for TNE (in particular subjects) is assumed to be built around skills gaps, in fact many TNE students are focused on subjects with perceived high ‘employability’ or those that are easier to study while working. This could mean that TNE might in some cases contribute to oversupply of graduates in some fields, and skills mismatches, rather than assist in solving them.
5. TNE research: motivations, profile and experiences

Hoare (2012) points out that TNE students’ voices are rarely heard in relation to several aspects of their study experience, but quotes Chapman and Pyvis (2005), Cuthbert et al. (2008), and Ziguras and McBurnie (2011) as offering some of the few examples.

Although many people are uncomfortable with the conceptualization of higher education as a business, surely there is nothing sinister in attempting to understand whether or not this “service” is meeting its stated aims in the longer term and at a human level … We know little about their preferences, even less about the outcomes that they attribute to their TNE experience and nothing in any depth about their longer term career and life trajectories. (Hoare 2012, p. 272)

5.1. Motivation and profile of TNE students

5.1.1. Previous knowledge

Hoare (2012) cites Hodgkin (1972) who observed that developmental needs were greatest when a nation’s human capital needs to evolve from hard to soft skill bases. Where ‘hard skills’ are needed, Knight identifies niche programmes as one of the pull-factors toward TNE (Knight 2010) and “an unplanned and essentially risk-free boon to the national economy” (Low 2003, in Hoare 2012, p. 27). In professionally orientated programmes, particularly in countries where there are skills gaps, national skills agencies may often be involved in designing TNE programmes and approving the curriculum.

Beyond ‘hard skills’, several studies have noted that student motivation for TNE has both personal and professional purposes (e.g. Hoare 2012; Robertson et al. 2011). These two studies in particular use Pyvis and Chapman’s (2007) “transformative and positional” concepts as a framework for their studies. We will see in later sections some of the work-related and competitive (i.e. positional) outcomes, but it is important to highlight also that personal and professional identity can also be “transformative” dimensions motivating TNE study.

For one student in Sin’s (2013) study, building work skills was tied with an intrinsic motivation for a different approach to learning and personal development. Pursuing a UK TNE programme was a strategy to create distance from “a rigid culture of ‘spoon feeding’ and being ‘spoon fed’; that is, of rote learning and teaching that were especially prevalent in public institutions” (2013, p. 853).

Hoare’s longitudinal ethnographic study (2012) establishes that former TNE students have seen tangible transformative outcomes following their studies while also meeting or exceeding their original positional motivations. Participants talked of a new-found confidence gained through “credibility”, and that their confidence increased as they continued to apply the outcomes from their studies. This was in spite of the relatively low status of a TNE degree in Singapore (although its status varies in different countries).

TNE is reaching a different profile of students according to McNamara and Knight (2014) –those who are generally older than traditional HE entrants and often with previous employment experience. This relatively mature demographic also includes a high proportion of students working full-time during their studies. They found, however, that career development was the main motivation for choosing TNE study, either to start a career or develop an already established
one. In terms of employability skills, the perception of non-TNE students in their study was that the opportunity to gain a more international outlook was the most positive attribute of TNE programmes, while TNE students rated it as the second most enhanced skill from their programme after analytical thinking. These students also cited the wish to strengthen intercultural awareness and competence as one of the key motivations for choosing their TNE programme. However, the nature of their sample should be remembered, as many had overseas study elements within their TNE programmes.

5.1.1.1. Employer and student perceptions of TNE

McNamara and Knight (2014) find that TNE students believe employers perceive TNE to be advantageous in selecting candidates for a position. They cite (1) prestige and status of the foreign institution/education system and (2) the international outlook and multi-cultural experience of TNE graduates relative to local non-TNE graduates. Again, the sample involved may not have been representative of all TNE students. However, other studies have found variability in perception of TNE programmes in different contexts. Hoare (2012) has already been mentioned in this respect, and Robertson et al. (2011) found negative perceptions associated with Australian TNE graduates in comparison with those who had graduated locally in Singapore. Local graduates were regarded as of higher academic ranking and overseas qualifications did not confer a positional advantage.

I think having an Australian degree is also a bit of a stigma here in Singapore. What it means is that you couldn’t get into a local university so you went overseas.

( Participant – Robertson et al. 2011, p. 690)

Hoare (2012) notes that TNE is often dismissed as ‘distance learning’ in Singapore. She found that TNE graduates experienced negative discrimination from both public and private sector employers and that Singaporean employers tend to recruit based on an applicant’s credentials. The perception of TNE programmes as being of inferior quality compared with domestic universities is also noted by Ziguras and McBurnie (2011). The Singaporean education context may be an unusual situation but Waters and Leung (2011) report similar findings in Hong Kong.

Robertson et al. note that these experiences contrast with a great deal of previous research – Ong (1999), Matthews and Sidhu (2005), Chen and Zimitat (2006), Waters (2006) – which views a Western qualification as a status marker for returning Asian students (Robertson et al. p. 690). However this is not only true for earlier research, as more recently Sin (2013) found “better trust in the quality and prestige of UK education relative to a domestic one.” although:

A UK off-shore or transnational education was the consolation prize, ‘the next best thing’ (Nadia) for my participants who believed that they still enjoyed exclusivity, although not of the highest form that was achievable only by studying onshore.

(Sin 2013, p. 854)

Indeed Sin found something of a hierarchy:

A UK education obtained in the United Kingdom was placed at the top of this hierarchy. Education in the United States and Australia typically occupied the second and third spots, followed by education in a few other advanced countries such as Japan, New Zealand and Singapore. UK offshore and transnational studies were located in the middle ranks of the hierarchy, leading other sources of external international education in Malaysia. Malaysian public education was in most cases positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy. In the same rank or at the bottom was education in or from developing and less developed countries.

(Sin 2013, p. 854)
Waters and Leung (2011) argue that through the introduction of so-called 'top-up' programmes, British universities offer degree-level education to students unable to access local higher education. It offers an 'entry ticket' when it comes to job-seeking. However, they also suggest that TNE students and graduates are relatively disadvantaged by their degrees being less valued than a local equivalent. They argue that TNE can be seen to reinforce patterns of social inequality and relative societal exclusion, marking students as different and inferior.

An Australian study (AEI 2010) sought the views of 'offshore employers' on recruiting graduates who had studied overseas in comparison with those educated locally. Sixty-three per cent stated that overseas educated graduates were more creative or had better problem-solving skills than locally educated graduates; 53% thought overseas educated graduates had better life experience; and 47% cited the English language skills of overseas educated graduates as an important reason for choosing them rather than a locally educated graduate. However, 68% said that locally educated graduates had more realistic salary expectations and 53% gave proficiency in the local language as reasons for preferring a locally educated graduate.

Australian qualified graduates are too confident and put too much value on themselves due to their international qualifications. (Employer in AEI 2010)

This was echoed by students in Sin’s (2013) study, who observe that a “heavy display of UK cultural capital could be read as plain acts of social snobbery and pretension” (Sin 2013, p. 861). Further interesting perspectives on location of study were provided by students in this study, pointing to the need for “self-regulation and humility in cultural capital accumulation and activation” (pp. 861–2). Although studying abroad was seen as the gold standard, those who would study in the home country identified that it would provide them with continuity, helping them to be more in touch with Malaysian values, norms and expectations that were essential for local employment, giving them a head-start in the home labour market (pp. 859–60). In this respect, a UK education in Malaysia was seen as the best of both worlds.

Aspects of local cultural capital that my interviewees believed were their strong points include spontaneity in using colloquial Malaysian English and willingness to adopt a softer, more submissive interaction style, indicative of Asian reverence for authority and seniority … Their narratives reflect sensitivity and adaptability towards interactional and situational possibilities in their future employment. (p. 860)

The participants believed that as much as western cultural capital was likely to give a positive impression of a candidate’s technical and social competences, it had to be sensibly utilized because a display of excesses could backfire in the conversion to job entry and advancement. (p. 861)

It could be argued that this is an example of culturally-situated employability skills, delivered through a Western approach to education but with an understanding of the local employment context. Sin’s paper, however, presents this largely as post-hoc rationalisation among the student body rather than as an intentional outcome delivered by the programme, and it is unclear the extent to which sensitivity to the local context was designed or a pragmatic response to students’ needs. The curriculum could have evolved over time with TNE delivery influencing its content.

5.2. Empirical research findings on motivations and profile

In our interviews, alumni were questioned about their personal circumstances prior to undertaking their TNE programme, why they had chosen to study this form of HE, and why they selected the particular course or programme associated with the UK.
5.2.1. Why undertake a higher education programme through TNE?

Almost all the interviewees related broadly career-related motivations for undertaking their HE programme. Unsurprisingly, this varied somewhat with the nature of the participant and their career trajectory and also the nature of the programme.

Just over half of the alumni were interviewed in relation to a UK first degree programme. Among these, particularly from mid-economic level and developing countries, many interviewees reported general assumptions that HE would lead them to a better job and generally a better life than had been the case for their parents. The majority of these interviewees progressed direct from school-level study, although a handful had already undertaken a local tertiary qualification or dropped out of one. Some had undertaken a qualifying or foundation year programme in order to progress to the degree course.

Most of those who had studied a postgraduate TNE programme had done so from a position of employment. The majority cited a somewhat general rationale of overall career progression or greater credibility, rather than the necessity of a specific qualification to enter a particular job. Relatively few were seeking to progress within their current employment, although there were a very few such cases funded by their employer. Equally, relatively few appeared to be undertaking the study in order to make a specific change in career sector. It could be argued that these are ‘employability’ (or career progression) rationales rather than more specific employment outcome motivations.

Some recognised that such a ‘payback’ could be quite a long time distant, in some cases due to current limitations of the local labour market. (In what follows, Txx indicates interviewee reference numbers).

T94 (MBA, partnership in Russia), had worked in executive administration roles and wanted to move ‘up’ to a position of more influence in the business: “I wanted to change my life.”

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

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

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

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

- (perceived) prestige or value;
- cost;
- ‘fit’ with their circumstances.

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

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

_T107 (BA, branch campus in China): “It’s the same qualification as you would get in the UK – it’s the same certificate.”_

_T98 (BEng, branch campus, UAE): “It doesn’t say Dubai on the certificate.”_

_T106 (MA, branch campus, China): “[My first degree] university is not well-known and no-one would expect a lot from a student who graduated from that university.”_

In a few cases, interviewees felt that certain local universities (in this example, private as opposed to public) could offer equivalent prestige to an overseas degree studied transnationally. This reflects the position described in the literature of regional variations on a perceived ‘hierarchy’ of value of different forms of HE.

However, the majority of those who expressed an opinion considered that the value (to employers, and societally) of an overseas qualification studied through a TNE programme fell between the value of international study at an overseas university and that of studying a local degree at home. This matches Sin’s (2013) findings specifically of perceptions in Malaysia, where study in the UK, US, or Australia was perceived to be at the top, followed by study in other ‘advanced countries’, then UK transnational study, other forms of international provision available locally in Malaysia, and Malaysian public education at the bottom.

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

_T91 (MSc, partnership, Malaysia): “The cost of the course was [RM]28,000, that’s three times the cost at a local public university but similar to that at [a private university].”_

_T95 (MBA, partnership, Greece): “If I had the chance to, I would advise to study overseas. But overseas study was just too expensive, even if it was more prestigious.”_

_T77 (BA, partnership, Hong Kong): “I took it up because it was much cheaper than other universities. It was efficient too, it didn’t take too much time.”_

There was a minority of alumni for whom cost had not been an issue – they had obtained a scholarship, were from a wealthy family or, in the case of a few postgraduates, were funded by their employer. However, this was a small subset of the interviewees. It would be interesting to speculate why this group had not studied overseas, but there was some evidence of family preferences to study locally. It was not possible to obtain sufficient information to ascertain the extent to which academic attainment might have restricted their choices.
The issues of prestige (or perceived value) and cost seemed to apply roughly equally at undergraduate or postgraduate level. However, there was much more variation between these two groups in relation to the importance of the potential convenience or logistical ‘fit’ of TNE to their personal circumstances.

As stated, most of the alumni interviewed in relation to a postgraduate taught (PG) course had been working since their first degree, in a very wide variety of occupations. For most of them, the mode of study was critical as they needed to continue working and earning while they studied. In some cases they had a family and home to support. While several stated that study overseas would be an ideal, they simply could not afford or accommodate that in their lives. Study of a part-time TNE programme was the only realistic way that many could achieve an overseas qualification, even if they accepted that the eventual qualification and experience might not be valued as highly by employers as ‘genuine’ international study. This might suggest that the perceived value was as much, or more, about the provider (country and institution) than about the content of the course.

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

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

For the few who had studied a postgraduate course funded by their employer, the ability to continue working for the company and study part-time was key to obtaining the employer’s agreement.

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

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

There were also a few cases in which the UK TNE programme had been studied overseas (i.e. ‘third country’ students, not in their country of origin or a neighbouring country), but these were rare among the interviewees. Those who had studied part of their programme in the UK had not been a target within the sample.

Thus, the most commonly held view was that studying a TNE programme was a highly pragmatic choice, offering the prospect of a somewhat more valuable or prestigious qualification at a lower cost than studying abroad and, for many, in a much more practical way that could be fitted into their life. Clearly, the cost and ‘fit’ circumstances tended to reinforce each other to some extent. This could also suggest that some TNE students are among the ‘brightest and best’ but simply cannot travel; TNE students are not just those who are not strong enough to enter programmes overseas or the most prestigious home universities.
5.2.2. Why select a UK programme?

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

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

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

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

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

It should be noted that the extent to which alumni had researched their choice of programme, that is, the basis on which they made their decision, varied widely. Relatively few reported that they had undertaken what might be regarded as substantial research, and many had made their decision based on the experience of a single relative or acquaintance. Several had come across a suitable course somewhat serendipitously, whether in a web search or through some other mechanism.

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

T67 (BSc, partnership, Oman): “When we chose [local college], we chose University of … by default, because it is [the college’s] partner university.”
T81 (MSc, partnership, Uzbekistan): “Honestly speaking, I didn’t have many options. At that time there were only two international universities.”

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

The overall impression gained was that, in most cases, the alumni either did not have many choices open to them or were not aware that they did (or at least choices that satisfied their criteria in relation to cost and fit). The extent to which this was genuinely the case, or was a function of a lack of research or knowledge by them, is unclear. However, it contributes to a view either that the market for TNE programmes may not have been very diverse in some cases when they were making choices, or at least that was how they had experienced it.

5.3. Empirical research: study experiences

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

5.3.1. Pattern and mode of study

Those who undertook unsupported distance learning programmes had a distinct learning mode and pattern, as would be expected. However, the other alumni reported a wide range of patterns of study, which in some cases was related to the level of the programme. Relatively few reported that they had studied full-time, and these tended to have been on undergraduate programmes, although it was not always clear whether the programme had been advertised as full-time or part-time. Postgraduate courses undertaken were almost always part-time, with teaching organised during evenings, weekends and/or more intensive blocks of days (or a combination of these), and the part-time nature of these models had in many cases been crucial for the interviewee’s participation (in order that they could continue to work and earn sufficient income to pay for the course fees). It was clear that for many of the postgraduates, their activity at the time would be described as “full-time employment and part-time study”, although none of them appeared to have been undertaking their programme as work-based learning that was formally integrated with their job. This does seem to confirm previous observations that conventional UK terms to describe mode of study apply less well to overseas study (Drew et al. 2008), and McNamara and Knight’s view (2014) that many TNE students are also working full-time.

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

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

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

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

In almost all cases their programmes had featured blended delivery, with a combination of face-to-face lectures (mostly by local staff, but occasionally UK staff) and self-directed learning using online or other resources. Many reported, in addition, some proportion of learning in groups through workshops, group discussions or, more rarely, joint assignments or case studies.

5.3.2. A distinctive UK pedagogy?

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

Over two-thirds of the alumni interviewed identified that their programme had been taught in a manner that was different from their experience of local education, in terms of being less directed and more participatory (although of those reporting on first degrees would have had no direct experience of local HE so their comparison could have been with their secondary education, or based on the experiences of others). Equally, many of those who had studied a Masters course (MBA in particular) actually sought a different style from their first degree, irrespective of where they studied.

In comparison with international graduates who had studied in the UK, the proportion reporting this distinctiveness was lower among the TNE interviewees. Whereas among the international alumni this ‘learning to learn’ was regularly reported as a highlight of their study experience, and for some had been revelatory, a much lower proportion of the TNE interviewees reported it as a highlight. Nonetheless, there were sufficient reports to suggest that some pedagogical distinctiveness was present in many programmes, and some did articulate this as a positive aspect of their experience:
T6 (BA, partnership, India): “It felt like being at [UK university] because of the curriculum and the way it was conducted – research-based, team projects, lots of discussion, using software to detect plagiarism. Indian equivalent degrees are completely different.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In summary, UK pedagogical distinctiveness did appear to feature in many TNE programmes to some extent, but was less forceful in its influence on these graduates than was the case for those who were immersed in it by studying in the UK. This also potentially raises questions in relation to the comparability of learning experiences between for those on programmes delivered by institutions through TNE and those in the UK. However, awareness of this distinctiveness did not seem to have been commonplace beforehand and there were few instances where this had been an overt motivation for choosing a UK TNE programme.
6. Employment and employability: outcomes

6.1. Prior research into outcomes from TNE programmes

Given that Australia is arguably the most active TNE provider (Naidoo 2009), it is unsurprising that their programmes feature most prominently in TNE research. And yet, Hoare (2012) finds it remarkable that more research has not been undertaken to understand the motivations and opinions of stakeholders in transnational education, in particular since TNE is such “big business” for Australia. Where there is research, O’Mahony (2014) found:

little evidence of any collaborative authorship or activity between host and provider, indicating the relative immaturity of transnational education as a research field. (O’Mahony 2014, p. 4)

Robertson et al. (2011) argue that, in general, research into the outcomes of international education is primarily quantitative and market-driven, using market-research models, such as satisfaction scales, to measure outcomes (e.g. Banks and Olsen 2008) and is usually based on students studying in another country.

It tends to provide base data on course experience and direct job outcomes rather than probing more deeply into the ways in which life choices, chances and identities function after an ‘internationalised’ educational experience. (Robertson et al. p. 686)

However, it must be noted that TNE students are not included in any of the UK’s large-scale student surveys (e.g. the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) or the UK Engagement Survey currently in development) so there is very limited evidence of issues around engagement and satisfaction among UK TNE students.

6.1.1. ‘Positional’ outcomes

Cuthbert et al. (2008) suggest that the benefits of TNE to individuals and the community are “often-asserted, but rarely established” (p. 261).

Robertson et al. (2011) contrasted three kinds of learning contexts for Singaporean students: one group went to study in Australia to facilitate their migration; the second studied in Australia and returned to Singapore, and the third group studied through an Australian TNE programme locally in Singapore. They used Pyvis and Chapman’s (2007) positional and transformational framework to consider both motivations for and outcomes of these three contexts and their study offers useful insights into the outcomes of TNE study in comparison with studying overseas. In all three contexts, they found that students’ goals were not exclusively transformative or positional. Their long-term goals,

encompassed work and career, financial security, home ownership, travel, personal development and overall life-satisfaction, all of which have a complexity of interdependence. (Robertson et al. 2011, p. 691)

The post-study career transition was framed differently for the TNE group and although they described themselves as “late-bloomers”, many had gone on to further study and had achieved transformational as well as positional outcomes from their studies. In contrast with the groups of
McNamara and Knight (2014) found that TNE graduates are highly skilled but are not necessarily addressing local skills gaps. This depended on the programmes being delivered, with niche topics having a positive impact, suggesting a focus on employment-specific skills rather than generic employability skills. In their study, TNE students felt that teaching methods on TNE programmes rely more on critical thinking and voicing of opinions compared with local programmes and thus that their analytical skills were better developed.

Overall, the TNE experience has the capacity “to develop an unexpected motivation for transformative learning, and postgraduate study” according to Hoare (2012, p. 276). TNE thus “provides a potentially rich experience for ‘second chance’ learners, which can change lives, often in situations where there are few other options” (p. 283).

So the literature suggests that TNE can help develop employability or result in positional outcomes in domestic settings. This will partly depend on the local employers’ views of these programmes but in some cases they may have advantages both over domestic programmes delivered by a local university or over students educated overseas. Being employable in the home country may require skills, knowledge and attitudes that are relevant to the local context where there is an interplay between hard and soft skills requirements of employers. There is even the possibility that developing employability skills through study overseas could make some graduates less employable at home (Robertson et al. 2011) and that returning students may find it harder to reintegrate into the local labour market. If TNE is effective in developing employability skills it could help students to interpret their new-found knowledge and skills in the local labour market while interpreting employability within the local paradigm.

6.2. Research findings: employment-related impacts

Career-related and employment-related motivations (expressed more in terms of employability than a focus on a particular job or career) were dominant for undertaking a TNE programme. We wanted to learn the extent to which the alumni regarded those motivations as fulfilled by their programme experience and qualification. In other words: Had they obtained satisfactory career-related and employment-related outcomes? This consideration is likely to have featured strongly in any perception of their overall satisfaction. It is noteworthy that previous research with international graduates has tended to focus on more direct or short-term employment outcomes, rather than longer-term career impacts (Robertson et al. 2011).

This issue was considered in terms of whether the graduate believed that they had obtained an immediate or near-immediate impact in terms of finding a job or enhancing their existing employment, or progressed to further study, but also their experience or current expectation of whether there had been or would be long-term career impact. As a subsidiary issue, the extent to which the programme or qualification had been chosen for, or had led to (or was likely to lead to), a major change of career was also noted.
6.2.1. Short-term employment impacts

Around seven in ten interviewees reported some immediate or short-term, career-related progression in the form of gaining a first job or an enhanced role, or (almost as commonly) through progression to a further qualification.

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

T20 (LLB, partnership in Pakistan) had obtained an offer of a Masters in the UK after her degree but could not go because her parents wanted to support her brother doing a similar first degree. Instead she obtained a job in an international charity doing research, and felt she was accepted with a UK first degree whereas she would have needed a postgraduate local degree.

T37 (MSc, distance learning, Zambia) felt that her qualification in sustainable development was “the one everyone is after – the qualification commands a great deal of respect”. She applied for and obtained a very good job two months after finishing the course, with greater responsibility and salary, and has since gone to a director-level job, a level she felt she could not have accessed without the degree. She is hoping that her daughter will apply for a Commonwealth Scholarship and study in the UK.

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

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

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

6.2.2. Progression to further study

Up to one-third of the interviewees had progressed to further HE study (after their TNE programme) by the time they were interviewed, including about half of those interviewees who reported no immediate employment impact of their programme, while some of the others had pursued further study as part of a longer term plan.

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

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

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

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

It is perhaps notable that the majority of the further study that they had gone on to was in the form of local or overseas HE programmes, rather than another TNE programme (with the exception of some serial distance learners). At least half of them remained in their home country for further study. This might suggest that TNE may have been helping certain types of students to increase their academic progression.

6.2.3. Longer-term career enhancement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.2.4. Negative outcomes

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

T4 (BSc, partnership, China) found that his course had not been accepted by the Chinese government, finding this to his cost after he quickly realised that computing was not the industry he wanted to work in. Having failed to find any other suitable work, he had to endure two years of ‘lowest level’ work while studying an evening course through which he obtained a degree that was accepted and could enter graduate-level employment.

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

T13 (LLB, partnership, Jamaica) had chosen a UK degree because it enabled her to study part-time, unlike local alternatives. She then moved to the US with her husband and family and found that her degree was not accepted. She studied a paralegal certificate remotely with a US institution to offset this but then found out that too was not accepted. She tried more than once to contact her UK university for advice and support but had received no reply. When interviewed, she was working as a healthcare assistant. She regretted the absence of any career guidance before or during her course and the lack of information about the international validity of the qualification.
T28 (LLB, distance learning, Jamaica) had entered law school locally and then worked as an attorney. She now wanted to work in the US and has tried to take bar exams there, but found that for several of the key exams her qualification was not accepted.

In summary, although the majority of interviewees did report positive perceptions of the career-related value of their programme, and a few very positively, overall the average impact was less profound than has been reported for many international graduates (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). It is unclear the extent to which this results from a somewhat lesser value or misunderstanding the value of a TNE qualification by employers in their local labour market (as has been reported in several studies in the literature), and the extent to which it relates to the candidates themselves, who might be of somewhat lower calibre (on average) than those who undertake international study, although we did not obtain sufficient comparative data to verify this.
7. Employability development

7.1. Do TNE programmes develop employability skills?

In the British Council’s pilot study (British Council 2014), both student and expert respondents felt that TNE programmes are addressing skills gaps particularly at Masters level. However, the responses indicate that these are often job-specific skills, related to the subject of study and leading to a qualification in a certain field.

In the same study, students indicated that communication skills and analytical thinking were not only augmented by their TNE programme but also required in their current job. This response presupposes that students are already in work and studying part-time on the TNE programme, so it tells us little about generic employability skills development for those on full-time programmes. The pilot study was later followed by more detailed work commissioned by the British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) (McNamara and Knight 2014). O’ Mahony’s (2014) research found that transferable skills development is perceived by TNE staff as one of the potential benefits of TNE programmes, but she does not go further to elaborate on what this means or how it is developed.

However, there is limited evidence (rather than opinion) that generic employability skills can be developed as an outcome of TNE programmes, other than where mobility or work-integrated learning is incorporated. Offshore and transnational programmes are marketed as similar to those offered at the parent or partner university in the UK, especially in terms of content, standards and qualifications awarded (British Council 2010). Furthermore, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) requires programmes delivered overseas to be comparable, in terms of expected outcomes, to programmes delivered in the UK so as to protect academic standards and quality. QAA institutional reviews and country audits are expected to investigate these issues so this lack of evidence of employability skills being developed is somewhat disconcerting.

Mention should be made at this point of a forthcoming British Council-funded study, led by Dr Christopher Hill at the University of Nottingham’s Malaysia campus to capture and analyse employer, student, and university perceptions of employment (rather than employability), and which will include TNE programmes. It is a three-phase project worth £100,000 and, at the time of writing, phase one is due to report shortly.

7.1.1. Embedding employability skills in the curriculum

In Australia the need for employability skills as generic outcomes for graduating students has been highlighted for at least two decades (DEEWR, [n.d.]) and is often reflected in the graduate attribute (Bowden et al. 2000) statements of an Australian university. As far as the UK is concerned, the UK Commission for Employment Skills (CES) 2008 report identifies guidance on pedagogical approaches by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), suggesting that employability skills should be promoted through “subject-related material and through the use of authentic contexts, collaborative project work, ‘scaffolding’ to encourage learning beyond current capacity and reflection” (UKCES 2008, p. 62). In spite of this, the report found that employability-related teaching had not been fully embedded into mainstream curricula in higher education, although some notable exceptions were given (ibid.).

More recently, examples of embedding employability skills by UK universities are given by Universities Alliance (2013), which seeks to identify good practice among its member institutions. The report also highlights the need to incorporate these skills as a recruitment tool because of the
importance international students place on employability and the driver for UK students of getting a good job on graduation (ibid.). There is also guidance on curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment in a comprehensive publication by Pegg et al. (2012). Meanwhile Cole and Tibby’s (2013) framework provides “a process for reflecting on and addressing employability provision in a systematic and holistic manner” (2013, p. 4).

At Leeds Beckett University (formerly Leeds Metropolitan), work has been undertaken to embed both employability skills and “a global outlook” as two of three graduate attributes for all students (the other being digital literacy). This has been detailed in a range of publications (Jones 2011; Leeds Metropolitan University 2011; Jones and Killick 2007, 2013; and Killick and Dean 2013), although in all cases the focus is on the curriculum in general rather than the TNE context. A summary of this approach based on Leeds Beckett’s response to the institutional call for evidence is provided below:

**Leeds Beckett University: Embedding employability skills in the TNE curriculum**

Leeds Beckett University has embedded graduate attributes – including employability and life-skills – in the curriculum of all new undergraduate courses delivered in the UK and via its overseas collaborative provision by making them a mandatory requirement in course design and approval. New curricula were designed to allow individuals to learn skills to stand out in the global job market and be equipped for life and effective citizenship. Consultation with students, staff and employers in the UK and internationally was undertaken, supported by sector research on global employability needs. This activity generated three broad attributes which could be honed, tailored and adapted within the curricula of both on-campus and overseas collaborative provision thus suiting the local needs of the students and their future employers: to “be enterprising, to have a global outlook and to be digitally literate.” These represent baseline expectations for a consistent student experience but are (through tailored implementation) mindful of local practice. All three have a strong employability focus, and students are provided with resources on how to reflect upon articulate these attributes to others (including employers). Leeds Beckett’s recent HE Review commended its employability practice for both in-curricular and its extracurricular focus and its consistency of TNE provision for UK based and overseas courses.

A similar approach was reported by Middlesex University whose Graduate and Transferable Skill Framework maps the curriculum against the skills that employers highlight as important for gaining employment. In addition to disciplinary knowledge, three additional themes underpin all of its curricula; research and critical thinking, digital literacy and internationalisation, where learning outcomes are expected to be achieved through a critical evaluation of disciplinary knowledge and the development of transferable and graduate skills located within a global and localised context. This approach is supported, as appropriate, locally, by student services that incorporate careers and employability services. Generic employability advice and support is also available to all students enrolled on programmes running at its overseas campuses and on international franchise programmes, via its VLE.

This leads neatly to the next section, which considers the link between employability and TNE programmes.

**7.1.2. Embedding employability into TNE programmes**

In a rare and interesting article on embedding employability skills, Bilsland et al. (2014) describe how work-integrated learning has been incorporated into the TNE programme of an Australian
university provider and a Vietnamese partner. They quote Freudenberg et al. (2010), Curzon-Hobson (2003), and researchers in Vietnam (Duoc and Metzger 2007; Trung and Swierczek 2009) who found that incorporating employability skills throughout the programme offers formative opportunities to acquire and practice these skills prior to starting an internship. The twelve-week internship aimed to provide the student with a “bridge” between study and full-time work, and to demonstrate and hone their employability skills. They identify several factors critical in the success of the programme:

- integrating relevant skills into learning outcomes to enable university graduates to acquire and practice employability skills that match employer requirements. Those assessed in the study are:

  11 integration of theory and practice: adapting skills learnt to new situations at work;
  12 problem-solving skills: identifying problems and developing creative yet practical solutions;
  13 analytical skills – collecting, analyzing and organising information;
  14 collaboration across departments – understanding performance as an individual and as a member of a team;
  15 drive to learn – being enthusiastic; open to new ideas; eager to learn new skills;
  16 time management skills – managing tasks and time for self and others; organising work and meeting deadlines;
  17 communication skills – speaking and writing clearly; able to convey messages effectively;
  18 people relations – engaging in discussions; able to relate with different people in different settings;
  19 self-confidence/assertiveness – being pro-active, reliable and committed; taking on responsibility;
  20 listening skills – understanding, interpreting and evaluating information.

- including a pre-requisite workplace preparation programme (WPP) for one semester before students can apply for work-integrated learning. This incorporates job search, application writing, interview preparation, mock interviews, and business networking techniques to give prospective interns opportunities to apply related soft skills;
- orientation session and workshop sessions during the internship period on key employability skills, including effective communication, conflict management, time management and lifelong learning;
- guest speakers from various organisations to give added professional exposure;
- close co-operation throughout between university and industry, facilitated by the local partner.

It seems rather odd that this kind of approach merits attention as innovation or good practice. On a domestic programme in many UK universities, it would in fact be standard practice. The interesting point is, however, that either it is not being done when programmes are delivered overseas or else it is being done and is simply not being reported in the literature. Coventry University offers an example of where this does operate, via Dual Award programmes where students can develop these skills through studying in the UK for part of their programme:

Embedding employability in the curriculum in collaborative programmes: Coventry University’s TNE partnerships in Malaysia and Turkey.

Coventry University has a dual award MBA programme with a Turkish partner aimed at an international student audience. Students are taught via a mix of local and UK staff (via flying-faculty) and have the option to complete their third and final semester at a Coventry University campus (in Coventry or London). The programme includes
semester 1 and 2 modules on Academic English Skills, an Employability and Consulting Skills module (non-credit-bearing modules) and a module on Critical Thinking and Business Communication. The Employability and Consulting module is a mandatory requirement for those wishing to undertake a final project in the UK. If students choose a final project that includes internship, individual consulting, group consulting, or simulation, they must move to the UK for a 10-12 week period during which they will tackle live business problems for a two-month employer-hosted placement (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKv124PYP_I&feature=youtu.be).

The intention is to develop employability skills and also apply academic theory to real business practice. For students not taking this module, there are options for volunteering, and employability workshops focused on areas such as leadership, being interviewed, making presentations, business etiquette, customer satisfaction, project management and problem solving. Coventry University also collaborates with a Malaysian partner on a dual award undergraduate business and finance programme, which uses a similar approach to the Turkish partnership by including the opportunity to study in the UK for a semester to develop work-related skills (including intercultural awareness, problem-solving) via teaching and consultancy projects in local organisations.

7.2. Research findings: employability development

As has been described, almost every graduate interviewed in our research had career-related motivations for undertaking their degree programme. These were mostly rather general aspirations for life improvement but, for some, related to more specific objectives either to increase the quality or level of their employment. To that extent, the potential for enhanced employability was an inherent assumption lying behind almost all the graduates’ choices when they selected their programme, and there is evidence that some current programmes are marketed as supporting such an aspiration especially within the global labour market. In that sense, it could be argued that most of these programmes (and, for that matter, many current HE programmes) inherently aim to support improved employability of their participants.

It could be argued that this is likely to be stronger for vocationally-oriented courses in subjects such as STEM and especially business-related and management-related programmes, including MBAs, although some of these will more directly support specific employment outcomes as well as generalised employability. This is also likely to be the case for some industry-related postgraduate programmes than undergraduate courses. However, the majority of interviewees relating experiences of postgraduate programmes cited employability-related goals rather than more specific employment outcomes as their aim. The institutional call-for-evidence provided the following example of support for employment related outcomes through a collaborative Masters programme involving Abertay University and a partner in France:

Employer engagement: Collaborative MSc in Construction Management between Abertay University and Ecole Supérieure de Conduite de Travaux (ESCT)

Abertay University is involved in a collaborative TNE programme that was designed and delivered through a collaboration with Ecole Supérieure de Conduite de Travaux (ESCT), a private educational institution in Paris which provides education programmes on a block-release basis to full-time employees of leading French construction companies. The MSc in Construction Management involves studying for a term in both Scotland and France with a project completed in students’ workplaces with the support of their employers, with both an Abertay supervisor and a workplace
Questions were posed in the interviews to try to understand the extent that support for improved employability had been a focus of the programme itself or had been provided as co-curricular support. A range of employability support mechanisms could be identified or inferred from the interviewees’ descriptions:

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

In the institutional call for evidence the University of Warwick offers an approach that incorporates many of these elements via its Double Masters programmes in Politics in International Relations:

University of Warwick – Double Masters degrees with partners in Singapore, Germany, Spain, US, Canada, and Australia

The University of Warwick offers Double Masters programmes in Politics and International Studies with partners in six countries, where students are study in both partners and then work on a dissertation or other capstone research project that is jointly supervised and jointly examined. Students receive two Masters degrees, one from each institution. These programmes enhance employability through providing the opportunities to study in different countries (as well as Warwick) and access to unique employability enhancement dimensions at each partner institution including; internships; major projects with international organisations; practical training in job-related skills; and personal and professional development workshops and careers training as part of their programme while studying at Warwick. The aim is to produce more fully experienced and rounded internationally focused Masters level graduates who have greater adaptability and transferability of skills.

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

With further prompting, it was possible to investigate this in a more nuanced way, based on the extent to which the range of mechanisms above could be identified within the graduates’ experiences. However, it should be noted immediately that over half of the interviewees reported no experience of any of these activities or support mechanisms whatsoever. This might have been
because they did not exist, or because although they were perhaps present (and/or optional) the interviewee had not recognised and/or taken advantage of them at the time.

7.2.1. Employability-focused ‘content’ and other curricular learning

Overall, the interviewees rarely reported specific content or learning activities that directly addressed employability. However, it was identified regularly by three groups of interviewees: from a major international branch campus, an established partnership that largely resembled a branch campus, and one partnership with a private university.

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

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

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

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

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

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

T75 (BSc, partnership in Sri Lanka) indicated that his course included group project assignments and visits to companies they had to evaluate. There was also a compulsory module in final year covering interview skills and CV writing, as well as provision of help through one-to-one advice from student support staff and presentations from companies.

However, outside these three institutions, there were only sporadic instances (cited by perhaps one in six of the other graduates) where interviewees mentioned that their programme had
included any overt content or learning activity that they understood had been included to enhance their employability skills (taken to include team-working, communication, leadership or management skills). Among these relatively rare examples: were:

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

T72 (MSc, branch campus, Australia) actually reported that she had been offered a variety of employability courses but she “didn’t have time to attend any of them.” This appeared to be because she had spent all the time she could with “normal students” at a co-located university with whom she felt more comfortable than with the cohort undertaking the transnational Masters course.

T19 (BSc, partnership, Ireland) at the time of interview was undertaking a six-week online ‘employability course’ which he said had been offered free to any graduate with a degree from that UK institution. This was clearly an offer from the UK institution and not from the local partner. He had covered issues relating to CV development, writing professional covering letters and interview skills, so the content appears to have been strongly focused on tactical skills to support finding employment, rather than developing broader employability.

7.2.2. Co-curricular advice and support

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

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

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

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

T86 (BSc, partnership in Uzbekistan) reported that there had been a career development office that tried to host job fairs but these were unsuccessful as they were under-supported by employers.
Fellow alumna T82 (BSc), who graduated several years later, also suggested that this was the case, laying the blame with the employers who expected graduates to approach them and did not tend to be open in their recruitment.

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

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

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

It should be stressed that not all its interviewees mentioned the presence of this branch campus’s careers service, while one suggested: “The careers service was not very good at that time but it has improved now.” However, it was clear that careers support at this institution was modelled on provision at its UK campus, and the fact that not all the students actually made use of the service also mirrors the UK campus situation.

Beyond these three institutions, co-curricular careers advice or support services seemed to be as rare, or even rarer, than embedded employability (in the form of embedded transferable skills development), with only a handful of interviewees reporting the presence of such a service or office. The following example of innovative and effective practice in this area from the institutional call for evidence came from the University of London:

_Careers guidance: Collaboration between The Careers Group, University of London and University of London International Academy_

The Careers Group and the University of London International Academy work together to support the employability needs of the 54,000 students who are achieving their University of London degrees in countries overseas who study primarily via online learning. This collaboration involves: developing online learning materials, providing individual advice and guidance by email, Skype and phone, producing podcasts and vodcasts, and running live online webinars. Its Careers Tagged service is embedded in the International Programmes student portal with content reshaped to make it relevant to those studying outside the UK (e.g. international jobs search). In 2014 it also ran a successful MOOC _Enhance Your Career and Employability Skills_ on the Coursera platform that was designed to help learners to make effective decisions about their future career and how to take control of their professional development by honing their critical thinking and employability skills. [This appears to be the ‘online module’ that two interviewees reported that they had lately undertaken.]

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

It is worth reflecting that the nature of much careers advice or guidance is such that it needs to be offered on a personalised basis, and in its local context. This requires it to be provided by the local partner, where the UK institution does not have its own branch campus. It is tempting to infer from the interviews that where this was being left to the partner institution, it was mostly not being provided, with a few exceptions where the local partner was itself a university or similar institution. There was some evidence from the institutional studies that staff development opportunities within partner organisations, which could enable such support, could be very limited.

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

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

7.2.3. Extra-curricular activities

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

Overall, the TNE interviewees reported far less involvement in these types of activities, than international students in the UK (or our understanding of UK students), to the point that it was notable when they were mentioned. Of course, the context of their programme is highly relevant, as extra-curricular activity is inherently far more likely to take place and/or be seen as such where there is physical attendance at an institution, than for those studying through distance learning. In addition, this must also relate to their mode of study – both the motivation and opportunity to take part in extra-curricular activity will be much lower where a student is working full-time and fitting in their study around it. However, some respondents to the institutional call for evidence suggest that there can be scope for such activities to take place where there is space in the curriculum or in the summer break. Such employment could also obviate the potential benefit of a work placement or similar work-based opportunities. The lower involvement could therefore be an issue of availability or accessibility, or both.

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

A handful of the alumni had been elected as student representatives during their time at the branch campus or local institution, and these reported the developmental benefits typically
attributed to such activity. It is likely that this had contributed to a lasting allegiance to their institution, and was almost certainly a factor in their positive response to an invitation to take part in an interview. However, the proportion that were to some extent ambassadors for their institution, when interviewed, was far lower than had been the case in our research with international alumni who studied in the UK.

Nonetheless, a few graduates gained hugely from their involvement in student activities, including:

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

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

What this seems to show is that a few individuals did take advantage of the opportunities that were available in a limited number of the study environments, where they resembled a traditional ‘UK’ campus setting, but for most students and settings this had not been the case at all. It seems likely that this reflects both the nature of the student and also the study environment.

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

**University of Nottingham: Co-curricular and Extra-curricular opportunities for branch campus students**

The University of Nottingham has three campuses, in the UK, China and Malaysia. It provides its students in its non-UK campuses with the same opportunities as its UK-based students. For example the Nottingham Advantage Award is a free, employer-supported award based on completion of a selection from over 200 non-credit bearing modules focused on career skills, mentoring, cultural awareness, entrepreneurship and volunteering. The award is included on students’ degree transcript.

Another example is the International Young Entrepreneurs Scheme (iYES). This was a project that formed part of the HEA/UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) ‘Connections Initiative’ and helped students in the Malaysia campus to develop intercultural understanding focused on employability and entrepreneurship skills through participating in a business planning competition, supported by UK student mentors. A key impact was the development of entrepreneurial skills and enterprise development for postgraduate researchers within an international and practice-based context.
It was hard in the alumni interviews to distinguish between work placements or internships that were integral to a graduate’s programme and those that were genuinely extra-curricular. In all, only a handful of interviewees reported that they had undertaken an internship or work placement facilitated to any extent by the local institution. One interviewee’s experience of a course that had been promoted on the basis of an integrated year placement with a relevant employer, was that not a single placement had actually taken place. It should be noted that he did say that the following year this feature of the course had been removed from the marketing.

However, there were a handful of graduates who had undertaken an internship successfully, linked in some way either to their programme or their institution. There were also one or two instances where a student had organised their own placement (or it had been facilitated by their parents’ local contacts) in the absence of support from the institution. Although the evidence is somewhat sketchy, as was the case of careers advice, this type of provision will be highly dependent on the local partner and may be largely outside the influence of the UK institution. The inference again is that reliance on the local partner is not resulting in widespread provision of this type of supporting activity, except where the setting is a branch campus (i.e. the UK institution has stronger influence) or the partner is an established university or institution that might already have this experience or capability. The following example of how partner-institutions can be supported in this way comes from the University of London:

**Support for partners: Collaboration between The Careers Group, University of London and University of London International Academy**

In 2014 representatives from teaching institutions that offer support to ULIP students attended a Symposium in London designed to share their practice. A key theme of the Symposium was how teaching centres could enhance the employability of students who use their institutions to support their UoL [University of London] degree programmes. Topics included: identifying employer needs in Singapore, employer engagement to support enhanced employability skills, and supporting employability skills in distance learning.

The observations on extra-curricular activities, and their rarity, from alumni should again be seen in the context that many of these students, particularly those on postgraduate programmes, were also in full-time or part-time employment. The need and opportunity for development through these broader experiences, as part of a student’s formation during higher education, are likely to be lower for such students. However, the observation (of less extra-curricular activity) also holds among those on full-time first degree programmes, who presumably would have benefited more from such activities, and this may be a weakness of many of the study environments in current TNE activity. This is potentially important as these activities are widely recognised to contribute significantly to development of transferable skills and employability (and are increasingly recognised formally within UK higher education for that reason).

More broadly, the evidence from the interviews suggests that employability development strategies and opportunities are relatively much less developed within TNE programmes (especially where no physical mobility is involved) than in UK home provision, whether in the form of embedded, co-curricular or extra-curricular activity. This could partly be because there is somewhat less need for them, due to the nature of some of the students, and also less opportunity for them to participate, or could reflect a different conceptualisation by the local partner (compared with current UK HE strategies). It could also be that there is also some lag effect in terms of time, and that more employability strategies may have been introduced through
the partners since some of these alumni undertook their programmes (although in many cases this was only a few years ago).

7.3. Intercultural skills

7.3.1. How crucial is international experience in TNE?

It is argued that overseas study can lead to a sense of common identity and mutual recognition for overseas-educated locals as an exclusive class of transnational professionals (Waters 2007) and the accumulation of “forms of capital” (Bourdieu 1986).

Students who move to study in an international arena, especially if they attend high-prestige universities, accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital – mobility capital … human capital (a world-class university education), social capital (access to networks, ‘connections’), cultural capital (languages, intercultural awareness) and, eventually, economic capital (high-salary employment). (King et al. 2010, p. 32)

In Ilieva’s (2012) study, international experience was found to be crucial to employers in a rather unusual way. She found that employers perceived graduates coming from middle class families to have led a ‘cushioned’ life, and considered an experience of at least one year abroad to be a ‘guarantee’ for maturity and international exposure. She identified extra-curricular aspects of studying abroad, such as social interactions, as being most important for developing intercultural competence.

Robertson et al.’s (2011) study found that the group who studied through TNE did not appear to have gained the transferable skills associated with spending time in another country such as intercultural skills, personal independence and broader global perspectives. This was echoed by Sin’s (2013) study in Malaysia, where the greatest gains were made by those who spent a period of study abroad as part of the TNE programme. Rizvi argues that employers attribute greater value to an overseas education that can offer “exposure to different people and cultures, to different ideas and attitudes, and to different ways of learning and working.” (Rizvi 2000, p. 214).

Thus it seems that TNE programmes with an overseas study element may offer an ideal solution for those seeking positional outcomes from TNE, with intercultural competence developed while retaining a sense of the local employment context.

7.3.2. Development of global attributes

Deardorff and Jones (2012) highlight some of the variety of terms that appear to be interchangeable in describing intercultural competence, including “cross-cultural capability”, “intercultural sensitivity” and “cultural fluency”. Freeman et al. (2009) describe intercultural competence as “a dynamic, ongoing, interactive self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective and appropriate communication and interaction across cultures” (Freeman et al. 2009, p. 1).

It is perhaps more evident for some career paths than others that intercultural competence and/or global perspectives are crucial for future professional roles. However, Fielden et al. (2007) claim that employers in general are looking for graduates with first-hand experience of living and working among other cultures. Archer and Davison (2008) also argue that, “employers value graduates who have a global perspective” (2008, p. 5), and Webb emphasises that all students need this dimension in their programmes:
As part of their preparation to live and work in a globalising world, graduates need increasingly well-developed lifelong learning skills and attitudes, including an international perspective. They need to interpret local problems within a wider and global framework and to judge the importance of global phenomena for their own lives and work. (Webb 2005, p. 110)

In 2012, the British Council commissioned a survey of Human Resources managers at 367 large employers in nine countries: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Jordan, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It was found that, “Employers understand the value of intercultural skills to their businesses. In fact, they value these skills above many technical abilities and formal qualifications.” (British Council 2013b, p. 19). However, the study also found that, while intercultural skills are valued, employers do not often screen for them in the recruitment process (p. 14). This finding was echoed in a Finnish survey (CIMO 2014), which noted a clear discrepancy between views held by employers and by students on the value of intercultural competences in the recruitment process, stating that:

international mobility produces the kind of competences that the employers are seeking, but they are not able to link these competences and people’s international experiences at recruitment. (CIMO 2014, p. 5).

Employers who value international experience were also found to value networking ability, creativity and openness to new experiences (CIMO 2014). The report argues that:

If international experience were perceived through a wider frame than is presently the case, a significantly larger number of employers would also consider it a much more important recruitment criterion. (CIMO 2014, p. 23)

This suggestion echoes de Wit and Jones (2014) who argue that we should “change the language of internationalisation” to emphasise the employability skills developed through mobility and an internationalised curriculum at home.

Beyond Western Europe, the employer perspective on intercultural skills requirements in Asian companies was studied by Ilieva (2012) in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. She found that the need for these skills has grown significantly over recent years, presumably as their economies and international trade have developed, and identified a mismatch between employer requirements and those with which graduates are equipped.

Of the 500 UK businesses surveyed in a report for the British Council, there was also a mismatch of skills. Those businesses

for which at least three-quarters of their trade is with people from another culture find it significantly harder to recruit employees with the right skillsets than less globally-oriented businesses. (British Council and Think Global 2011, p. 3).

Busch (2012) sees a key issue in reconciling employer needs and university curricula, arguing that:

for employers, intercultural competence tends to be seen as a benefit. However, courses of study that focus on intercultural communication are often regarded as academically weak. (Busch 2012, p. 432)

This is supported by Leggott and Stapleford (2007) who maintain that:
some academic staff may be reluctant to incorporate what they see as ‘mere skills’ [into the curriculum] at the possible expense of their subject-specific content. (p. 129)

As far as specific professions are concerned, detailed advice on incorporating international and intercultural perspectives has been offered for a range of subjects, such as Engineering (Bourn and Neal 2008), Medicine (Willott et al. 2012) and Pharmacy (Murdan et al. 2014). Leask (2009 and 2012) offers valuable perspectives on both generic and discipline-based curriculum internationalisation and Leask (2015, forthcoming) will be a helpful tool for those wishing to embed it in practice. Clifford (2009) points to an increase in the prevalence and importance of interpreting the meaning of intercultural and international dimensions of the curriculum for individual disciplines.

The TNE context is no exception to the need for international and intercultural aspects to be incorporated through an internationalised curriculum and associated learning outcomes. Simply because the programme itself is ‘international’ does not mean that students will automatically develop such skills any more than it can be assumed to be happening in domestic delivery of UK programmes. As a rare example in the TNE literature, Fitch and Desai (2012) explored industry expectations of the intercultural competence of public relations graduates in Singapore and Perth, along with implications for the curriculum. A further example comes from Clifford (2010) who considers student perspectives on “interculturality” within the same programme delivered in Australia, Malaysia and South Africa and finds a mismatch between expectations and outcomes.

Zimitat (2008) argues that:

> even if domestic graduates never leave their own country, on graduation they will be forced to compete in international, or multi-national, work and discovery environments. (p. 136)

If we accept that this is the case, international and intercultural elements, as well as employability skills, are key to future employment and need to be embedded in the curriculum for all students regardless of context; at home, abroad, by distance or through transnational delivery.

7.3.2.1. Primary research findings on interculturalism

One of the key benefits we reported in research with international alumni who had studied in the UK was the intercultural sensitivity that many gained due to the presence of students of multiple nationalities within their international student cohort on the UK campus (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013). The extent to which intercultural sensitivity is developed during TNE programmes would be an interesting extension of assessing employability development in this project.

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

Fewer than ten of the interviewees reported that their programme cohorts had been significantly international, and rather more reported that their cohort had been entirely local (and in some cases taught in that language not English), while the others did not remark on the composition at all. In only a very few cases was the international composition of the students highlighted, which suggests that the opportunities for intercultural interactions will have been limited.
Almost all the alumni who did report cosmopolitan cohorts had studied at what could be identified as international hubs, within which either their international branch campus or institutional partner had been located (e.g. Dubai, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia). By inference, in the majority of cases where the graduate studied in a standalone partner institution, their cohort had either been local or national, or at least any international dimension to it was unremarkable.

It should be added that not all of these alumni reporting international cohorts also reported resulting strong intercultural development (due to studying alongside fellow international students), but one or two did so to varying degrees:

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

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

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

It seems clear, from this evidence, that the development of intercultural sensitivity was much lower among these TNE graduates than the case for international graduates, other than those who were studying outside their own country (and therefore had been international students). Even where TNE programmes had involved a range of nationalities, the impact had been lower, presumably because the strongest impact arises through immersion in a mix of nationalities who have been thrown together in a ‘foreign’ environment. This evidence appears to accord with a number of studies in the literature, which identify the importance of mobility in developing intercultural sensitivity.

7.4. A note on experiential learning

As noted earlier, studies in several countries have identified profound transformational learning in students through international experiences in a range of geographical contexts. Whether questioning personal identity and sense of self, offering challenging opportunities or merely exposing students to alternative perspectives, significant results in terms of personal growth, self-efficacy, maturity and enhanced intercultural competence are widely reported. The evidence comes from a range of disciplines and types of experience, including study abroad, work placement, and international volunteering or service learning. There are similar results from varying visit durations, although for short-term experiences effective preparation, active engagement while overseas, along with reflection on return have been shown to be important for success (Bosley 2010; Jones 2010, 2012).

Frequent replication of similar findings suggests a framework for the design of international experiences into higher education curricula with the objective of transformational student learning and the development of transferable employability skills. However, similar claims are made of ‘experiential learning’ more generally (Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991). Examples of innovative methods
and outcomes from experiential learning appear in the literature on employability (e.g. UKCES 2008, p. 62).

This raises the question as to whether the international context is fundamental or whether it is the experience itself that offers such learning potential. Jones (2013) argues that further research is needed to establish whether learning outcomes delivered through international and intercultural contexts in a domestic curriculum can result in similar transformations. The findings from this project suggest that this research should include curricula used in TNE contexts.
8. Key findings and issues

Although TNE is a growing part of the UK HE landscape, our literature review has identified the limited nature of existing research on the development of employability skills in TNE programmes. This supports O’Mahony’s (2014) finding that the learning and teaching dimension of TNE is under-researched, particularly the area of student outcomes. Nevertheless, the literature review provides some valuable insights:

- it highlights varied, if not contradictory, viewpoints on perceptions of TNE programmes in different countries and outlines some of the complexity inherent in various country contexts regarding the interplay between a range of factors as they relate to perceptions of the nature and value of TNE. These include prejudice towards different types of programmes or the students who study them; prestige associated with particular overseas qualifications; the importance of practical experience versus knowledge; differing local priorities in terms of hard and soft skills; aspects of locally versus internationally-gained cultural capital; and conflicts between ‘Western’ and local norms and values;
- existing studies suggest that overseas study is often seen as the ‘gold standard’ and TNE as second best, rated either above or below local provision depending on the country context. The rich literature around study abroad articulates the many benefits to students of overseas study, but there is limited evidence that similar benefits can accrue from TNE programmes;
- researchers of TNE currently do not have access to datasets from large-scale surveys of TNE students, which means that our understanding of student outcomes related to TNE is reliant on a limited number of small-scale studies. However, these studies do suggest that TNE programmes that do not involve physical mobility (the vast majority) provide more limited benefits than overseas study;
- most of the existing literature does not effectively distinguish between employment skills and employability skills. This is an important issue for TNE students since they are often focused on the latter (in the form of qualifications and credentials) while current UK (and some international) practice in curriculum design has a strong focus on employability and the development of graduate attributes, many of which are considered to be globally relevant and transferable, and not job-specific.

Our primary research with alumni is a first step in looking both at the experiences, the development of employability skills in TNE contexts, and the outcomes for students on these programmes – seen through the lens of alumni perspectives. A key issue is whether TNE programmes are delivered (as far as possible) in the same way, with the same content, whether they are bespoke, and whether there is a blend of a bespoke and standardised approach. While student experiences vary widely – partly with the study environment and/or model of TNE delivery – a number of themes emerge:

- our research suggests that UK TNE programmes are usually distinct from their UK versions and thus have the potential to offer a unique kind of learning opportunity to students, beyond the qualification they will earn, such as the ability to provide an approach to employability which is sensitive to national and regional, as well as global, labour markets. However, a key focus of our analysis was to try and ascertain whether these outcomes are evidenced by current institutional practice and the experiences of TNE students;
- evidence from the alumni suggests that strategic focus on employability by institutions whether embedded in curriculum, through co-curricular support or extra-curricular activity, is evident but is far less widespread in TNE programmes than in HE provision in the UK. Practice that is now commonplace or standard in the UK seems to be innovative or noteworthy among TNE
provision. The difference appears to be most acute for collaborative programmes, most likely
because the student experience in such arrangements is less strictly controlled by the UK
institution. It is also a more collaborative enterprise than branch campus or distance learning
models, and embedding employability needs significant partner engagement and support, which
was not often evident;

- many TNE students are different and distinct from (most) students on UK campuses. Most
  postgraduates and many undergraduates are studying while already in employment, reducing
  the opportunities for them to gain skills through wider experiences and in some cases the
  need for work experience, but their perceived needs are also distinct, in relation to both
  gaining employability skills but also wider formation in the HE environment. The majority
  perceive that their UK TNE qualification itself will bring them employability impact with English
  language skills, rather than the wider skills they might develop through studying. It is also
  notable that many respondents (in institutions, as well as alumni) were not familiar with the
  term TNE or what it means.
- our evidence suggests that better support for students, especially, but also employers and
  other stakeholders, is needed in helping them to understand and articulate the value not only
  of TNE qualifications but also of the transferable skills (in addition to subject skills and
  credentials) they could gain or have gained through their TNE study and how these can
  enhance their employability. This requirement is not unique to TNE students and programmes.
  For example, in relation to overseas experience for international graduates:

  the value that employers will put on it depends on how the graduates themselves
  articulate the added value that overseas study has given them.
  (Employer in Fielden et al. 2007, p. 15);

- specifically on the value of overseas study, McNamara and Knight (2014) found that nearly half
  of TNE students and graduates in their sample reported having studied abroad as part of their
  programme. Students on UK TNE programmes that involve periods of study in the UK (and
  other countries) often have access to more curricular and co-curricular opportunities to
  develop employability skills (e.g. intercultural skills and entrepreneurship) which could
  positively influence employers’ perceptions of TNE programmes. However, recent census
  work on UK TNE programmes (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014) suggests that was not a
  representative sample, and that most UK TNE students do not spend time overseas. As Jones
  (2013) points out, a key challenge for HE providers is to provide comparable employability
  benefits for non-mobile students, considering both its availability and students’ access to it;

8.1. Employer perspectives
- Many employers in TNE host countries appear to prefer domestic students with international
  experience, usually gained from studying abroad, rather than international students or students
  via locally-based TNE programmes. This may be because they are not aware of the learning
  benefits of mobility. Multi-national employers, on the other hand, tend to recognise these and
  may well prefer international students who have undertaken physical mobility;
- they express a wish to recruit people with global perspectives but do not always follow this
  through when recruiting, as this skill is often difficult to identify;
- employer views of the value of TNE programmes or overseas study vary by country and often
  by TNE delivery mode; distance learning are often less highly regarded and branch campuses
  tend to have higher reputational value;
- studying in English is important in terms of employability, particularly for employers active in
  the global market – although studying English in the UK has even more cachet;
- there seems very little evidence of formalised work-based learning in TNE programmes,
  although many TNE students are employed during their studies;
• relatively few employers are engaged in TNE programmes, and are therefore not benefiting from such engagement – through tailored curricula, access to work-ready graduates that they could recruit, or benefits from student projects or related HE collaborations. This would suggest that employers are not putting pressure on universities to incorporate employability skills development into curricula, or may not understand the potential learning gains from it.

8.2. Student perspectives

• Universities are not clearly identifying to TNE students (or to all other students, for that matter) the importance of generic employability skills as well as other skills that are valuable for employment in their chosen field, which contributes to students failing to articulate their importance to employers;
• the limited evidence of employer engagement suggests that TNE programmes are not leveraging opportunities to support their graduates to enter local (or international) labour markets, or addressing local skills gaps; this often means that TNE graduates are unable to enter their chosen employment field and in some cases qualifications are not recognised or valued for student seeking professionally-orientated roles (e.g. law);
• universities are not clearly articulating to students why and how international experience or internationalisation of the curriculum in domestic or TNE contexts develops transferable, employability skills;
• students need help in articulating to employers how their experiences have developed their personal and professional transversal skills;
• UK universities may not be helping TNE students to understand and value the benefits of employability development – such as preferential access to employment markets, attributes/skills valued by employers, and experiences of the workplace – or how to participate (related opportunities to develop enterprise skills, personalised careers advice and guidance, work placement options);
• studying via UK TNE programmes (and via overseas study in the UK) can both develop flexibility and build personal confidence through experience of different approaches to learning and curricula;
• students have a simpler view of TNE models than institutions do largely only distinguishing between unsupported distance learning, branch campuses and partnership models. It is not clear why they would require more nuanced understanding than this, even if it is important to institutions in relation to the control they can potentially exert over the student experience;
• TNE programme choices made by students seem to be relatively poorly informed and influenced by institutional marketing. They tend to be driven by broad perceptions of prestige (of provider and country) rather by curriculum content, and certainly not by understanding of pedagogy or extent of employability content/development;
• TNE is usually a highly pragmatic choice for a particular and distinctive range of students – related to limited opportunity to study abroad, the possibility of working while studying, and affordability – which may be highly valuable to them;
• third country students appear to gain greater benefits from studying a UK TNE programme than those taking a TNE programme in their own country, as they gain international experience via studying outside their home context and develop skills such as self-reliance and intercultural understanding;
• short-term employment outcomes from TNE programmes are mostly positive but less so than those experienced by international graduates who studied in the UK, although TNE programmes do contribute to longer-term employability enhancement for many students, even where specific content to develop transversal and employability skills is absent.
8.3. University perspectives

- Universities need to understand better the individual personal as well as professional motivations to study on TNE programmes, and how these drive student needs and/or limit access to wider opportunities;
- they need to understand more deeply the potential impacts and outcomes of international and intercultural experiences for TNE students, in order to build them into curricula;
- they need to understand the importance of curriculum internationalisation at home and abroad, and what this means in the TNE context;
- employability is a theme in many debates on the broader curriculum and co-curriculum activity, but there is often insufficient distinction given to the impact of the location and study environment of different types of students;
- universities need to build employability aspects of curriculum in a way that is manageable and relevant for part-time students who may well be working full-time, which restricts their access to wider study-related opportunities;
- most partnership arrangements are delivering far less employability development, embedded or otherwise, than on UK branch campuses or even unsupported distance learning programmes. Universities may need to work with TNE partners to reach a common conceptualisation of employability skills and development and build in relevant staff development opportunities for teaching staff;
- there is limited use of co-curriculum opportunities in collaborative TNE programmes to provide employability content, compared with study in the UK. Some institutions provide both credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing opportunities, appropriate to students studying outside the UK;
- some support activities (careers advice, internship support, recognition of extra-curricular activity, including volunteering) need to be delivered locally and are dependent on partners, although there is some evidence of successful online learning provision. There is a need to better understand how universities exert greater influence in these areas so as to provide a more comparable experience with study in the UK, or to include more employability-related content embedded within the curriculum;
- universities and their partners need to deepen their levels of employer engagement in relation to curricula and their delivery as well as work placements and internships. There appears to be a strong mismatch between UK delivery and TNE on this issue although there is evidence for engagement of industry in teaching and learning on a few collaborative programmes;
- alumni at branch campuses and distance learners are more easily engaged (with/by the UK institution) than those who studied through collaborative arrangements, some of whom have affinity to the local partner – this could be important in providing longer-term support or benefits to graduates;
- many students studying via TNE do not have the same access to employability modules/support as those studying at the home campus. These are more likely to be provided in branch campuses and on programmes designed to be delivered online (recognising some cultural differences and need for bespoke content);
- institutions and the QAA perhaps need greater insight into the extent to which comparability (with UK provision) of student experiences, and specifically employability development, is currently measured in collaborative TNE provision to effectively assure academic standards and quality, and support quality enhancement in this area. TNE students are currently not included in the UK’s large-scale surveys, which provide measures of engagement and satisfaction.
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Appendix 1: Methodologies

Literature review

Given the breadth and range of potential literature covered by the topic of TNE and employability, a multi-pronged approach was taken. This involved, firstly, helpful conversations among members of the project team to ensure that recently-published reports were shared, including the general outcomes of one report that was about to be published.

Secondly, an extensive literature review undertaken in 2012 in preparation for a journal article (Jones 2013) was re-evaluated and updated with several items the author had collated in the interim for follow up work. Several publications within the article were re-examined for potential issues impacting on this project.

Thirdly, a number of global experts on TNE were contacted directly to ask if they knew of any work being done in relation to TNE and employability. They provided a number of leads which, when followed up, yielded one or two useful studies. The same process was followed with experts around the world in different aspects of internationalisation and employability. These approaches were helpful in identifying several post-doctoral researchers in relevant fields with whom direct contact was made and whose PhD research was consulted, especially their own reviews of literature. Given the paucity of literature on TNE and employability, this approach was fruitful to the tune of one or two further studies.

Finally, appeals were made on social media for any further contacts doing work on this topic. This led to a helpful conversation at a conference in Australia with the team leader of the Nottingham University Malaysia project mentioned in the review, which will be reporting first phase outcomes early in 2015.

The results were collated and themed by the author, with a view to gathering any relevant learning points for the project. These were fed through to other members of the team as the review and other strands of the project progressed. Drafts of the literature review were read by the other team members to inform findings emerging from surveys and interviews. The literature review document was then integrated within the final project report.

Institutional perspectives

Focus
This strand of the project was designed to collect examples of innovative and effective practice from UK HE institutions that embed the development of employability within the curriculum in all types of TNE programmes (including distance learning, flying-faculty and partnership arrangements).

Definitions
While recognising that the terms ‘employability’ and ‘TNE’ do not have widely accepted definitions within the sector, the call for institutional evidence used the following definitions – adopted by the HEA – that take a broad, but student-focused, approach to these concepts:

- **employability**: a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen
occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Knight and Yorke 2003);

- **transnational education (TNE):** award-bearing or credit-bearing learning undertaken by students who are based in a different country from that of the awarding institution (Adapted from the Council of Europe’s statement on TNE, 2002).

**Methodology**

The call for examples was distributed in October 2014 to members of the Higher Education Academy’s two networks related to internationalisation – one focused on TNE and the other internationalisation of the curriculum and also via three LinkedIn Groups: ‘HEGlobal – UK Transnational Education’; the ‘IEAA Transnational Education Special Interest Group (SIG)’; and ‘Transnational Education’ Invitations to submit examples were also sent via Twitter and other contacts working in the international HE research field. Respondents were also asked to pass on any information about innovative or effective practice that they were aware of outside their institutions.

We asked that each example be organised as a short case study or vignette (up to 750 words) containing descriptive information about the programme (name, location of student, subject, delivery mode, level of study, partner – if relevant), the category of practice, and a brief reflection on why the approach is considered it to be particularly innovative or effective. Respondents were also asked to provide details of any future plans to develop or disseminate the activity, and contact details should further clarification be required.

Respondents were free to interpret what constitutes innovative and effective practice in their own way. However, some potential categories of practice were asked to provide greater detail on the kind of material that we were seeking, although recognising that these are not mutually exclusive for a particular TNE programme. There were no restrictions around subject area, country of delivery, level of study, or institution type (e.g. research-intensive, teaching-focused, etc.)

In addition, respondents were asked to provide information about the main challenges related to employability in TNE from their institutional perspective. In particular, they were asked to briefly outline the nature of the challenge, why it was an issue for their institution and key stakeholder groups (e.g. students, employers, and Government) and to provide some ideas on how this challenge could best be addressed by their institution, the wider HE sector and national governments.

We informed respondents that we would summarise trends emerging from the challenges and the examples of innovative and effective practice in our report to the HEA and that we seek agreement to like to include selected edited versions of the vignettes in our report. Respondents were informed that all data and contact details collected during the project would be stored securely and will be destroyed two years following the completion of the project, and that all contributors to the research would be invited to engage in any dissemination activity for the project.

**Responses**

Respondents were given a two-week deadline to respond to the call for examples, and this was extended in some cases so that information requested could be collected and written up.

In total, there were twenty-five responses to the call for examples, including three from Australia, resulting in eight completed vignettes, two of which were not focused directly on TNE. Another five contacts provided further information about their approach to employability but not in the
vignette format. Other contacts suggested that they may be able to produce vignettes, but were unable to meet our deadline.

Conversations with respondents suggested that this relatively low response was not surprising since few institutions had focused directly on how employability is evidenced in TNE programmes, and even fewer would have written up their practice in a format that could be shared to the wider HE sector. Contacts located in Australia suggested that institutions there have addressed this issue, but collecting examples outside the UK was outside the scope of the project, although we have made reference to Australian research on employability in the literature.

Research with alumni

The interviews with TNE alumni reported here were carried out as part of a project being undertaken by CRAC for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), to investigate the wider benefits of TNE to the UK. With the permission of BIS, additional questions were inserted into these interviews for the purposes of this research, offering perspectives from TNE alumni on a variety of issues relating to their UK TNE programmes and impact, including employability development.

The lack of previous research with TNE alumni meant that these in-depth investigations carried a number of inherent uncertainties, not the least of which was how readily TNE alumni could be engaged in the research. In most cases TNE alumni are not included in UK alumni databases and so contact with them would be reliant on TNE partner organisations. For most of the alumni, English would not be their first language, which could be problematic as the research would seek insights into motivations and perceptions about impact that could be complex and, at times, subtle. A qualitative research method was chosen in order to obtain sufficiently deep understanding of the graduates’ experiences and perceptions of impact, which are situated in the context of their personal backgrounds, career trajectories and circumstances. CRAC’s earlier project on the wider benefits of international higher education (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2013) had shown such a methodology to be feasible as a research process with international graduates who had studied in the UK.

An in-depth interview process was designed, to be conducted by interviewers with expertise in facilitating career conversations and also in international HE. Given that the graduates would be located, literally, worldwide, the interviews were conducted by telephone and/or Skype.

Interview style and structure

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

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

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

**Sample design and stratification**

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

Such a number of interviews cannot statistically represent the wide range of UK TNE graduates, in terms of their personal characteristics and parameters of study, so the target interview sample was designed as a purposive sample to reflect a range of variables:

- country of study (grouped into broad regions, using the groupings of HESA’s aggregate offshore record which were used in the linked ‘value’ research);
- broad type or model of TNE;
- broad type of UK TNE provider (in terms of both type of institution but also in relation to its extent of TNE provision);
- level of study;
- broad subject of study;
- gender.

In addition it was felt important to try to include graduates with differing levels of positive (and negative) experiences, and different extents of linkage with fellow alumni and the UK, in order to avoid any potential bias in the sample towards more closely connected with the UK and with positive experiences. The target for interviews was graduates of TNE programmes (i.e. alumni) rather than current students, because of the focus on different aspects of impact.

Practically, it was necessary to group some of these characteristics very broadly, in order to reduce the granularity of sampling required, including country of study, institution type, subject of study, and programme delivery model. It was hoped to find interviewees who reflected the spectrum of characteristics of those undertaking UK TNE, although the final target achieved would also be heavily dependent on the willingness and physical availability of volunteers.

Different proportions (of the proposed 100 interviews) were agreed for the main variables (and/or groups relating to each) on the basis of either rough approximation to their distribution in the overall cohort of UK TNE students or particular groupings expected to be of interest (Table A.1).
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*Note: proportions of ‘other’ and ‘research-intensive’ are dependent on how graduates of University of London International Programmes are categorised.

### Attraction and interview sample achieved

Potential volunteers were invited through a range of attraction methods, although this relied heavily on assistance from UK HE institutions, as there was no ready source of TNE alumni contacts as a group. Using contacts forged during our recent TNE census (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014), institutions were contacted for assistance with promotion of the project. A small number of these were able to issue invitations directly to alumni who had studied their TNE programmes, encouraging them to participate. However, in the majority of cases the UK institution did not have access to their contact details but passed the request for assistance to a selection of their delivery partner organisations, which should hold details of their alumni. This longer ‘chain’ was necessary to try to reach the alumni but was inherently weaker; the UK institutions did not offer us direct contact with their partners, and so the process was entirely reliant on the goodwill of partners in responding to the institutions’ requests, and direct chasing actions could not be instigated.
The number of requests for assistance to institutions, via a wide range of types of staff, together with reminders and chasing actions, was in the end very large in relation to the actual number of volunteers obtained. This could partly have resulted from low quality contacts data, or that were not up-to-date, being held by partners. The process was also highly iterative, with promotional efforts directed to try to seek different types of graduate, as the shape of the sample of interviews achieved evolved.

One immediate conclusion is that UK TNE alumni are currently hard to reach and engage in research from the UK, on any consistent basis, and are markedly harder to reach than has been our experience in working with those who have studied physically in the UK.

In total, just over 140 volunteers were obtained, although some of these proved to be ineligible (some misunderstood the criteria for participation, and had studied in the UK, while others were still current TNE students). Some simply proved impossible to contact despite having offered us their current contact details. There was also some ‘oversupply’ of volunteers comprising one or two ‘types’ of alumni – in particular, a large number of distance learners who had studied law programmes, which would have unbalanced the sample had they been used. A total of 66 alumni were successfully interviewed, and the analysis that follows is based upon that sample. Table A.1 (above) illustrates the ‘shape’ of the final sample achieved, in terms of the key variables, in comparison with the target sample identified.

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

In practice, it proved harder to attract volunteers who had studied in certain regions, such as the Middle East, whereas more volunteers emerged in some other regions than could be accommodated. However, some interviewees were obtained in all regions and a good number in most of the key TNE markets.

Although the study failed to obtain any postgraduate research degree (PGR) graduates, it had been agreed at the outset that the priority groups were those who had studied undergraduate and taught postgraduate (PGT) programmes. All targeted broad groups of subjects of study were represented, although it was particularly hard to find alumni who had studied arts and humanities courses (which comprise a minority of TNE programmes). Our recent research on extent and nature of TNE provision by the UK revealed complex trends and inter-relationships between market region, type of provision, and subject of study, not all of which had been understood when the target sample shape was designed.

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

In total, the alumni interviewed had studied for awards from twenty different UK HE institutions, including post-1992, research-intensive and other institutions. The current pattern of UK TNE provision is a small number of very large providers and many others operating at a range smaller
scales. Interviews were conducted with alumni who had studied in all three of our groups of provision extent (these had been split into ‘very large’, the next ‘Top 40’ in terms of extent reported in HESA’s Aggregate Offshore Record – which was around 1500 TNE students – and other smaller players).

In terms of other personal characteristics and issues, a good gender split was achieved, and the sample included significant numbers of alumni with more and less positive experiences, and with and without links to the UK, so the risk of bias towards those with positive stories and/or well-connected to the UK was reduced. It was not possible to limit tightly the period since graduation, due to the somewhat unpredictable flow of volunteers; most interviewees had graduated three to five years ago, although there was a small proportion who had graduated between five and ten years ago. The sample interviewed was limited to graduates, that is, current students who volunteered were considered ineligible.

Overall, although the interview sample obtained did not match all aspects of the target sample shape, it contained a good variety of alumni who reflected the desired range of experiences and characteristics. It was also achieved at very considerable effort.
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