

Transnational Graduate Outcomes

A case study of the United Arab Emirates

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Transnational Graduate Outcomes: A case study of the United Arab Emirates

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
1. Introduction.....	8
1.1 Context	9
1.2 Methodology	11
2. TNE student profile in the UAE.....	13
2.1 Participant demographics	13
2.2 Modes of study	14
2.3 Social backgrounds.....	15
3. Graduates' experiences of TNE and the learning acquired	17
3.1 Satisfaction with degree programme	17
3.2 Skills, competencies, and expertise.....	17
3.3 Independent learning and critical thinking.....	18
3.4 Intercultural communication and understanding	19
4. Employability and labour market outcomes.....	22
4.1 Work and employment	22
4.2 Job satisfaction and skills utilisation.....	22
4.3 Professional and career development opportunities.....	24
5. International Mobility	29
5.1 Graduates' current location	29
5.2 Inter-campus transfer.....	30
5.3 Future plans	30
5.4 Degree recognition	31
6. Influence of TNE on identities and personal lives.....	34
6.1 Personal development.....	34
6.2 Life satisfaction and wellbeing.....	34
6.3 Relationship to the UK.....	37
7. Conclusion.....	39
7.1 Reflecting on research challenges.....	39
7.2 Key implications for further research.....	40
References.....	42

About the authors	44
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Executive summary

Considerable attention has been given to UK transnational higher education (TNE) in terms of its global scale, rapid growth and evolving scope of provision. Far less is known, however, about the impact UK TNE has on its graduates, and on the communities and economies in which it operates. This study, commissioned by Universities UK International, addresses this gap by examining the outcomes of UK TNE graduates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through questionnaires and interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate UK TNE degree-holders, it identifies common experiences of graduates in their transition from education to employment and their application of specialist skills and knowledge to the spaces where they work and live. This focused case study has framed these experiences and outcomes according to the following five research areas, outlining the key findings for each.

TNE student profile in the UAE

- 29% of respondents were born in a different country from their nationality. 18% of respondents were born in the UAE, and a further 24% had migrated to the UAE as minors.
- Nearly one in four was the first in their family to obtain a degree and 15% experienced financial hardship growing up. The majority of respondents were from traditional higher education backgrounds.
- Two-thirds of the sample studied business management, finance, or law. Nearly one-quarter studied a STEM subject, including computing, IT, engineering, architecture, and construction. 10% studied other subjects such as fashion design, politics, psychology, and teacher education.
- For postgraduate respondents, 80% were part-time students, 75% were adult emigrants to the UAE, 66% were male, and the mean age was 36. For undergraduates, 99% were full-time students, 73% were born in the UAE or migrated as minors, 57% were female and the mean age was 24.

Our sample suggests that UK TNE in the UAE is widely attended by a relatively mobile and often transnational middle class, serving both the children of expatriate families residing in the UAE and older working professionals. Questionnaire and interview responses strongly point to TNE as an attractive, convenient, or cost-effective alternative for individuals for whom study in the UK is also possible. The option to gain a UK qualification while in the UAE was framed by interview participants as an ideal combination of the two, highlighting the desirability of UK higher education's leverage in local labour markets and the attractiveness of the UAE – particularly Dubai – as a cosmopolitan centre, a global hub for employment, and familiar home to many respondents.

Graduates' experiences of TNE and the learning acquired

- 84% of graduates expressed high or very high satisfaction with the teaching and learning aspects of their TNE study programme, comparable to that found among international students studying in the UK (Universities UK International, 2019). Satisfaction was nearly 30% higher for graduates who participated in multiple career support activities provided by their university.
- Graduates showed strong appreciation for the independent learning aspect of UK higher education, with 83% of respondents stating that their enthusiasm for further learning had

increased as a result of their degree programme. Together with findings on different levels of satisfaction, it appears that the more graduates invested themselves in their programmes, the more they felt that they got out of them.

- 84% of respondents felt that their programmes equipped them with both employment-specific knowledge and broad, transferable skills, including negotiating, communicating across job roles and levels, being more understanding towards people, thinking outside the box, thinking critically, analysing problems, planning, prioritising, meeting deadlines and managing stress.
- 86% felt they were able to engage with diverse students and staff through their course; the same number felt that they learned to collaborate in culturally diverse groups.

The study finds that UK TNE in the UAE equips graduates with transferable skills relating to critical thinking, applied analysis and independent learning. Questionnaire responses strongly show perceived gains in analytical and personal development skills as a result of their programmes. Respondents were highly satisfied with the teaching and learning aspects of their course, particularly noting their opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning, specialise in topics of interest, and learn abstract theory and frameworks by applying them to industry-specific contexts or cases.

As a result of the diverse student cohorts attending UK TNE in the UAE, graduates also received valuable opportunities to socialise with students of other nationalities and gain intercultural communication skills, exposure to other ways of thinking, and collaborative experiences in solving problems. Respondents did not see this as a feature exclusive to UK TNE providers (drawing comparison with North American and Australian TNE providers in the UAE), but did feel that it was a sharp departure from South Asian TNE providers and Emirati universities, as well as many secondary schools in the UAE, which concentrate national groups and create relatively narrow socialisation experiences.

Employability and labour market outcomes

- Nearly 80% of the graduates in our sample were employed at the time of their participation in the questionnaire, with nearly 9 out of 10 employed on a full-time basis. About 60% of those employed were highly satisfied with their job.
- More than 80% reported that they made use of most of their skills, knowledge, and competences in their jobs. 70% reported being in jobs where their degree level or subject was a formal requirement or it was seen to give them a decisive advantage in getting the job.
- 75% of respondents participated in multiple career support events such as career days or CV and interview workshops. Nearly two-thirds had participated in at least one work experience activity such as internships, workplace visits, or enterprise competitions. Both forms of career development were strongly associated with perceived employability gains.
- Just over half felt they improved their career prospects with employers in the UAE and abroad. However, more than one in four also felt that they were no more employable after graduating. Undergraduate degree-holders were considerably less optimistic about their employability in the current UAE and international labour market.

Findings on graduate employability show strongly perceived gains in professional development and career fulfilment as a result of graduates' TNE programmes, which generally have a professional orientation and offer multiple career development opportunities through each course. The data indicate a clear difference in individuals' employability for those who maximised these opportunities or

their study experiences. These professional elements are not exclusive to UK TNE, however, and some interview respondents believed that other TNE providers offered more structured opportunities for transitioning students into the UAE labour market.

International mobility

- Four out of five respondents who were born in the UAE or migrated as minors were still in the UAE at the time of this study. For respondents who had migrated as adults, only three out of five remained in the UAE.
- 15% of respondents now reside, work or study in a third country (neither the UAE nor their country of citizenship). 52% stated that they were likely to do business or seek work in a non-UK third country in the next five years.
- Less than one quarter of respondents studied in the UK for any period of time during their programme. 90% of those who did were on postgraduate courses and were older than the mean age of the overall sample.
- 26% reported having experienced issues with their degree being recognised by various agencies in or outside of the UAE on at least one occasion. Nearly 10% experienced issues on more than one occasion. These experiences were equally distributed across undergraduate and postgraduate degree-holders from all five of the largest UK TNE providers in the UAE.

The graduates in this sample were relatively mobile by virtue of their life experiences or patterns of work. Interview responses suggest an alignment between degree holders' international or transnational aspirations and UK degree qualifications, which graduates saw as globally recognised by employers, universities, and immigration authorities. However, evidence pointing to whether graduates' degrees enable or enhance their mobility was inconclusive. Most respondents intended to remain in the UAE for work, which appears to be strengthened by the restrictions on international travel imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic. The study also found various accounts of degree recognition issues stemming mainly from the accreditation systems in use in the UAE. This issue particularly impacted UK TNE graduates seeking public sector employment in the UAE or further studies in Emirati universities, as government entities outside of the Emirate of Dubai do not recognise TNE qualifications which are not also accredited by the UAE Ministry of Education.

Influence of TNE on identities and personal lives, including relationship with the UK

- The mean life satisfaction score in the sample was 7.1 out of 10, which is relatively high when accounting for the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.
- 65% felt that they were doing well financially, and 54% were optimistic that their financial situation will improve over the next year. These sentiments strongly correlated with graduates who felt that their skills had improved significantly as a result of their programme.
- At the same time, 67% of respondents believed that their career prospects had worsened to some degree as a result of the pandemic, closely correlating with respondents' employment status and measures of their employability (e.g. skills and competences).

- Although only around 5% had worked or studied in the UK after their TNE programme, one quarter of respondents expressed the intention to do so in the next five years. 39% were likely to develop professional links with UK organisations, and 67% were likely to visit the UK for holiday or leisure.

Extending from graduates' TNE experiences and the perceived value of their degree, respondents reported heightened personal development, including their sense of confidence, self-worth, empowerment to affect global problems, and aspirations to achieve higher levels in their careers or study for higher postgraduate qualifications. Despite the general perception that the pandemic had negatively impacted graduates' career prospects, interview respondents expressed confidence in navigating the economic fallout, and in many cases found opportunities to advance their careers. The wider benefit of these attributes is also evident in interviews where graduates drew connections between their degree provider, their identities as UK graduates, and their future goals, often articulating clearly defined aims to reach leadership roles in their organisations or start their own organisations.

While measures of graduates' future relationships and feelings towards the UK were not strong overall, interviews highlighted graduates' close appreciation for UK education, seen as a reliably high-quality global brand and educational model. Respondents expressed strong sentiments on the positive impact of their UK education on their identities and personal growth, and the doors they believed it opened to them.

In all, this report documents the various dimensions of graduates' lives following their completion of a UK TNE degree programme in the UAE. It finds that graduates overall see themselves as having gained a broad range of skills and knowledge through their programmes which they apply to their professional and personal lives, giving them confidence and a sense of advantage in navigating job markets and achieving their personal goals. This study concludes with a series of reflections on some of the challenges of conducting TNE graduate outcomes research in the UAE, as well as the implications and questions its findings raise for further research in this field.

1. Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has emerged in recent years as a significant component of global higher education. TNE refers to types of higher education programmes and services offered in a different country from the awarding institution, and typically takes place through franchised or partnership programmes, international branch campuses (IBCs), double degree programmes, and study abroad sites. The programmes may be offered either through traditional face-to-face or distance/virtual education options (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018).

In recent decades, education hubs, most notably in China, the UAE, Singapore, Malaysia and Qatar, but also a range of other locations in Asia and Africa, have emerged as hosts to concentrations of TNE (Jisc, 2018). UK providers have been active in this domain, with 156 providers engaging in some form of TNE, serving 449,690 students in 225 countries and territories in 2019/20¹ (Universities UK International, 2021). Although degree franchises are globally a more prevalent model of TNE, much of the literature on TNE provision concentrates on IBCs (Juusola & Rensimer, 2018). Most IBCs come from five sending countries: UK, US, Russia, France and Australia, and are hosted by 77 countries, with the top five host countries being China (34 IBCs), the UAE (33), Malaysia (12), Qatar (12) and Singapore (11) (Garrett et al., 2016).

Yet despite this consolidated presence there remain a series of challenges and complex questions for the TNE sector. The equivalency of degrees at the branch and home campuses has been the subject of debate, both in terms of the actual learning acquired and public recognition of diplomas. Questions have also been asked about the economic and social benefits that TNE brings to its host localities, given the globally mobile nature of its graduates, and globally oriented curricula (Knight & McNamara, 2015). Furthermore, there is the impact of TNE on international relations, intercultural understanding and the engagement of graduates with the UK. More research is needed to understand these questions, and to inform the development of policy and practice both from the perspectives of TNE providers and recipient higher education systems.

Interest in graduate outcomes has also grown significantly in recent years. Whereas in earlier decades graduates may have been virtually guaranteed white-collar work, with an expanding pool of qualified candidates they must now enhance their employability skills, not only through formal qualifications but also 'soft skills' and work experience (McCowan, 2015). Moreover, in the context of squeezes on public funds for higher education, universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the contribution that they make to graduates' professional success, and to the public good more broadly. These questions are highly relevant for TNE, yet with some exceptions (Ilieva et al., 2021; Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015), there have been few studies to date.

This report, commissioned by Universities UK International, aims to shed light on these questions in the context of the UAE. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, it focuses on understanding the characteristics, experiences and outcomes of graduates from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes from UK TNE providers, with the objectives to identify and explore the following:

1. The TNE student profile in the UAE and the role of TNE in opening opportunities for study
2. Graduates' experiences of TNE and the learning acquired
3. Employability and labour market outcomes
4. International mobility
5. Influence of TNE on identities and personal lives, including relationship with the UK

¹ Excluding Oxford Brookes

In addressing all of these objectives, the emphasis was on understanding the distinctive role of TNE providers, in relation to conventional, domestic forms of higher education. Where possible, the results were disaggregated to show how the above questions differed by type and level of programme and background characteristics of students. In the context of the global pandemic, there was also a subsidiary aim to assess the impact of Covid-19 on these outcomes.

This report focuses on IBCs and franchised programmes from the UK with operations in the UAE. Online-only TNE providers as well as strictly fly-in providers of short courses were not included in this study.

1.1 Context

The UAE, and Dubai in particular, is an established TNE hub with approximately 33 IBCs, numerous degree franchises, and hybrid partnerships between international and local providers (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2020). The landscape includes mainly traditional delivery modes on physical campuses as well as some online programmes. Furthermore, the provision differs greatly in terms of operating modes; some IBCs are large campuses spread across several buildings with multiple schools or departments, while others operate in small, sometimes shared premises with other providers. Some TNE providers also operate under the fly-in, fly-out model where UK-based teaching staff are flown in from the home campus to deliver intensive courses (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2014).

TNE providers complement local higher education provision in the UAE consisting of three federal universities catering primarily to Emirati students, in addition to several dozen private universities with a mix of Emirati and Arab expatriate students. Of the 12 countries with TNE provision in the UAE market, British TNE dominates the landscape, with approximately nine well-established British providers and several smaller campuses, franchised programmes and partnerships with local providers across the UAE leading to a joint degree (Table 1). The importance of the UAE as a TNE hotspot is also underpinned by its commercial dynamics as a mostly unsubsidised private market. In this model of non-state educational provision, providers are geographically concentrated in academic free zone areas and put in direct competition with other international and private local providers. The scope of TNE-provided degree programmes concentrates in vocationally oriented degrees, with business, engineering and computing programmes dominating the range of offerings.

The quality assurance framework of the UAE higher education landscape is heterogeneous, with providers operating inside free zones made exempt from national accreditation requirements. In lieu of national accreditation, TNE providers operating in free zones are licensed by individual Emirate-level regulatory authorities which ensure that the quality and scope of each degree programme offered is comparable to that of a provider's home campus (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009). National accreditation comes with stringent requirements on years per degree level and the qualifications of teaching staff; however, it also enables graduates to work and study in public sector institutions in the UAE. In 2011, the Emirate of Dubai revised its law allowing TNE degrees without national accreditation to be recognised by government entities within that Emirate. However, without national accreditation, TNE degrees are still not recognised outside of Dubai making graduates ineligible for further study at Emirati universities or public sector employment in other Emirates. In light of this, there has been growing interest among TNE providers over the past five years in seeking national accreditation in the UAE in order to attract more Emirati and expatriate students and for providers to be eligible to offer training and consultancy services to government entities².

² At the time of this report, 3 UK TNE providers were nationally accredited: University of Birmingham, University of Strathclyde Business School, and University of South Wales (closed in 2020).

A majority of TNE students in the UAE study in Dubai as most providers are located there. More than half of the students in non-federal universities in Dubai are from South Asia, while 30% of the students come from the MENA region (including UAE nationals), and a further 5% each from Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa (KHDA, 2017). Very few Emiratis enrol in the TNE providers without national accreditation due to the limitations it places on their future opportunities within the UAE. Conversely, TNE providers are popular with international residents planning to live and work outside of the UAE and seeking a qualification from a globally recognised higher education system.

The degrees offered focus heavily on professional fields, with business management programmes dominating the landscape with more than half of the total number of enrolled students, followed by engineering, IT and media (KHDA, 2017). There is considerable overlap in course offerings between TNE providers, although providers occasionally offer niche degree programmes, giving them competitive advantage for student enrolments.

The UK TNE landscape in the UAE is broad, consisting of large, undergraduate- and postgraduate-serving campuses, postgraduate-only business schools, smaller degree franchises, online providers, and degree validation partnerships with local institutions. The largest and most well-established providers are almost entirely in Dubai; several further providers are based in the northern Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah³. Table 1 below summarises the scale and scope of these larger providers. The UAE TNE market also consists of several smaller or recently established campuses or franchises, such as those of Birmingham City University, University of West London, Bath Spa University and Cardiff Metropolitan University. The UK TNE providers lead in student enrolments over all other international brands, with 38% of the Dubai IBC student market in 2019-2020 (32% of undergraduate and 49% of postgraduate enrolments) (KHDA, 2020). In absolute figures this equates to nearly 9,000 students enrolled in 2020, with year-on-year enrolment growth at around 4%⁴. With the market leaning towards postgraduate provision, the British campuses in Dubai collectively produce an average of 2,450 graduates each year, which is nearly half of graduates in all Dubai IBCs. In the broader picture, the UAE leads globally in terms of overall students studying for an award at an offshore campus of a UK provider (HE Global, 2016).

Table 1: List of most established UK TNE providers in the UAE

<i>Provider</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Year established in the UAE</i>	<i>Scope of degree programmes</i>	<i>Number of graduates between 2016-2020</i>
University of Strathclyde Business School	Dubai	1995	4 taught postgraduate (MSc & MBA)	Not available
University of Bradford	Dubai	1995	MBA	147
Heriot-Watt University	Dubai	2005	37 undergraduate, 39 taught postgraduate, 6 research postgraduate	6497

³ The distinction between a campus and franchise in the UAE context in some cases is minimal and subject to interpretation.

⁴ Rate of growth is prior to the Coronavirus pandemic. Recent reports cite a dramatic spike in enrolments resulting from pandemic-related travel restrictions (Masudi, 2021).

Middlesex University	Dubai	2005	36 undergraduate, 23 taught postgraduate	4011
Manchester Business School	Dubai	2006	MBA and DBA	1005
London Business School	Dubai	2007	MBA	398
Cass Business School	Dubai	2007	MBA, Executive PhD	289
University of Bolton	Ras al Khaimah	2008	8 BTEC Higher National Diploma, 13 undergraduate, 6 taught postgraduate	800-1000*
University of Birmingham	Dubai	2017	16 undergraduate, 15 taught postgraduate	37

* Estimates based on authors' previous research, confirmed with local regulatory agency. All other figures are from the KHDA's Open Data (KHDA, 2020).

1.2 Methodology

This study drew on two primary data collection methods: (1) a quantitative online questionnaire completed by graduates of UK TNE providers in the UAE who had completed their undergraduate or postgraduate degree between 2016 and 2021 at either a UK IBC or a franchised programme with physical presence in the UAE, and (2) qualitative follow-up interviews with a diverse sample of questionnaire participants. The questionnaire was response-dependent, asking between 75-100 questions about graduates' backgrounds and current whereabouts, degree programme experiences, employment situation and related skills, further studies, wellbeing, social values and identities. Participants were given the option to be contacted for a follow-up interview as well as enter a prize draw. The follow-up interviews, lasting on average 35 minutes each, were semi-structured around the same topics, allowing for more detailed responses. The interviews complemented the questionnaire data by helping to explain emerging findings and explore related topics or issues not directly assessed in the questionnaire.

The data were collected through both methods over six weeks between May and July 2021. Our sampling pursued a two-pronged recruitment strategy: 75% of questionnaire survey responses were obtained through collaboration with TNE providers who emailed their graduates on our behalf with a link to the questionnaire; the other 25% of responses were obtained through a paid social media campaign targeting UK TNE graduates on LinkedIn. In total, 217 responses were obtained through these complementary strategies, with 15 deemed invalid (e.g. respondents having not yet graduated, graduated from a non-UK provider, or from a provider outside of our TNE definition) and were removed from the sample. The sample represents around 1.25% of the target population based on the estimated number of graduates of UK IBCs and franchised programmes in the UAE between 2016 and 2021.

Our two-pronged approach offered an affordable and efficient method for obtaining empirically rich data. However, such an approach produces a non-probability sample, as not all TNE graduates had an equal chance of being contacted for participation given that not all TNE providers participated. This is

commonplace in graduate outcomes research as random probability samples are very difficult to achieve. The data are therefore not technically representative of the TNE graduate population, and the exact margins of error are unknown⁵. Nevertheless, the sample obtained is widely in proportion to the TNE market in terms of student enrolments at UK providers, with the exception of one postgraduate business school, which had an outsized representation in the sample. Questionnaire findings should therefore be interpreted with a degree of caution as to their generalisability within the UAE, but our data still provide valuable insights into TNE graduates' experiences and circumstances, with our analyses concentrating on differences that would be statistically significant if the data came from a probability sample.

Follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom or Skype with 13 UK TNE graduates of different nationalities and representing different providers, programmes and degree levels. With the data in this study concentrating on graduates themselves, the responses obtained are self-referential, but can also be interpreted in terms of the wider or collective contributions they potentially make (for example, being gainfully employed, being satisfied with life/wellbeing, and holding a broad range of skills which apply beyond places of work). As previous studies have found (Oketch et al., 2014), the boundaries between the individual and wider impacts are not strongly demarcated, as individual benefits of higher education inevitably spill over.

⁵ In a probability sample with 200 observations, the margin of error would be around 10 percentage points to either side.

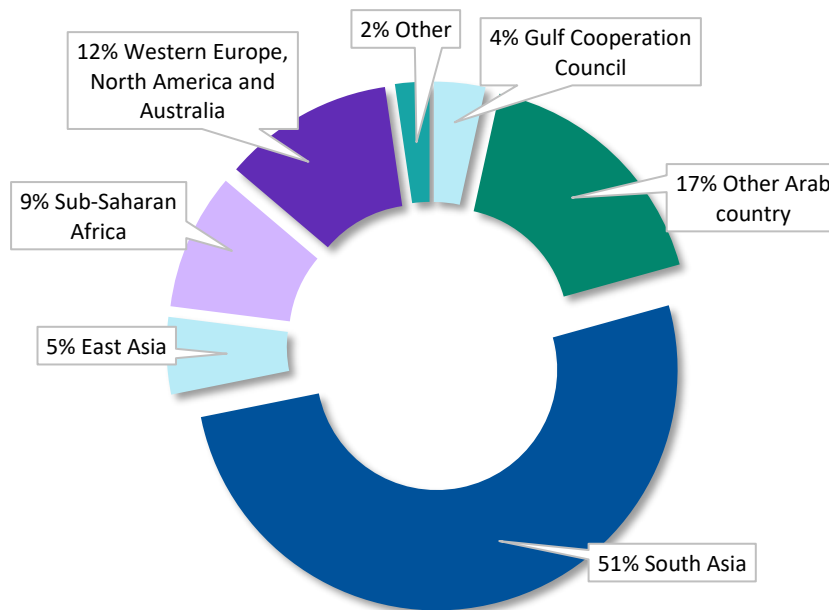
2. TNE student profile in the UAE

The findings of this study begin with a look at the opportunity pathways that UK TNE affords to a diverse student population, largely with different life trajectories and backgrounds from international students in the UK or TNE students in other regions. The unique higher education context of the UAE draws on its highly international non-citizen population and further attracts international students aiming to start or build their careers in the region.

2.1 Participant demographics

The sample of respondents broadly corresponds in proportion with key nationality groups in TNE in the UAE (KHDA, 2017). Nearly half of the respondents were of South Asian nationalities (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan) (47%). The second largest group were nationals of the Middle East and North Africa excluding Gulf Countries (16%), followed by Western Europe, North America and Australia (11%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (9%) (Figure 1). Respondents from Gulf countries, East Asia, and other regions were relatively few, with only one Emirati respondent in the sample. Low rates of participation by Emirati nationals in TNE are common due to most providers' lack of national accreditation and generous public subsidies for citizens to attend national universities.

Figure 1: Questionnaire participants by nationality [n=187]

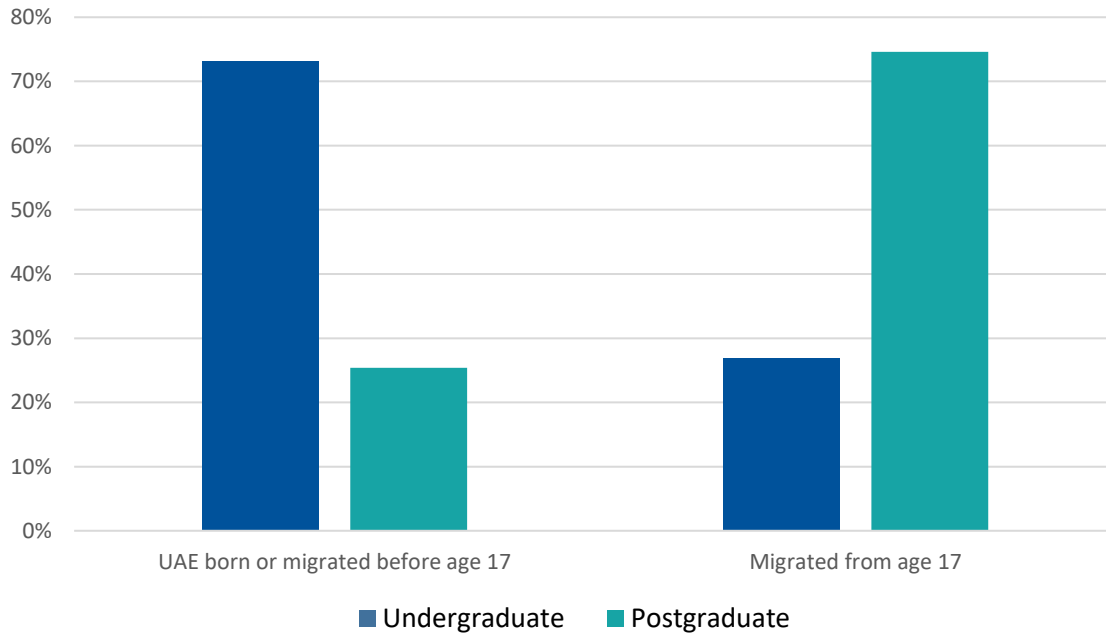


29% of respondents were born in a different country from their nationality, indicating a relatively high degree of international and transnational experience within the sample. 18% were born in UAE. This figure increases to 33% when including those who had arrived before the age of five, and to 42% including arrivals before the age of 17. The study did not ascertain graduates' reasons for emigrating to the UAE, but we assume those arriving as minors came with family and attended at least one year of secondary school in the UAE prior to beginning higher education. The other 60% of the sample arrived in the UAE from the age of 17, with a stronger likelihood of having emigrated to the UAE for work or full-time higher education.

2.2 Modes of study

Participants' relationship to the UAE was consequential to the analysis, as the sample reflected key segmentations between non-citizen residents ("expatriates") and international students, undergraduate and postgraduate, and full-time and part-time modes of study. As Figure 2 indicates, undergraduate level respondents were particularly from expatriate resident backgrounds, while the majority of postgraduate level respondents had arrived in the UAE from the age of 17.

Figure 2: Non-Emirati respondents by age of arrival in the UAE and degree level



Note: Based on a breakdown of 67 undergraduate and 126 postgraduate respondents by migration background.

Overall, two-thirds of respondents had completed a postgraduate qualification through their UK TNE provider. Among the postgraduate respondents, there were seven with postgraduate diplomas and one Doctorate in Business Administration; nearly four out of five of the remaining Masters level graduates were MBA degrees, earned from seven different UK TNE providers. Across both undergraduate and postgraduate respondents, a narrow majority of the sample studied their course part-time. This is a consequence of the weight of postgraduate degrees, particularly MBAs, in the sample, as undergraduate degree respondents were almost exclusively full-time, while 80% of postgraduate respondents were part-time.

This study mode breakdown also closely correlates with respondents' age and gender. The mean age of the overall sample was 32 with 41% of participants identifying as female. When parsed by degree level, however, the sample leans majority female among the undergraduate respondents and is heavily male at the postgraduate level. Within the postgraduate sample, there is a further imbalance in full and part-time study modes. The full-time postgraduate students were on average 29 years old and 70% were female, while part-time postgraduate students were considerably older and only one-quarter were female (Table 2). This might be explained by the greater proportion of males on MBA courses, which tended to be offered on a part-time basis. Another explanation may stem from gendered UAE residency laws, which allow females to be sponsored by their parents or spouses to no maximum age, whereas males at the age of 18 must either be sponsored by an employer or engage in full-time study.

This affords females more flexibility in their work and study options, and may influence how and at what age they undertake postgraduate study.

Table 2: Respondent age and gender by degree level and study mode

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Undergraduate			
Mean Age	24		24
% Female	57		57
N	66	1	67
Postgraduate			
Mean Age	29	37.5	36
% Female	70	25	34
N	27	102	129

Two-thirds of the overall sample studied business management, finance or law. Nearly one-quarter studied a STEM subject (computing, IT, engineering, architecture and construction), while 10% studied other subjects (fashion design, politics, psychology and teacher education). Again, the degree level differed between these groups, with business, management, finance and law being overwhelmingly (78%) postgraduate, and STEM subjects being majority undergraduate (61%).

2.3 Social backgrounds

Most graduates came from traditional higher education backgrounds, which generally refers to students from middle-class households with at least one parent also holding a university degree. In our sample, just over half of respondents had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher, had attended fee-paying private school, and did not experience financial hardship growing up. However, there is a non-negligible proportion of students from less advantaged backgrounds. Nearly one in four was the first in their family to obtain a degree, one in four attended state schools, and 15% experienced financial hardship. We recognise that fee-paying private schools may not indicate affluence in the context of the UAE as it is the default for foreign nationals and fees are commonly paid by employers. Nevertheless, these social background variables correlated closely, with exposure to financial hardship climbing to 45% among first-in-family and former state school students.

It is difficult to characterise or make any general observations about such a broad and diverse sample of respondents. What does stand out in both the questionnaire data and interview responses is the relative degree of choice and international mobility shared by many in the sample, which is reflected in their social backgrounds and their international or transnational lifestyles and pathways. Interviewees for the most part made the choice to study at a UK TNE provider in the UAE over studying in the UK, dispelling any notion that UK TNE was an alternative or second-best option to studying in the UK. For postgraduates, particularly those on part-time courses, UK TNE complemented progression in their UAE-based careers, while for undergraduates, it was commonly framed as an affordable and attractive opportunity to gain an internationally competitive qualification in a more desirable, if not familiar, geographical and cultural setting. Respondents appeared to have a considerable degree of agency with regard to international mobility (discussed further in Section 5) but strongly tied their choice of degree provider to their preference or need to stay in the UAE or the Gulf region.

The UAE context, and the highly dependent relationship it sets up between students and providers, is critical to our understanding of the graduates in this sample as distinctive from international graduates having studied in the UK and graduates in other TNE markets in terms of their agencies, needs,

preferences and the alignments between students, providers, and labour markets. The degree to which findings in this study can be extrapolated is therefore limited in terms of making direct comparisons with findings on students in other contexts; however, as this report concludes, this does not reduce the relevance of its findings to other TNE regions.

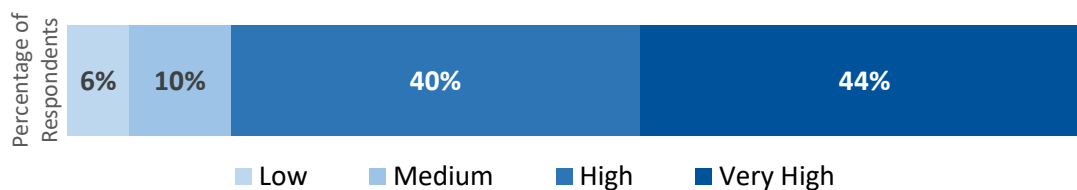
3. Graduates' experiences of TNE and the learning acquired

The questionnaire assessed graduates' experiences of their TNE programmes with an aim to capture the scope of learning opportunities and broad, transferable skills provided through their programmes.

3.1 Satisfaction with degree programme

One component of this measure was found through questions relating to graduates' satisfaction. Specifically, graduates were asked to reflect on their satisfaction with the learning resources, quality of teaching, and academic support on their TNE programmes. These responses were combined and banded to measure overall satisfaction with the teaching and learning aspects of their programmes. In all, 84% of the sample (n=198) expressed high or very high satisfaction with the teaching and learning aspects of their TNE study programme (Figure 3), reflecting a comparable level of satisfaction found among international students studying in the UK (Universities UK International, 2019).

Figure 3: Graduates' satisfaction with the teaching and learning aspects of their TNE course [n=198]

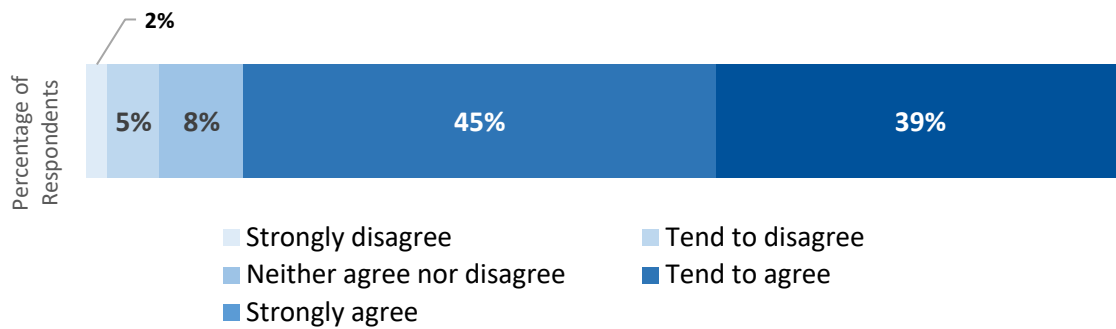


There is no evidence that graduates' various experiences in their programmes differed by individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, migration history, first-in-family, financial situations during childhood) or programme attributes (e.g. modes of study, degree level). This would suggest that providers deliver a similar experience for all their students.

3.2 Skills, competencies, and expertise

Graduates were asked to reflect on the specialist knowledge, competencies and expertise gained through their programmes. 84% of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement that their programmes equipped them with specialist knowledge (Figure 4), with interview responses highlighting both employment-specific knowledge and broad, transferable skills acquired through graduates' degree programmes. The skills identified by graduates, in their own words, included negotiating, being able to talk to people at different levels with different specialities, being more understanding towards people, thinking outside the box, thinking critically, analysing problems, planning, prioritising, meeting deadlines and managing stress, among others.

Figure 4: As a result of my course, I have gained specialist knowledge and expertise [n=202]



3.3 Independent learning and critical thinking

Graduates also identified in their experiences how they benefitted from UK higher education's pedagogical and curricular model of independent learning. This was noted especially by graduates coming from other educational systems accustomed to more didactic teaching, comprehensive coverage of key texts, or assessments requiring mastery of entire subjects. These students were particularly satisfied with a pedagogical approach that they often described as academically less difficult to pass than in other educational models, but also more rewarding, with greater opportunity to explore topics of interest in depth, apply theories and frameworks to these specific topics in their assessed work, and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning. Others also remarked on this aspect from a comparative perspective, pointing out how they felt that they were given more ownership in the learning process and therefore were more invested in the learning outcomes.

"What you study is up to you. The professor teaches you and then how much you take out of it is up to you. And how you want to go ahead and implement it is up to you."

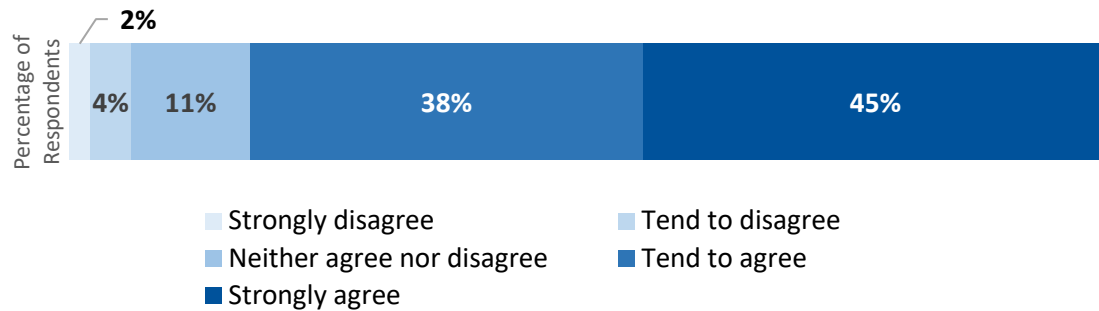
Female Indian national #1, undergraduate

"They all have their perks, right, but the UK system really pushes you out of your comfort zone, like critical thinking, analysis. [In the US system] it's easy come, easy go. You just have to master it and that's it. But in the UK system ... it's more challenging, more critical thinking, more hands off. They let you off on a lot of independent study, but in that independent study you're doing so much more."

Female Ugandan national, undergraduate

This sentiment was also reflected in questionnaire responses, where participants were asked whether their enthusiasm for further learning had increased as a result of their degree programme, to which 83% agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 5).

Figure 5: As a result of my course, my enthusiasm for further learning increased [n=201]



3.4 Intercultural communication and understanding

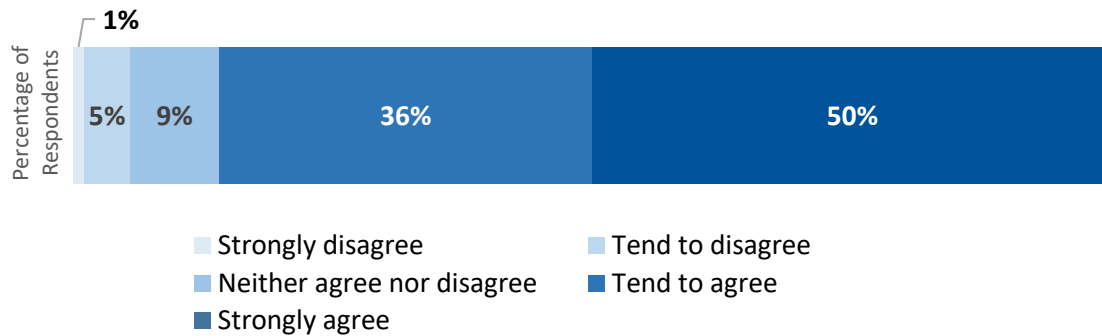
Another conclusive finding from both the questionnaire and the interviews was the opportunities UK TNE provides for students to interact with and learn from diverse student cohorts. UK TNE providers in the UAE enrol students and recruit staff across a wide range of nationalities, producing valuable opportunities for students to develop intercultural communication skills. This diversity can be contrasted with other systems of education in the UAE, including the entire secondary school landscape (segmented by various international curricula), the Emirati national universities, and Indian and Pakistani branch campuses (attended mainly by respective nationals). The diversity of students and staff is shared at other Anglophone Western TNE providers as well as locally rooted universities modelled on Anglo-American institutions (e.g. the American University of Sharjah, the British University in Dubai).

Figure 6: Engagement with diversity

As a result of my course, I was able to meet people from diverse cultural backgrounds. [n=201]



As a result of my course, I have learned to collaborate in culturally diverse groups. [n=200]



Questionnaire respondents strongly felt that their degree programmes provided opportunities to meet and collaborate with culturally diverse or international peers (Figure 6). The intercultural communication and other soft skills developed through these interactions were unanimously touched upon by the interview respondents, who highlighted this feature of their learning experience and how it impacted them. Some respondents drew connections between classroom encounters with diverse individuals and employable skills developed. For one graduate pursuing a career in psychological counselling, her dialogues with the students and staff in her degree programme led to skills in holding culturally sensitive conversations, articulating herself clearly, practising self-awareness and empathy, and other “people skills”. Several others similarly noted that these skills developed in the classroom had implications for their careers in multinational companies. Some respondents focussed more on the social impact of their encounters with diversity, including skills relating to tolerance and appreciating different ways of living.

“I became more open to a lot of different ideologies, beliefs, the way that people do things. I've been exposed to more things because we were a diverse group of people, and my views on a lot of things changed: relationships, marriage, the way people look, and people's outlook on life.”

Male Bahraini national, postgraduate

“My class was so diverse. We had someone from the UK, India, Pakistan, everywhere. It was like a little world map in class, so that alone is enough experience to learn about people's cultures... Also the professors that teach: Canadian, UK, India, the same thing. So my ability to relate to people and have proper, culturally sensitive conversations definitely started off in my study in the UAE and at [TNE provider]. Skill-wise I think I'm more articulate and I think it all begins with self-awareness, because for me that programme was a self-awareness spark right?”

Female Ugandan national, undergraduate

Respondents keenly pointed out, however, that it was not solely their TNE provider nor the degree programme that created intercultural opportunities, but rather that fact that the provider was located in a highly diverse space (UAE, or Dubai specifically) and drew its diversity from the context it sat within. Some saw the diversity of their programme strictly as a byproduct of its operational context, contending that in their prior experiences in the UK the university student composition was more culturally and ethnically homogeneous; others felt the global cachet of UK higher education drew wider participation from across nationalities and therefore facilitated intercultural socialisation that in many spaces in the UAE does not happen to the same degree. Respondents referenced specific programmatic elements which facilitated these outcomes, such as collaborative group work and “international day” events where students showcased their ethnic or national traditions for classmates.

When asked how these outcomes had been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic, one highlighted how online engagement with diverse cohorts, particularly through certain telecommunications apps, enhanced their learning of intercultural skills and knowledge. They felt more at ease to share their views and content about their lives, especially their experiences of the pandemic in their home countries, thereby building closer and enduring social relationships with classmates.

4. Employability and labour market outcomes

One of the more conclusive findings of this study is the substantive impact of UK TNE on graduate employability and labour market outcomes. This relationship is not unique to the UK TNE providers, as higher education in the UAE is closely linked to the labour market, widely functioning as a source of professional training and career progression through applied, vocational courses (Juusola & Alajoutsijärvi, 2019). The employment gains made by the graduates in this study, however, are evident, with respondents drawing links between their degree programme experiences and their employable skills and competences, professional development, and their career progressions. The programmes offered by UK TNE providers appear to create strong matches between graduate skillsets and labour market demand for specialist skills and qualifications. Some of this may be attributable to the market-responsiveness of TNE in the UAE, with qualifications offered by providers corresponding to the local industry landscape.

4.1 Work and employment

Nearly 80% of the graduates in our sample reported being employed at the time of their participation in the questionnaire, with nearly 9 out of 10 in this group employed on a full-time basis. Another 5% were pursuing further studies on a full-time basis and were not in work. Of the remaining 15% who were neither in work nor education or training, nine out of 10 respondents were looking for new paid work in the four weeks prior to the questionnaire, indicating a strong intention to work. The unemployed graduates in our sample looking for work graduated across a range of years, rather than concentrating among more recent (2020/2021) cohorts. This group was also evenly split between undergraduate and postgraduate degree-holders.

In terms of job security, the picture is more nuanced, as 70% reported being on a permanent employment contract. However, two-thirds of these respondents were non-nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) working in a GCC country, primarily the UAE. Due to restrictive labour laws in GCC countries, non-GCC nationals working in the Gulf region are generally hired on time-limited renewable contracts for one to three years at a time, with their employers sponsoring their residency visa. This figure therefore needs to be interpreted cautiously and assumed that a large number of respondents are employed on conditions resembling fixed-term contracts (14% of those reporting as employed, nearly all also non-GCC nationals working in the GCC). One in 10 working respondents were in more precarious forms of employment, including contracts lasting less than one year, zero-hours contracts, temping, and internships or training schemes.

4.2 Job satisfaction and skills utilisation

The questionnaire also assessed job satisfaction, a subjective assessment of job quality against the individual expectation of what job respondents might expect. About 60% expressed a high level of satisfaction with their job. Job satisfaction links closely to the extent to which employees feel that their qualifications and skills are fully utilised (Green & Henseke, 2016a). 70% of employed respondents reported being in positions either where their degree was a formal requirement (either by level or subject) or it was seen to give them a decisive advantage in getting the job, which is consistent with overall good skills utilisation. More than 80% reported that they made use of most of their skills, knowledge, and competencies in their jobs.

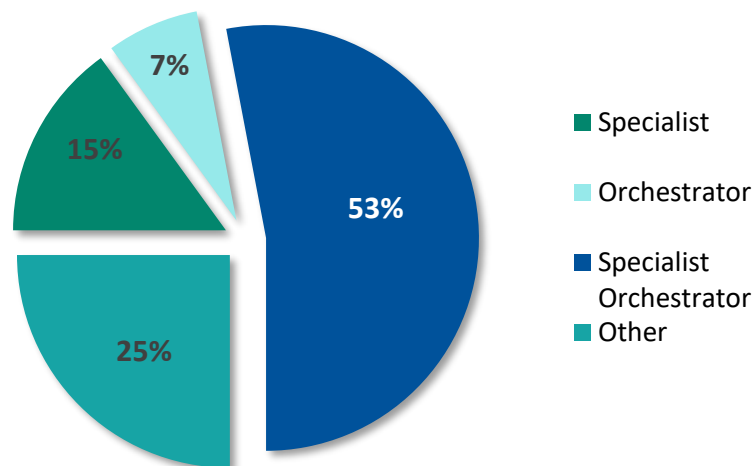
75% of respondents who reported that their degree was not required had earned MBA degrees. This finding aligns with the high number of part-time and older graduates in the sample who were already

employed and undertook an MBA for further professional growth or promotion within their organisations. Interviews with several MBA graduates confirmed this and found that in some cases their MBA studies were paid by their employers as an investment in staff development. However, the method of financing across the wider sample was not assessed.

Higher education is believed to contribute to individuals' skills and competences and thereby widen graduates' capability to engage in contemporary labour markets. These skills and competences can be parsed into three types of knowledge clusters: communication expertise, specialist expertise and orchestration expertise (Elias & Purcell, 2013). Particularly, the latter two are related to the competencies acquired through higher education and its aftermath (Green & Henseke, 2016b). *Specialist expertise* is involved in tasks that require the activation of detailed knowledge to perform in knowledge-intensive occupations. *Orchestration expertise* is required for activities such as planning and co-ordinating activities, bringing together knowledge holders or making decisions based on the evidence available. Jobs that require a combination of specialist and orchestration expertise have especially increased in importance in current labour markets (Deming, 2017).

Our survey asked respondents to indicate how frequently they carry out tasks related to either of these types of expertise. Based on the responses, we grouped jobs into three broad occupational types: specialists, orchestrators, and specialist orchestrators (a combination of the two). Jobs falling outside these types were classified as Other. Just over half of graduates in the sample worked in specialist orchestrator jobs that combined the use of specialist expertise with the need to co-ordinate with knowledge holders and plan the activities of others (Figure 7). About 15% worked in specialist occupations, 7% were active as orchestrators, while the remaining quarter worked in other jobs that might not have drawn as much on graduate capabilities as they could have.

Figure 7: Occupations and skills use [n=156]



Consistent with the capability enhancing role of UK TNE, only a minority of graduates worked outside of highly skilled jobs. Those that did might not have done so due to a lack of capabilities, as indicated by their lower skills utilisation, lower job satisfaction, and higher levels of graduate underemployment.

4.3 Professional and career development opportunities

Given the close association of higher education in the UAE with professional training, this study also assessed the role of professional and career development opportunities in producing labour market outcomes. UK providers in the UAE, in line with market-based providers across the UAE higher education landscape, provide students with a range of general and industry-specific professional development activities including mentoring and careers advice, enterprise competitions, internships, workplace visits, careers seminars or career days, and CV and interview workshops, among other activities. The scope of these activities varies by provider, with some components formally structured into degree programmes, and others provided on a voluntary basis. One interview respondent recalled his degree programme's integrated module on professional issues within his field, noting the specific skills developed and norms of the profession taught in preparation for the job market.

“I became more open to a lot of different ideologies, beliefs, the way that people do things. I've been exposed to more things because we were a diverse group of people, and my views on a lot of things changed: relationships, marriage, the way people look, and people's outlook on life.”

Male Bahraini national, postgraduate

Other respondents touched on the voluntary nature of the professional development offerings on their course. As a result, some felt that their decision to participate was what separated them from peers having less success in the job market after completing their programme.

“We had a lot of career days... where we would literally have companies coming and looking for interns... I got my first internship on my second year of [degree programme], and I never stopped working since then... Our lecturers were actually quite happy with working students, so they were actually pushing us... They would introduce us, they helped us a lot with the CV workshops as well, so we had a lot of programmes. If you wanted to succeed... I think there were a lot of opportunities to get employed very quickly during or after your degree.”

Female French national, undergraduate

Our study assessed graduates' involvement in each of these activities, clustered into two types of professional development (Table 3). Nearly all respondents recalled participating in at least one career support event in their degree programme, while three-quarters of respondents were exposed to two or more career support events. Close to two-thirds of respondents had engaged in at least one work

experience activity during their programme, with four in 10 having engaged in two or more work experience activities.

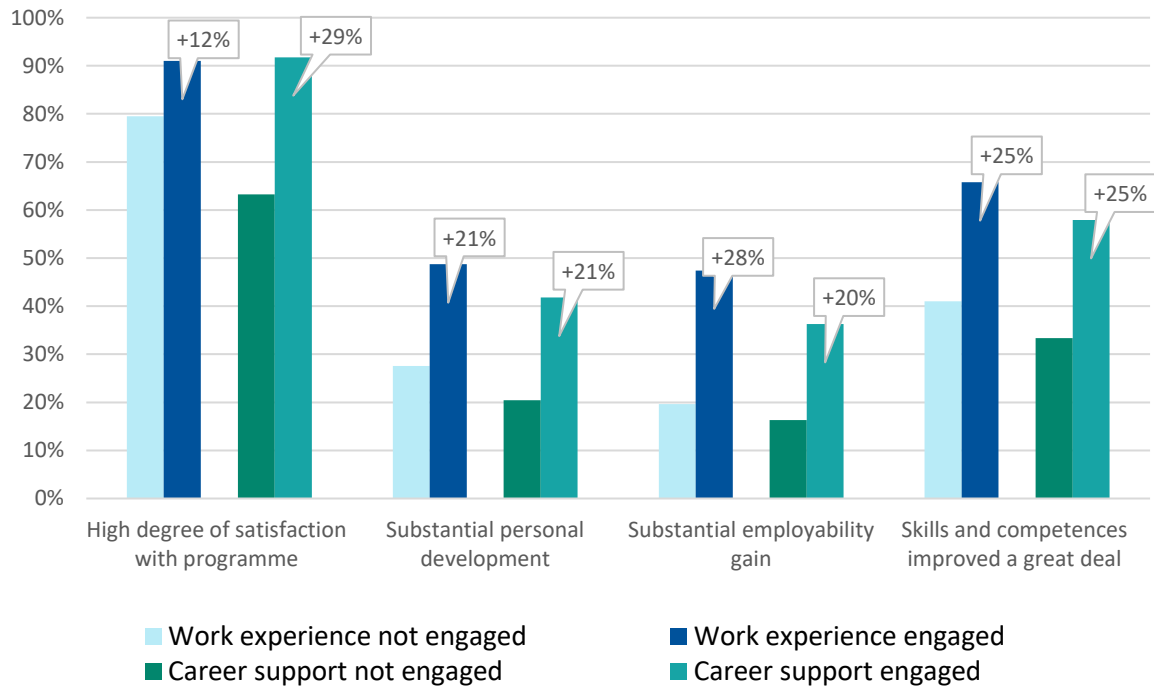
Table 3: Professional development activities and engagement [n=198]

Career support	Career advice, career seminars, career days (including visits by professionals or employers), CV workshops, interview preparation workshops	Engaged on one occasion: 63% Engaged on more than one occasion: 40%
Work experience	Internships, mentorship or job shadowing, workplace visits, enterprise competitions	Engaged on one occasion: 91% Engaged on more than one occasion: 75%

The impact of these professional development opportunities on graduates' employability is considerable. The likelihood for substantial employability gains rose with graduates' exposure to career support and work experience activities. The likelihood of graduate-level employment in positions requiring degrees in specific fields was found to be significantly higher for graduates who engaged specifically in work experience activities during their TNE programme. Graduates who participated in one work experience activity were 16% more likely to be in graduate-level employment; this figure increases to 20% for graduates who participated in more than one activity.

Participation in professional development opportunities (both career support and work experiences) provided by respondents' universities also correlated with graduates' assessment of their personal development (discussed further in section 6 below) over and above the impact of formal teaching, their satisfaction with their degree programmes, and increases to their skills and competences (shown in Figure 8).

Figure 8: Role of work experience and career support opportunities in programme satisfaction, personal development, employability gain, and skills and competences gain



Graduates were nearly 30% more likely to be highly satisfied with their programme if they participated in career support activities on more than one occasion. In this regard, direct career support organised by the provider mattered more for graduates' satisfaction than work experience placements. The interview responses from highly satisfied graduates leaned more towards work placement opportunities, particularly internships leading to employment after graduation, although these responses were more indicative of the impact of repeat exposures to professional development activities, as they often cited multiple activities leading to their positive employment outcomes.

The UK TNE providers reflected in this study demonstrate a substantive but not exceptionally high impact on graduates' sense of employability by transforming their skills and knowledge, contributing to their personal development and providing professional development opportunities. As shown in Figure 9, just over half of respondents felt that they improved their career prospects with employers in the UAE and abroad. However, a non-negligible one in four respondents also felt that they were no more employable after graduating, which is significant given the close relationship between higher education and employment outcomes generally and in the UAE in particular. When parsed by degree level, undergraduate 'tend to agree' and 'strongly agree' responses were 10% lower than postgraduates, and 'strongly disagree' and 'tend to disagree' nearly three times that of postgraduates, suggesting a shared pessimistic outlook on the leverage of undergraduate degrees in the current labour market compared to postgraduate degrees.

Figure 9: Improvement in career prospects resulting from degree programme*My career prospects with employers in the UAE improved [n=201]**My career prospects with employers internationally improved [n=199]*

- Strongly disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to agree
- Strongly agree

Interview responses provided a more nuanced picture, however, particularly as respondents drew repeat comparison with the scope of opportunities afforded by other non-UK TNE providers in the UAE and the comparative advantage their graduates had in the labour market. One undergraduate respondent noted how a popular Indian branch campus competitor formally required its students to participate in summer internships with the multinational companies it had established partnerships with, followed in the final year with career day visits where the same companies conducted job interviews with its students on campus (a practice also noted in Masudi, 2021). The respondent felt that her peers who had chosen this provider were consequently in better paying corporate jobs than herself or her UK TNE classmates. A similar comment was made by another undergraduate respondent who felt that the internship opportunities offered by her campus were fewer than those offered at the university's home campus. A third respondent from a different provider was also critical of the limited support she felt she received through her provider's career services office as well as the professional development opportunities provided: "In terms of connecting with companies in the UAE and having career fairs, I'd say it was a very basic level that they went to" [Female Indian national #2, undergraduate].

While interview respondents critically qualified the scope and depth of career support they received, there was consensus that opportunities in their degree programmes were voluntary yet instrumental to gaining a foothold in their chosen industries after graduating. These respondents placed their work experiences above their degree qualification or the formal instruction received when asked which component had the greatest impact on their employability; however, their narratives generally pointed to a degree of complementarity between these components where they identified particular skillsets or specialist knowledge from their course which they applied in their work experiences.

“I did not land my job because of my degree. I landed my job because of my teachers or the professors. They put me in touch for an internship and while I did that I got hired, full time. It was not my degree.. like, I did not even have to show my degree until much later when they wanted to process my visa.”

Female Indian national #1, undergraduate

5. International mobility

The study assessed the extent to which UK TNE programmes impacted graduates' international mobility, which we have framed as the degree of strategic agency to circulate across borders for work or study purposes. The UAE is a somewhat exceptional context for assessing international mobility, given the diverse, overwhelmingly non-citizen majority, who have either migrated for work or study, or circulate between the UAE and their countries of citizenship at various points in their lives. International mobility could be understood in this context as inverted, with TNE and other degree providers enhancing residents' ability to stay in the UAE rather than migrate to another destination (Rensimer, 2021). Nevertheless, the graduates in this study were found to already reflect a considerable degree of international mobility by virtue of their life trajectories, including family migration history and international work; some graduates also exemplified transnationality, having changed their citizenship since birth. In this regard, UK degree qualifications offered through TNE providers appear to complement existing mobilities and international aspirations. This study is unable to conclude whether UK degrees earned through TNE providers in fact enhance graduates' international mobility.

5.1 Graduates' current location

Among the 42% of respondents who stated that they were born in the UAE or arrived with family up to the age of 16, four out of five were still in the UAE at the time of this study. Of the remaining 58% who arrived in the UAE at the age of 17 or older, only three out of five were still in the UAE. This could reflect a difference in these two groups' attachment to the UAE, their sense of belonging, and the scope of their social networks there; it could equally be a reflection of the latter group's independence and agency, as most would have arrived in the UAE on a visa to either study full-time or work for an employer. The older respondents who studied on part-time MBA courses were especially mobile and chose their degree programme on this basis. Two interview respondents from the same global MBA course noted how they were constantly travelling in their work and described their multi-sited MBA programme as flexible and tailored to their travel needs.

As one indication of onward mobility, 15% of the respondents in the sample who left the UAE now reside, work or study in a third country (neither the UAE nor their country of citizenship); however, due to sampling margins we could not make any robust inferences on the directionality of their onward mobility (i.e. to specific countries). We speculate, however, that overall international mobility outcomes were suppressed at the time of sampling due to travel restrictions imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic. This was reflected in the interview data, where respondents discussed making career or study choices within the contexts in which they were located and facing difficulties when

“The timing for the classes and the way that the classes work fit exactly my need because I used to do a lot of travel, before Covid I mean. Every month I'm somewhere. But at least when they sent us the schedule every term I knew I needed to be in Dubai for that specific week... so that would make my life easier to plan... It fit my business needs, so this is how I chose [TNE provider].”

Male Irish national, postgraduate

setting their sights on international opportunities. The impact of this immobility resulting from the pandemic can be seen in the surging enrolment rates at TNE providers in the UAE, where residents are choosing local study options rather than risking international travel (Masudi, 2021).

5.2 Inter-campus transfer

The study also considered respondents' participation in opportunities to transfer to the UK home campus for any amount of time during the course of their studies. Overall, less than one quarter of respondents took opportunities to study in the UK during their programme. Of the respondents who did [n=48], nine out of 10 were studying at the postgraduate level and nearly all exceeded the mean age of the overall sample. This finding reflects a common experience with UK TNE providers in the UAE, with nearly all offering transfer opportunities to undergraduate and postgraduate students; undergraduate participation in these opportunities, however, is generally quite low (Rensimer, 2019). Only one of the interview participants took advantage of this option as part of his part-time MBA course, citing the intercultural exposure and international networks he developed as a result. Study in the UK during the TNE programme, however, did not appear to have an impact on graduates' employability or wider mobility.

“I started in Dubai, but I travelled to three different cities. I travelled to Manchester twice and Hong Kong and Singapore. I attended workshops there which helped me a lot to interact with different cultures, different nationalities, which helped me a lot to see the beauty of the MBA. The MBA is actually about interaction, more [than] about knowledge, so the interaction that I experienced there was really very, very efficient. I liked it.”

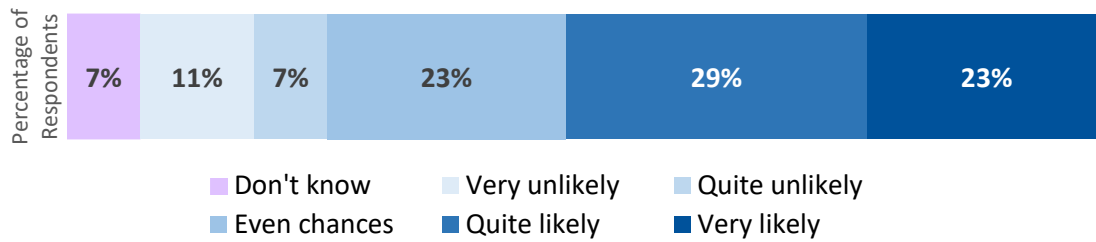
**Male Egyptian national,
postgraduate**

5.3 Future plans

Despite the limited evidence of enacted mobility in the sample, there was relatively stronger evidence of a relationship between the choice of a UK TNE degree programme and graduates' internationally mobile aspirations. Our analysis is unable to determine to what effect degree programmes informed these aspirations, but there were clear signs of complementarity between respondents' future plans and what they saw as an optimally suited degree for conversion across international borders. In all, 52% of graduates stated that they were likely or very likely to do business or seek work in another country (excluding the UAE, UK and their country of citizenship) in the next five years (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Graduates' international employment aspirations

What are the chances that you will do business or seek work in another country (excluding UAE, UK and country of citizenship)? [n=202]



Interview respondents qualified these plans with specific countries they had set sights on migrating to, with an understanding that their UK degree would be seen more favourably by overseas employers or immigration authorities than degrees from a non-Western TNE provider. As one interviewee described,

“We value how employers think about those universities ... It's also part of the consideration like [TNE provider] is a British university and we are planning to migrate in the future or soon, like in the next two years, leave Dubai and then move to Australia or Canada, so we thought that that's more prominent in there, it's more -- what's the word? It's more recognised than other universities.”

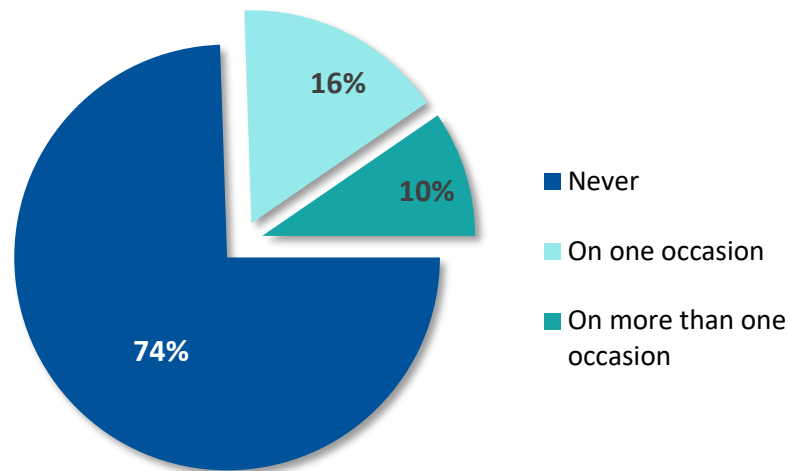
Female Philippines national, postgraduate

The range of comparisons between international higher education options and the perceived international cachet of their degrees varied by respondent, but the notion that UK degrees were generally more recognised and would therefore make degree holders more effective was a consistent finding among the respondents who aspired to emigrate.

5.4 Degree recognition

One finding closely tied to international mobility was graduates' accounts of experiencing issues having their degree recognised by various agencies in or outside of the UAE. One in four questionnaire respondents – a full 26% - reported that they had experienced issues with degree recognition on at least one occasion. Nearly one in 10 in the sample experienced issues on more than one occasion. The distribution of respondents reporting having experienced issues was balanced across the sample, affecting both undergraduate and postgraduate degree-holders across any of the five largest UK TNE providers in the UAE (Figure 11). While widespread, there was no indication that any one provider had a disproportionate number of graduates experiencing issues with their degrees.

Figure 11: Experience of degree recognition issues [n=188]



Based on the general wording of this question, the issue could have been with an employer, university, or government entity, in the UAE or internationally. The UAE also has a relatively high number of degree providers and graduates in relation to its overall size; with the UAE's highly international, mobile population, degrees are more likely to be applied in more contexts than those from comparable TNE markets with less-mobile populations, and potentially encountering more recognition incidents as a result. We speculate that most of these incidents were within the UAE, where TNE and UAE national accreditation sit in tension due to the exemptions to accreditation requirements for providers operating within academic zones, as discussed previously. Most of these experiences would therefore pertain to seeking employment in the UAE public sector or further study at Emirati universities.

Two interview respondents experienced recognition issues with their degree when applying for their next degree course at Emirati universities. Both were informed by admissions staff at their intended universities that they were not eligible for admission because their previous degrees from UK TNE providers were not nationally accredited in the UAE. Both expressed strong sentiments of disappointment and frustration that their degrees were legally recognised everywhere around the world except the country where the degrees were earned and where they both had planned to continue their studies. One of these respondents consequently left the UAE to study the next degree level in the US, while

“It's something I did not consider at all because I had graduated from [Emirati university], and it did not occur to me to check the accreditation of the university. I just thought all universities are accredited in the UAE. That was a major shock after I received my grades [from UK TNE provider]. I didn't even know until I applied to [another Emirati university] for a PhD program. A friend of mine as well, we both applied and we were both shocked. Just thinking about it right now, it was a very difficult time.”

**Male Bahraini national,
postgraduate**

the other decided to repeat a taught postgraduate degree at a nationally accredited Emirati university in order to progress towards a PhD in the UAE. In both cases, the issue appears to be how well graduates understood the potential consequences for their post-graduation plans. Accreditation has long been a contentious issue for TNE providers in the UAE, but the full scope of its impact on graduates is still a question requiring close attention.

6. Influence of TNE on identities and personal lives

The last aspect of impact this study assessed was the influence of graduates' degree programmes on their identities and personal lives, finding that overall strong gains were made in measures of their wellbeing and personal development.

6.1 Personal development

Graduates' personal development was measured through an exploratory factor analysis of multiple questions asking the extent to which their degree programme impacted their interpersonal and intercultural skills, self-worth and confidence, and sense of empowerment or ability to tackle both personal and global problems. The analysis found that 37% of graduates [n=198] felt that their UKTNE course led to a high level of personal development (averaging seven or above out of 10 across eight questions). At the same time, nearly 15% felt that their course led to little to no personal development (an average of less than five across the same questions).

Interview respondents identified components or dynamics of their course where these attributes developed and how they specifically impacted their lives. Many of these were individual skills with applications in the labour market (as covered in Sections 3 and 4 above), but there were also attributes with non-monetary personal and social benefit. Most interview respondents expressed confidence in their ability to accomplish their personal goals as a direct result of completing their degree, producing an original application of knowledge in their course (e.g. a research project with a local, social impact), and having their accomplishments recognised in their career progression (e.g. getting hired or promoted). Several also developed aspirations to continue their academic progression to the doctoral level with the aim to split their work between their current careers and academic teaching or research. Their rationale for this was generally to pass the opportunity on to others to learn the same skills or specialist knowledge and achieve similar success in their careers.

“Business-wise, I'm still in the same position. But I feel I am more confident... [My MBA] was the step I had to take first to make it easier to grow. So, yeah definitely it has an impact. Even in personal-wise it's changed mindsets somehow... because it gives you that confidence and you will be happier with what you have at the moment because you think more clearly.”

Male Irish national, postgraduate

6.2 Life satisfaction and wellbeing

These personal attributes which respondents described, particularly their confidence in their abilities, appear to be reflected in other measures of individual wellbeing also assessed in this study, including their life satisfaction, financial health and outlook for the future. Life satisfaction, which refers “to subjective wellbeing and constitutes a cognitive, overall judgement” (van der Lippe, 2014, p. 5654), draws on the comparison of an individual's current circumstances with expectations of what one deems appropriate. This is synonymous with “happiness” or “subjective wellbeing”. The mean life satisfaction score in the sample was 7.1 out of 10, which can be considered relatively high taking into account the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic (Figure 12). For comparison, the average life satisfaction score in the UK population was 6.9 in the second half of April 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021); no 2021 data for the UAE population could be found to benchmark graduates against.

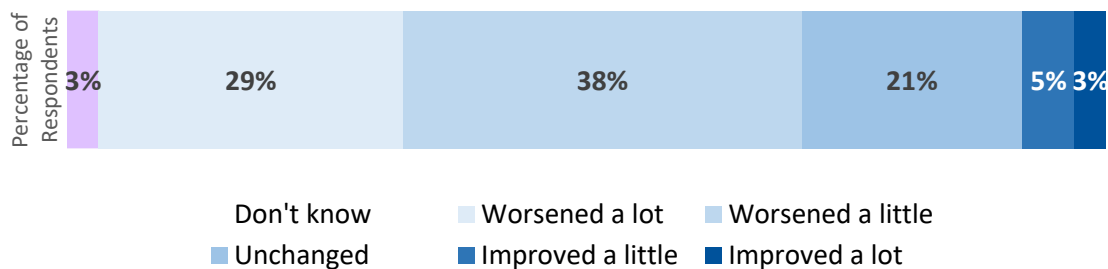
Figure 12: Measures of individual wellbeing [n=198]



Nearly two out of three in the sample felt that they were doing well financially (choosing “living comfortably” or “doing alright”), and just over half were optimistic that their financial situation will improve further over the next year (Figure 13). Those who indicated higher employability gains and overall greater skills improvements from their TNE programme were likely to be in good financial health. There was a difference of 24 points among the respondents doing well financially between those whose skills improved a great deal as a result of their programme and those whose skills did not improve as much. Graduates who indicated that they were doing alright financially were also more optimistic about their future than graduates who were getting by or struggling financially.

Figure 13: Perceived impact of Coronavirus pandemic on graduates' careers

To what extent, if at all, do you think your career prospects have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic? [n=202]



Graduates' experiences of the Coronavirus pandemic also tie into these findings on individual wellbeing and personal development attributes. All of the measures shown in Figure 12 are expected to be depressed as a result of the economic fallout and social restrictions from the pandemic. A direct assessment of this sentiment found that career prospects were believed to have worsened to some degree for two out of three respondents (Figure 12). Responses to this question correlated closely with their employment status. Our sample suggests that respondents who felt their employability developed substantially during their TNE programme were less likely to feel that Covid worsened their career prospects. There is no similar relationship with personal development, however.

Interview responses balanced this finding, with a surprising number of positive career experiences of the pandemic. Two-thirds of the interview respondents reported changing jobs in the middle of 2020, being promoted, or taking the opportunity to start new career directions, start a business, or another degree programme. The experiences are too varied to draw connections between, but in each of their accounts was a common tenor of cautious optimism coupled with confidence in their own abilities to navigate through difficult times.

“Initially I graduated as a BSc in Interior Design, and I have been working in interior design, consulting firms, or building design and construction companies. Throughout those experience over the years, I discovered that I like construction management in particular, so that's why I pursued the degree. During the times of the pandemic where business is slow, there's not many projects so I took advantage of the downtime to get my degree.”

Female Philippines national, postgraduate

“[My company] was taking lots of precautions and had lots of cost mitigation plans going on... So for that they had this cost mitigation plan of taking services and giving them to in-house teams... The general manager appointed me to lead the team... so that was a big scary thing that happened with me in the Covid time, but because of that, everyone saw what I am capable of, and they could see that even if they give me whatever comes, I will be able to lead it and get good results out of it. So that helped me in my professional life, because it showed all the people in higher positions that yes, I am capable of doing something... So [Covid] was a bad thing, then it did something good... it made me more visible to everyone.”

Female Pakistani national, undergraduate

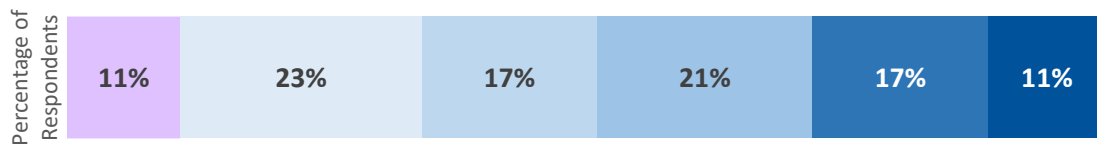
6.3 Relationship to the UK

One further aspect of graduates' identity explored in this study is their relationship to the UK, assessed through both their future engagements with the UK and their general feelings toward it. It is difficult to infer from these measures the impact their UK TNE programme specifically made to their plans or feelings, especially as respondents may also have attended British curriculum secondary schools or established professional or social relationships with the UK prior to their course. Nevertheless, the findings do speak to the potential impact of graduates' identities on the UK and the international business or transnational networks it indirectly benefits from.

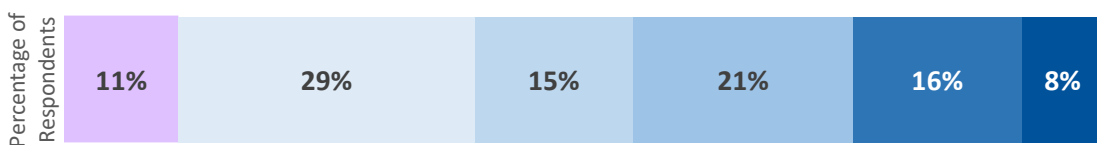
Only 4% of the sample [n=202], having neither studied nor worked in the UK prior to their TNE degree course, reported having worked in a paid capacity in the UK after their course. Similarly, 6% of the sample reported having studied in the UK after their course. The majority of these responses are from the same individuals, suggesting that they worked while studying in the UK or for a period of time thereafter. These figures contrast slightly with graduates' projected future relationships with the UK (Figure 14), where one in four expected to do business, seek work, or study in the UK in the next five years. Respondents were more likely to develop professional links with UK organisations, and most expected to visit the UK for holidays. The sample size was not large enough to draw robust inferences about these sentiments by graduates' degree subject or level. However, in comparison with analogous findings among former international students who studied in the UK (Universities UK International, 2019), responses from the TNE graduates in this study are much lower across each of these measures, notwithstanding slight methodological differences between the studies.

Figure 14: Graduates' projected relationships with the UK

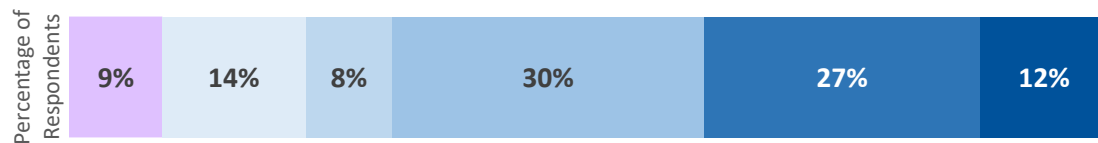
What are the chances that you will do business or seek work in the UK in the next 5 years? [n=202]



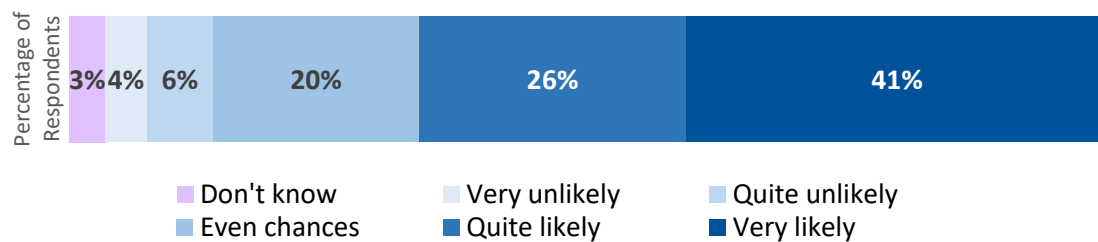
What are the chances that you will study or train in the UK in the next 5 years? [n=202]



What are the chances that you will develop professional links with UK organisations in the next 5 years? [n=202]



What are the chances that you will visit the UK for holiday or leisure in the next 5 years? [n=202]



The mean score to the question of graduates' emotional attachment to the UK was 5.6 out of 10. This ambivalence was qualified to a small degree by interview respondents who drew sharp distinctions between, on the one hand, the UK as a collective signifier of its national culture and institutions, and on the other, its educational institutions. While some respondents also expressed strong cultural affinities for British products, media, or politics, most articulated their relationship with the UK and their attachment to it exclusively through its educational institutions. By extension, their choice of UK TNE was informed by their preference or attachment to the UK higher education brand among a range of international options available to them in the UAE. These responses intersected with other findings of this study, including the desirability of Dubai as a study destination and respondents' international mobility. This particular aspect of graduate identity is incidental. While it may not point strongly to future trade and investment relationships with the UK, it does not reflect poorly on UK TNE nor impact it, considering the overall strong satisfaction and learning outcomes reported by the graduates in this sample.

"I adore UK and London, and you know I love to go there. Actually after I finished my MBA I got the visa for 10 years, so I want to go every year but, due to the Covid I'm not able to use it so far."

**Male Egyptian national,
postgraduate**

7. Conclusion

This study contributes novel insights to our hitherto limited evidence base of graduate outcomes in TNE, examining the alignments between TNE students, UAE-based providers, and the labour markets and societies to which graduates contribute and make wider impacts. While its findings are novel, substantive and identify various internal and systemic challenges for UK TNE, the current study can serve as a stepping stone to further academic, policy and practice-based research on graduate outcomes in TNE. The contextual nature of this field demands that a broad, exploratory evidence base on graduate outcomes is charted in other major TNE concentrations and by types of provision, with the longer-term aim of integrating findings across cases to reach greater degrees of abstraction and comparison. To this end, this study makes an important, initial contribution and provides the basis for further inquiry.

7.1 Reflecting on research challenges

The study also provided valuable opportunities to explore and reflect on the challenges in conducting research on TNE graduate outcomes, both generally and in the context of the UAE. The condensed timeframe of the study and timing of data collection likely depressed response rates, and conducting research of this nature during a global pandemic produced results which must be interpreted through this historical moment and its attendant social and economic challenges. Another challenge resulting from the timing of this research relates to graduate outcomes data collection efforts already practised by individual TNE providers and regulatory agencies. Engagements with each provider and regulator in the process of this research shed light on existing practices, which varied in rigour and scope. Many of these efforts similarly took place during the summer period, leading to clashing survey schedules and presumably 'survey fatigue' on the part of respondents. This was a shared concern among providers contacted by the research team, especially where over-surveying might impact response rates on higher stakes exercises such as the Dubai KHDA's graduate satisfaction survey taking place each summer. One provider also expressed concern that the findings of such research, conducted during the Coronavirus pandemic, would adversely reflect on the reputation of providers or the UK TNE brand in the UAE.

Reflecting on this study's implementation and challenges also provides insights for the feasibility of further research on graduate outcomes in TNE. On a logistical matter, the study team had mixed success reaching campuses in the UAE, despite exhausting various avenues (e.g. careers and alumni teams, contacts within senior management, and general enquiries). In some cases where contact was made with home campuses, UK-based staff expressed both interest in the study and surprise that their offshore branches were relatively guarded or hesitant to participate, creating an unexpected reflective moment for us and the home campus staff as to the different operational context and considerations that TNE operates within.

On the broader methodological challenges, it is pertinent to highlight here the difficulties generally faced in researching graduate outcomes. Graduates are no longer at their institutions, and can therefore be hard to reach, increasing with each year from the point of graduation. It is also very difficult to isolate the effect of higher education from the many other influences on their subsequent careers and lives. Most crucially for outcomes research is the challenge of assessing the counterfactuals, or what graduates *are able to do* even if they have not actually done it, which also depends on how long after completing their course graduates are being surveyed. In our efforts to capture graduates' capabilities (borrowing from Sen, 1999) in order to understand the impact of higher education, we stress the importance of mixed-methods research strategies, drawing on quantitative data to chart the

broad trends in outcomes, and in-depth qualitative research to understand the broader impacts on graduates' lives in their present state and in their futures.

7.2 Key implications for further research

Further to the aim of reflecting on the feasibility of further research, we view the findings of this study as an important opportunity to pose questions about the key implications of TNE, considering how providers interface simultaneously with student expectations, labour market demands, and societal needs, and how they respond to systemic, global challenges. The UAE case introduces some distinctive features and issues, and indeed as this study argues, understandings of graduates are in some ways inseparable from this context. However, the key findings and the questions extending from them are relevant to wider audiences in TNE and graduate outcomes research, especially where TNE providers and their graduates across contexts face similar external challenges, namely the Coronavirus pandemic.

The impact of UK TNE on graduates' identities, personal lives and general wellbeing is strong in this study, with respondents articulating a sense of confidence and agency to tackle personal and global problems. Their UK degree in this regard has both a formative and summative role, one in directing the process through which students learn and achieve, and the other in certifying achievements and securing future opportunities. Given that a non-negligible number of interview respondents reported positive gains despite the Coronavirus pandemic's impact, there is more to learn here about the soft skills and values resulting from UK TNE degree programmes and the extent to which providers recognise and promote these in their teaching and learning. Graduate identities and their wider social impact are likely the least understood aspect of graduate outcomes research but stand to play a critical role in responding to some of the 21st Century's most disruptive global challenges.

These outcomes go in hand with the positive findings on intercultural communication and tolerance, potentially contributing to social cohesion, mutual understanding, and peacebuilding. They also align with this study's finding on the distinctive model of UK higher education fostering learner autonomy and critical thinking. There are many directions to take this further in exploring how these skills equip graduates beyond the workplace, in addressing complex global challenges including climate change, pandemics, and poverty. It is clear that graduates value these aspects of their course. The question then becomes how does the abrupt and potentially permanent shift to technologically mediated modes of learning as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic affect these valuable opportunities, either to encounter diverse students and staff or make a scaffolded transition to independent learning? What can providers do in their online teaching to ensure a similarly rich intercultural experience for all students and continuity in all the advantageous aspects of UK higher education?

The labour market outcomes explored in this study were strong, with a particular impact stemming from integrated professional development opportunities offered by UK TNE providers. This is clearly a critical benchmark for higher education providers in the UAE, with institutional reputations resting in large part on these outcomes, although there is a degree of circularity here as employers also select on the basis of degree reputation. Even outside of TNE research, there are strong disagreements as to the precise mechanisms driving higher education's impact on graduate employability even where the overall impacts are indisputable. Given the evident impact of professional development opportunities in this study, further exploration is needed on the relationship between the various aspects of the university experience, including different types of careers interventions, and employment outcomes.

There are also implications for further research on the graduate-provider-regulator nexus, where regulatory conditions impact on graduate outcomes regardless of the evident strength of quality provision. The degree recognition issues identified in this report point to specific opportunities

curtailed by regulatory policies, and in this regard are a different type of outcome than those that providers produce through their teaching and learning. They are nevertheless a challenge for UK TNE collectively, shaping who chooses to enrol in UK providers and what opportunities are possible with their earned degree. Further research is needed on the specific trade-offs where national accreditation is even achievable for providers and how it potentially opens some doors while closing others. UK TNE providers in the UAE have all engaged with this issue, albeit differently, and are best positioned to share knowledge on how to move forward in this regulatory context.

This study highlights the importance of broad and rigorous research on graduate outcomes in TNE. While making an empirical contribution, its aims were also exploratory, tasked with reflecting on the feasibility of graduate outcomes research in offshore settings, and identifying thematic areas and issues for further enquiry. Given the strong presence and positional weight of UK TNE in the UAE as well as in the UK's global TNE portfolio, sustained attention to the outcomes and wider impacts of this form of provision is not only timely but essential for maintaining and cultivating its many strengths in a competitive global market.

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