

Transnational routes to on-shore UK higher education

A joint report from the British
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I. Executive Summary

- A substantial proportion of international students in the UK do not study their entire course in the country. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for the 2018/19 academic year shows that more than 15,000 international students started a degree course in Year 2 or later of the programme without having previously studied in a UK Higher Education institution (HEI), making up around a sixth of all non-UK first degree entrants.
- These students (“transnational entrants”) are divided between those who were enrolled on a UK course overseas through transnational education (TNE), students transferring from overseas universities through credit recognition / articulation agreements, and students who join UK HE programmes on the basis of sub-degree HE qualifications earned overseas.
- Transnational entrants from China and Malaysia play a particularly important role. More than half of transnational entrants come from mainland China alone, and more than a third of Chinese entrants to UK first degree programmes join their course in Year 2 or later. Malaysia is the second largest country of origin with 40 per cent of first degree entrants having started their course overseas. In contrast only around one in 10 transnational entrants come from EU countries, which is much lower than the EU’s 34 per cent share of all international entrants to UK first degree courses.
- The amount of time transnational entrants will spend in the UK varies. More than half (58 per cent) arrive in Year 2 of their course, meaning that they will typically stay in the UK for two or more years, but this still leaves a significant minority who would only study one year of their course in the UK.
- Transnational entrants make up 21 per cent of international first degree entrants to institutions with lower average entry tariffs, compared to only 12 per cent at high-tariff institutions.¹ The size of this gap is much smaller than that found in previous reports by HEFCE based on data from 2012/13 and 2013/14, as a result of a large drop in the proportion of transnational entrants at low- and medium-tariff HEIs.
- The number of transnational entrants to UK first degree programmes has fallen over the last five years, with the 2014/15 academic year seeing the sharpest decline while recruitment numbers over the last three years have been roughly stable. Combined with growth in direct entrants this means a significant drop in transnational entrants as a proportion of total entrants. The largest single drop has been in Malaysia, which one interviewee attributed to increasing attractiveness of local private institutions. Meanwhile

¹ HE providers are divided into three groups of equal size based on the average (mean) UCAS tariff points of UK-domiciled first-degree entrants having such points. High-tariff providers are the one-third of providers with the highest average tariff points per student, while low-tariff providers are the third with the lowest

the number of transnational entrants from China has increased slightly but has not kept pace with growth in Year 1 entrants from that country.

- In addition to students coming to the UK part-way through an undergraduate degree course, transnational education delivered overseas is also a significant contributor to UK postgraduate recruitment. Evidence from China shows that large numbers of students progress to master's degree study in the UK after completing a UK degree taught entirely in China through a "4+0" model² – although most of these students choose a different university for postgraduate study than the institution that awarded their undergraduate degree.
- As the most recent data analysed in this report is from the 2018/19 academic year, it does not take the impact of more recent developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic into account. Anecdotal evidence suggests a strong negative effect in the short term, especially among students from China where transnational education courses typically give students the option to either go abroad for the final part of the course or complete their degree in China. It is hard to estimate the longer-term impact: some universities have reported increased interest in transnational education from students who would otherwise have gone overseas for their whole degree course, which could lead to an increase in transnational entrants later on the course after the pandemic dies down; on the other hand, economic difficulties may make students more likely to complete their course in their home country rather than coming to the UK.

2 The length of joint programmes in China is often given in the format "X+Y", where X is the number of years spent in China, while Y is the number of years spent in the UK. A 4+0 programme involves four years in China with no UK-based component.

II. Introduction and research methods

This report was researched and written by the British Council in conjunction with Universities UK International and with external advice from Dr Janet Ilieva (Education Insight), in order to help the UK education sector better understand the progression of overseas students from programmes delivered overseas onto first degree programmes delivered in the UK.

The report revisits, expands and updates work carried out by HEFCE in two reports in 2014 and 2015 respectively:

- ‘Directions of Travel: Transnational pathways into English higher education’. Janet Ilieva. November 2014.
- ‘Transnational pathways into higher education in England’. Adam Finlayson, June 2015.

As with these previous reports, the current report looks at students joining UK first-degree programmes – including bachelor’s degrees and joint undergraduate-plus-masters courses such as MEng – part-way through the course, without previously having studied in a UK higher education institution.

Section 3 of this report presents a quantitative analysis of transnational entrants based largely on data from the HESA Individual Student Record for the 2018/19 academic year, supplemented with information from interviews with UK HEIs and overseas transnational education partners. As well as the overall scale of transnational entrants to UK first degree programmes, it also analyses related information such as the leading countries of origin, main subjects and course types, and variation between institutions.

Section 4 takes a more qualitative view, providing case studies of two UK universities and a provider of sub-degree qualifications whose transnational education provision leads to large amounts of mobility to the UK. The first discusses the University of Liverpool’s involvement in Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU), a joint university in China where students can choose to either complete their course at XJTLU or articulate to Liverpool for the final two years of the course. The second case study looks at a partnership between the University of Greenwich and the Academy of Finance in Hanoi, which allows students to either complete a UK bachelor’s degree in Vietnam or come to the UK in the final year of their course. The third case study looks at the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland, which provides a significant number of sub-degree qualifications in different countries, notably in China through its partnership with CSCSE, which allow students to progress to degree-level studies in the UK.

The definition of transnational entrants used in this report includes students transferring from overseas HEIs through credit recognition / articulation partnerships, students who were enrolled on a UK degree delivered overseas as part of a transnational education partnership, and students who enter a UK higher education course in year 2 or later based on sub-degree qualifications earned overseas. However, it is difficult to distinguish between students moving to the UK through credit recognition and transnational education partnerships. The Appendix to the report gives more information on the methodology used to identify transnational entrants and also discusses the limitations of this approach.

III. The scale of transnational pathways to UK higher education

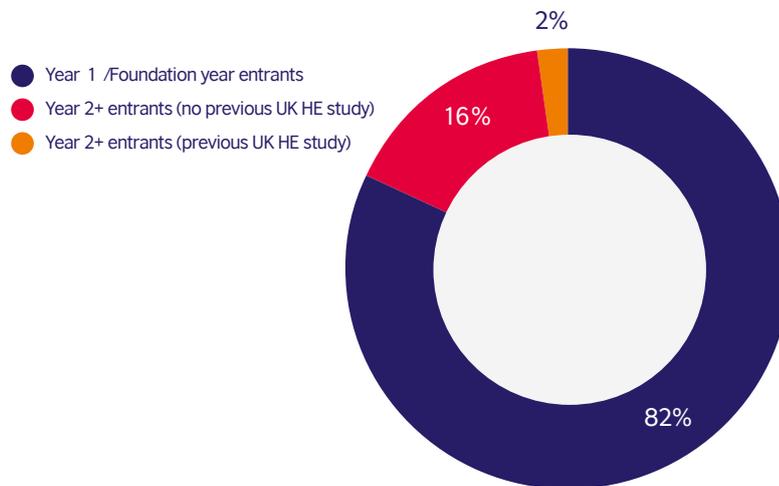
3.1 Overall scale of transnational entrants to UK first degree programmes

Based on data from the 2018/19 individual student record, an overall total of 15,125 non-UK domiciled students (including both EU and non-EU students) joined UK first degree programmes as transnational entrants – defined as those who entered their programme in year 2 or later of their course, without previously having been registered on an HE programme in the UK and excluding incoming visiting & exchange students.

These transnational entrants accounted for around 16 per cent of all non-UK entrants to UK first degree programmes, while a further 2 per cent of total non-UK entrants had previously completed a sub-degree course at a UK university or had transferred from one course to another. This sets these entrants apart from the remaining 82 per cent of new first degree students who joined their course in Year 1 or took an integrated foundation year.

Interviews with UK universities confirm that this methodology successfully identifies transnational entrants. A large majority of students classed as transnational entrants by this methodology had started their studies outside the UK and then transferred to a UK HEI – although some interviewees pointed out that this definition would also capture some students that had studied sub-degree courses at an FE college in the UK or those that studied an “international year one” course at a pathway provider before transferring to Year 2 of a degree programme. A more comprehensive description of the definitions used in this report and their limitations can be found in Appendix 1.

Figure 3.1: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes, by year of entry and previous UK HE study experience, 2018/19



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

Within the broad category of transnational entrants, students can be classed into a number of broad groups. The most important distinction is between those who are transferring as part of a UK degree programme delivered abroad (including branch campuses, jointly-delivered programmes and franchised or validated UK degree courses delivered by a local partner), and those whose overseas study was delivered entirely by a local institution without direct involvement with the UK partner. The latter group includes articulation or credit transfer agreements between the overseas institution and a UK university, including those leading to dual degrees as well as students who will only receive a UK qualification. Several interviewed institutions noted that a growing proportion of their international student population is coming through students who have undertaken foundation courses at an ‘international college’ with progression links into one or more UK university partners; many of these students would join in Year 1 of the course and so would not be classed as transnational entrants, but others study an “international year one” partnership and then come to the UK in Year 2 of their course.

A third group of students, which often overlaps to an extent with the second, is students who are admitted to a UK course based on a sub-degree qualification earned overseas; this includes local qualifications such as a Chinese higher vocational diplomas as well as UK HND courses delivered abroad.

The HESA Student Record does not specifically identify the type of programme that a transferring student was previously studying, so it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the breakdown of transnational entrants between students who had been following a UK programme overseas vs those that progressed through credit recognition arrangements.

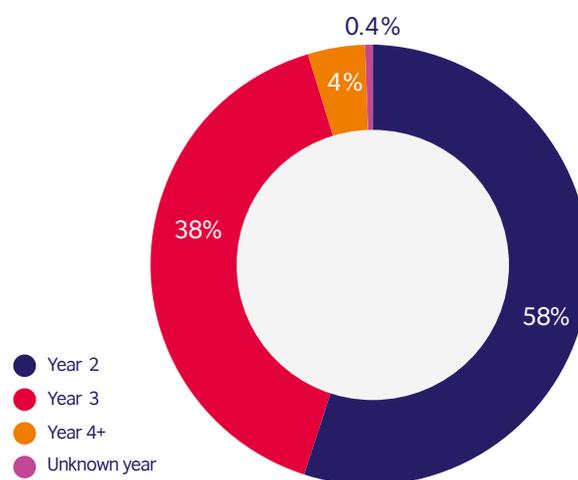
Interviewees at most interviewed institutions commented that the bulk of their transnational entrants transferred from overseas universities’ own programmes or entered with overseas sub-

degree HE qualifications. However, at some of the institutions with the largest cohorts of international year 2+ entrants, most of these entrants come through transnational education activities such as an overseas branch campus.

Nevertheless, there is not a perfect correlation between overseas programme delivery and transnational entrants. Several interviewees from providers delivering programmes overseas commented that students on these programmes generally completed their entire course in their home country and did not articulate to the UK as part of this programme (although many of these students may later come to the UK to study a postgraduate degree as discussed in Section 3.7). One provider with a large volume of TNE students indicated that all of their overseas programmes must be financially sustainable without relying on progression to the UK and that any articulating students would be treated as a bonus rather than a core part of the partnerships' value proposition.

The bulk of transnational entrants – 58 per cent of the total – enter their UK first degree programme in Year 2, meaning that they are likely to study in the UK for two years or more. Most of the rest enter in year 3, while a small proportion – around 645 entrants in total in 2018/19 – join in Year 4 of a programme or later. The latter group mostly consists of students joining 4+ year bachelor's degree programmes, although it also includes a small number of students on integrated undergraduate-to-masters programmes such as Master of Engineering (MEng) degrees who come to the UK for the final year of their course.

Figure 3.2: Non-UK domiciled Year 2+ entrants to UK first degree programmes without prior UK HE study, by year of entry



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

It should be noted that the year of entry given in the figures above is relative to the course delivered by the UK university, and may be different to the total number of years the student themselves has studied. For example, a relatively large number of universities have “2+2”

progression agreements with partners in China, which allow students to study for two years in China and then to enter the UK university in Year 2 of a 3-year undergraduate programme, meaning that they study for a total of two years in the UK.

3.2 Leading countries of origin

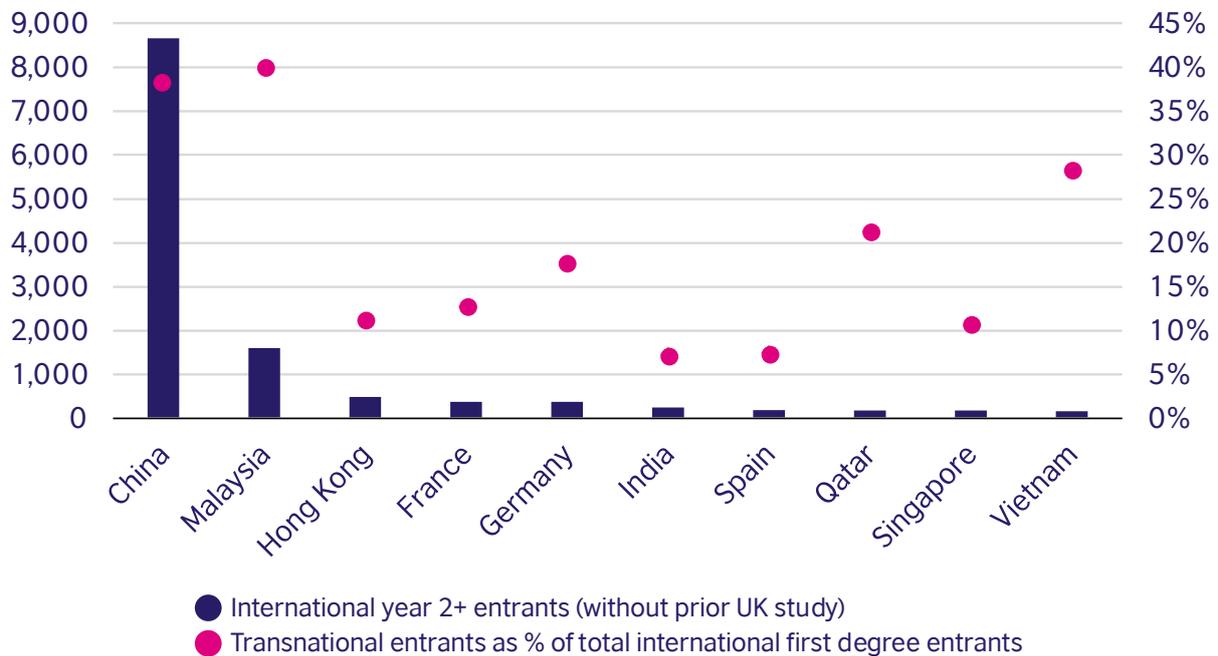
The bulk of transnational entrants to UK first degree courses come from a relatively small number of countries. In particular, 8,665 students from mainland China entered UK first degree programmes on year 2 of the course or later without prior UK study.

This accounts for more than half of all transnational entrants to UK first degree programmes, substantially higher than the country's 17 per cent share of direct entrants joining first degree programmes in Year 1 or through an integrated foundation year. Overall, transnational entrants accounted for 38 per cent of all Chinese students entering UK first degree programmes in the 2018/19 academic year.

Malaysia, the second largest source of transnational entrants, is in a similar position: its 1,605 transnational entrants accounted for 11 per cent of the global total, compared to Malaysia's 3 per cent share of non-UK Year 1 / foundation year entrants. Looking at the data a slightly different way, 40 per cent of all Malaysian students joining UK first degree programmes were transnational entrants.

Aside from these two major outliers, other countries and regions make up a much smaller proportion of total transnational entrants. Hong Kong is the 3rd largest source of these students but its 3.2 per cent share of the total transnational entrant student numbers is notably smaller than the special administrative region's 4.8 per cent share of international entrants that study in the UK from the beginning of the course. Transnational entrants do make up a relatively high proportion of students from Vietnam, making up 28 per cent of new entrants to first degree programmes, but the number of Vietnamese transnational entrants is substantially below the number from China or Malaysia in absolute terms.

Figure 3.3: Leading sources of non-UK domiciled Year 2+ entrants to UK first degree programmes without prior UK HE study

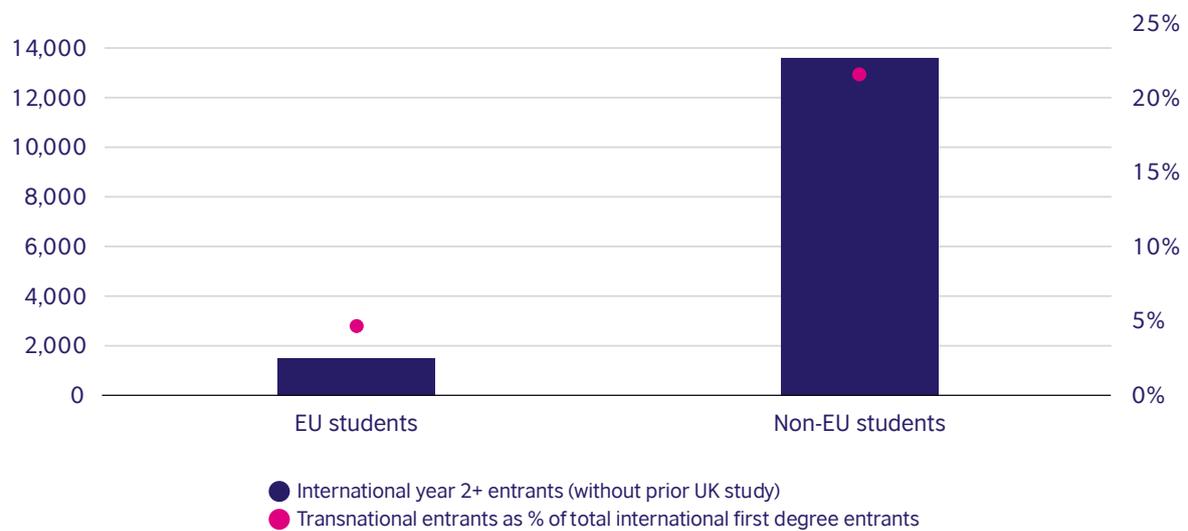


Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

Due mainly to the dominance of China and Malaysia, transnational entrants make up a much larger share of non-EU first degree entrants than of EU-domiciled entrants. Entrants joining in year 2+ without prior UK HE study made up 22 per cent of total non-EU first degree entrants compared with only 5 per cent of EU entrants at this level in the 2018/19 academic year.

Figure 3.4: EU and non-EU sources of non-UK domiciled Year 2+ entrants to UK first degree programmes without prior UK HE study



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

There was some anecdotal evidence from institutions delivering TNE programmes in Malaysia that a relatively large proportion of students studying on these programmes come from other countries in the region, particularly Indonesia, as well as from countries in South Asia and the Middle East. However, analysis of transnational entrants to on-shore UK programmes shows that these international TNE students generally tend to complete their whole course in Malaysia and do not transfer to the UK. In the 2018/19 academic year, 99 per cent of Malaysia-domiciled transnational entrants to on-shore UK HE programmes were Malaysian citizens.

An interviewee from a sub-degree qualification provider noted that there are newer markets where demand is proving strong, including Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The interviewee commented that internationally mobile students from these regions were not necessarily progressing to one of the main English-speaking destinations but that many were using these UK qualifications as routes to study in other countries such as Malaysia or Dubai, which may point to an interesting trend of TNE serving as a pathway for intra-regional mobility.

Aside from differences in student volumes by country, some institutions discussed differences in partnership models in different areas. For example, one institution indicated that students on their TNE programmes in Egypt were generally not able to bear the cost of studying for a full year in the UK, although they were willing to join more affordable summer courses. Another institution indicated that financial assistance (including bursaries and pay-backs to delivery partners) had proven key to developing successful progression arrangements in newer markets such as Vietnam.

3.3 Change over time

Data from HESA shows that the number of overseas students entering UK first degree programmes in year 2 of the course or later fell significantly between 2013/14 and 2015/16, with the decline spread across the sector rather than concentrated in a small number of individual institutions. This drop may be related to the suspension of the UK's post-study work visa policy in 2012, with a delayed effect due to transnational students studying the first part of their course in their home country.

Since then the figure has remained roughly constant in absolute terms, but the proportion of students joining in year 2+ has continued to drop due to growth in entrants joining the course in Year 1 and through Foundation years.

Figure 3.5: Historical trends in non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes by year of entry



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes, excluding exchange students

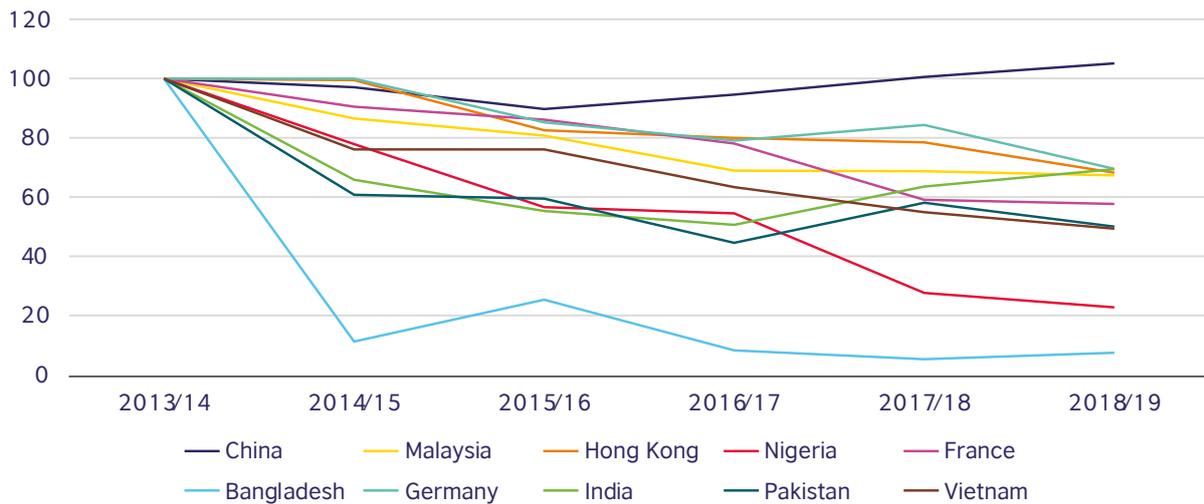
Note: In contrast to most other charts in this report, the chart above does not exclude entrants with prior UK HE study. As only a small proportion of Year 2+ entrants have previously studied in the UK (12 per cent of this group in 2018/19), this is unlikely to have a significant effect on overall trends

Source: HESA

As noted in Section 3.1, the statistical data above does not distinguish between students transferring from a UK TNE course delivered overseas vs those who studied at an overseas university and are coming to the UK based on articulation or credit recognition agreements. However, several university interviewees commented that their TNE transfer pathways were more stable over time whereas the number of students transferring under credit recognition agreements saw more rapid rises and falls – for example, one university that had seen significant recent growth attributed this to a rapid increase in students coming through credit recognition agreements.

Breaking this data down by country, data from HESA shows that China is the only major source country where transnational student numbers have increased compared to five years ago. The second and third largest source countries, Malaysia and Hong Kong, have seen their Year 2+ entrants drop by almost a third over the last five years, while other countries have also seen a decline. Some countries, such as Bangladesh and Nigeria, saw even more dramatic drops.

Figure 3.6: Historical trends in non-UK domiciled Year 2+ entrants to UK first degree programmes by country of domicile (indexed to 2013/14 entrants = 100)



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes, excluding exchange students

Note: In contrast to most other charts in this report, the chart above does not exclude entrants with prior UK HE study. As only a small proportion of Year 2+ entrants have previously studied in the UK, this is unlikely to have a significant effect on overall trends

Source: HESA

In Malaysia, an interviewee at a local institution attributed the fall in transnational education volumes to the increasing reputation of local private universities. In the past, these institutions had relied on UK partners to award degrees, but after gaining their own degree-awarding powers there is now more incentive for local partners to grow their own student populations rather than to promote articulation or progression to their UK partner institutions. The interviewee also commented that many Malaysian institutions involved in TNE partnerships were moving rapidly up global ranking tables, pointing to an example of an institution which had de-emphasised its TNE partnership after the Malaysian institution's international ranking had exceeded that of its partner.

In China, transnational entrants to on-shore UK study has grown slowly as the country's Ministry of Education now increasingly encourages transnational education partnerships to focus on "4+0" programmes delivered entirely in-country.

All of the data analysed above only covers the period up to the 2018/19 academic year, and more recent developments – particularly the COVID-19 pandemic – are likely to have had a major impact on transnational student mobility. Some interviewees noted increased interest,

particularly in China, for staying in country to continue or complete their studies. This suggests a short term drop in the number of students using TNE as a pathway to onshore study in the UK in 2020.

On the other hand, the crisis has also made transnational education a more popular option for new students in the short term, with this again being especially pronounced in China. The Chinese government has also announced flexibility in the quotas assigned to joint institutes and Sino-foreign joint universities, which have been allowed to recruit additional students who were planning to study abroad in 2020/21, and there is a high chance that these students could choose to articulate to the UK part-way through their course once the situation returns to normal. A third way that COVID could affect the number of transnational entrants is if an economic downturn made students more likely to stay in their home country rather than transferring to the UK part-way through their course.

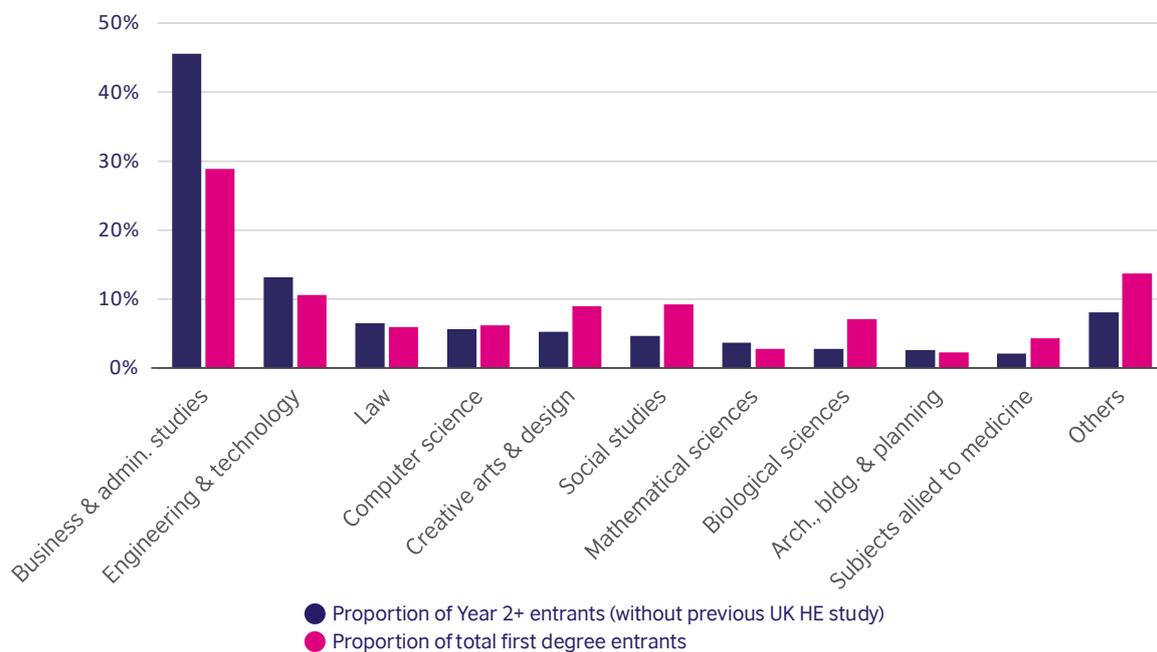
3.4 Subjects and course types

Overall, almost half of students transferring to UK first degree courses in Year 2+ join programmes in the broad field of business & administrative studies, compared to less than a third of all international first degree entrants. Engineering & technology programmes are the next most popular field, substantially ahead of law and computer science. In comparison, the share of transnational transfers to creative arts and social studies programmes is much lower than these subjects' proportion of Year 1 entrants.

These differences largely reflect the countries of origin of transnational entrants. Looking at China specifically, which accounts for more than half of international transfers, business & administration programmes account for around 55 per cent of year 2+ entrants which is only slightly higher than the 49 per cent of all China-domiciled first degree entrants studying this broad subject area.

However, there are also some subject areas where the profile of transnational entrants has major differences with the breakdown of Year 1 entrants from the same countries of origin. Law is a prominent example, with this subject accounting for around half of Malaysian students transferring onto Year 2+ of a first degree course compared to less than one in 10 Malaysian students who join their course in the UK from Year 1. An example in the other direction is creative arts, where the data shows that students have a strong tendency to prefer to study their entire course in the UK.

Figure 3.7: Subjects studied by non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes by year of entry



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

Although the large majority of students on first degree programmes are studying bachelor's degrees, the category also includes integrated undergraduate-plus-master's programmes such as MEng or MPharm, which award a single qualification based on 4+ years of study. Roughly 270 international students entered programmes of this type in Year 2 of the course or later (without prior UK HE study), accounting for a little under 2 per cent of all such first degree transnational entrants. Most of these students were in the field of engineering & technology but there were also small numbers of transnational entrants in subjects allied to medicine, the physical sciences, and architecture.

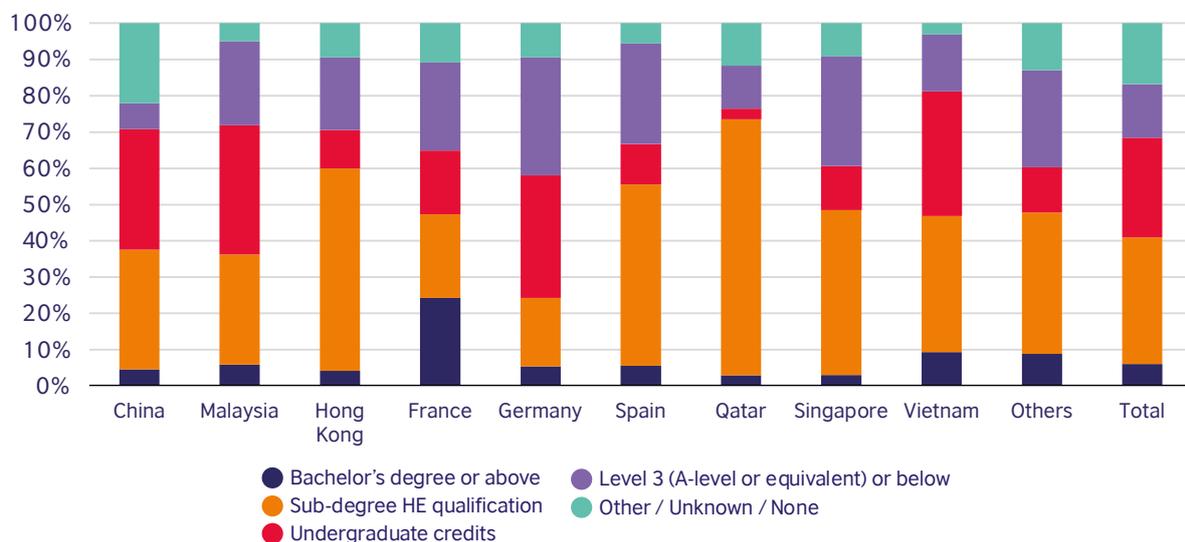
Subject area in transnational education partnerships (as opposed to credit recognition / articulation agreements) is driven not only by market demand but also by regulatory requirements. In China in particular, transnational education in business-related areas is tightly controlled, while in broader terms expansion into new subject areas often needs to be agreed well in advance.

3.5 Entry qualifications

Looking at transnational entrants' previous qualifications can help to show how these students are entering UK universities.

Overall, the majority of transnational entrants students are recorded as holding overseas university credits as their highest current qualification, as having only high school level qualifications, or as having no relevant qualifications.³ Slightly over one third of transnational entrants to UK first degree programmes without previous UK HE study hold sub-degree HE qualifications, including UK HND/HNC qualifications as well as equivalent domestic courses. Finally, around 6 per cent of transnational entrants are recorded as already having a degree, with this being particularly common among transnational entrants from France.⁴

Figure 3.8: Highest qualifications held by non-UK domiciled Year 2+ entrants to UK first degree programmes without prior UK HE study



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

As shown in the chart above, the two top source countries – China and Malaysia – have a similar share of sub-degree HE qualification holders to the overall total, but more than half of transnational entrants from Hong Kong and Qatar hold this kind of qualification.

³ During interviews, some institutions noted that the array of different levels of study undertaken by the students before entering programmes in year 2+ makes it difficult to categorise previous qualifications. It is likely that most entrants recorded as holding Level 3 qualifications or no relevant qualifications are actually admitted based on agreements between UK and overseas HEIs, although this group may also include a small number of students entering the second year of 4-year Scottish degree courses with A-levels and equivalent qualifications as described in the Section 3.6.

⁴ It should be noted that this data refers to the student's highest previous qualification, not necessarily the qualification they used to enter the course.

In most cases these sub-degree HE qualifications are local qualifications such as Chinese 3-year higher vocational diplomas or Hong Kong's associates' degrees and higher diplomas. Although these are local qualifications, in some cases UK institutions are still involved in the overseas portion of students' courses at this level – for example, several UK universities have partnerships that provide teaching at Chinese higher vocational colleges on 3-year diploma programmes which then give students the option to take a one-year top-up course in the UK to upgrade to a bachelor's degree. These programmes are often promoted to students as a “3+1” partnership, with students joining the course with the goal of gaining a UK bachelor's degree.

Students from some countries also enter UK universities with UK sub-degree qualifications. The largest group of these students is from China – roughly 7 per cent of China-domiciled year 2+ entrants to UK universities (or around 3 per cent of all Chinese first degree entrants) hold a UK HND, due to a large-scale partnership between the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE), a body under China's Ministry of Education.

Some institutions with the largest cohorts of year 2+ entrants noted that the majority of their year 2+ international entrants come through a single source, such as their Joint Institute in China. One large provider of sub-degree qualifications noted that information about the progression to further study in the UK is not normally captured, as institutions do not need to report this either to HESA or to the organisation offering the sub-degree qualification.

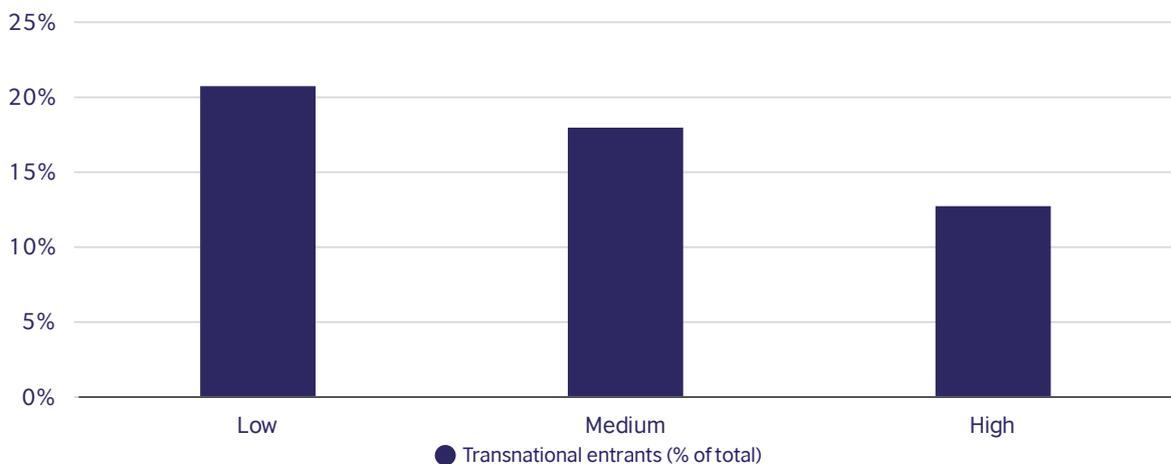
3.6 Variation between institutions

There was a great degree of variation in the number of transnational entrants across different institutions. There were two universities with 1,000+ students joining their first degree programmes in year 2 of the programme or later (without prior UK study), while another 39 had at least 100 such students and 66 others had between 10 and 99 transnational entrants. The top 10 institutions by number of transnational entrants collectively accounted for almost half (47 per cent) of the total.

Similarly, there was also a lot of variation in the proportion of overseas first degree students entering through transnational pathways. Although transnational entrants made up only 16 per cent of all non-UK first degree entrants across the UK HE sector as a whole in the 2018/19 academic year, there were eight universities where they represented more than half of all new non-UK first degree entrants.

Analysis of institutions by tariff band⁵ shows that transnational entrants make up a substantially larger proportion of all first degree entrants at institutions with lower entry tariffs, representing 21 per cent of non-UK first degree entrants at low-tariff institutions but only 12 per cent at high-tariff institutions.

Figure 3.9: Transnational entrants as proportion of total first degree entrants by university tariff band, 2018/19



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

Looking at this data from a different angle, the absolute number of transnational entrants is roughly the same in each of the three tariff bands. However, high-tariff institutions enrol

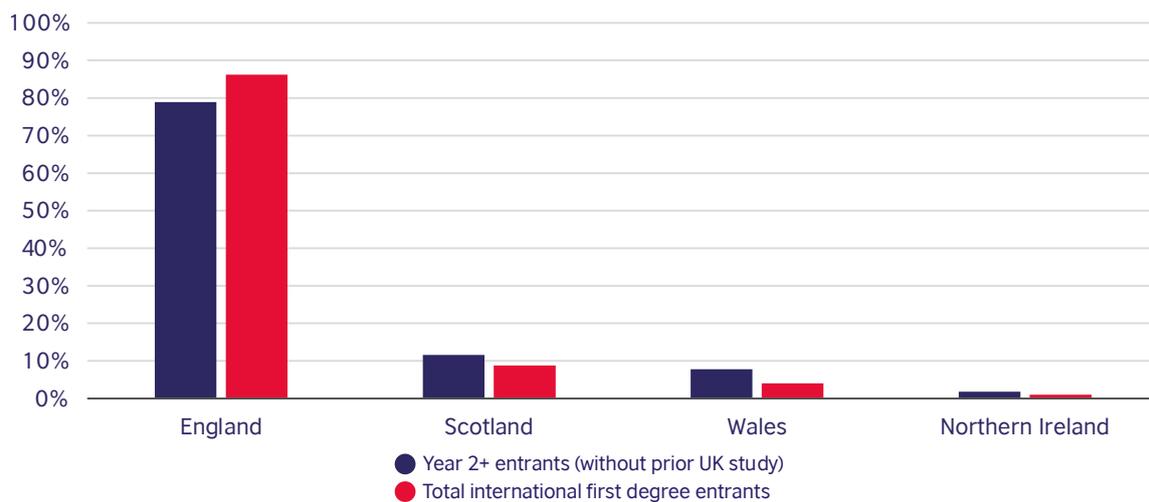
⁵ HE providers are divided into three groups of equal size based on the average (mean) UCAS tariff points of UK-domiciled first-degree entrants having such points. High-tariff providers are those with the highest average tariff points per student, while low-tariff providers are those with the lowest average points per student.

significantly higher numbers of international students starting a first degree course in Year 1, which means that transnational entrants make up a smaller proportion of the total.

Although there are significant differences between institutions in different tariff bands, these differences are much smaller than those found by HEFCE in 2012/13 and 2013/14,⁶ who found that more than half of international entrants in low-tariff institutions had entered through transnational pathways. This suggests that the drop in transnational entrants between 2013/14 and 2015/16 was concentrated in these medium- and lower-tariff institutions.

From a regional perspective, around 79 per cent of international first degree entrants that join their courses in year 2 or later choose universities in England, which is slightly lower than England's 86 per cent share of total international first degree entrants. Scotland accounts for around 12 per cent of the total – somewhat higher than its overall 9 per cent share of international first degree entrants – while Welsh universities collectively account for 8 per cent which is also substantially higher than their overall share of new first degree students.

Figure 3.10: Distribution of non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes without prior UK study in comparison to total entrants, by UK constituent country



Base: Non-UK domiciled entrants to UK first degree programmes entering in Year 2+ of programme without prior UK HE study (2018/19), excluding exchange students

Source: HESA

6 'Directions of Travel: Transnational pathways into English higher education', Janet Ilieva, November 2014; 'Transnational pathways into higher education in England', Adam Finlayson, June 2015

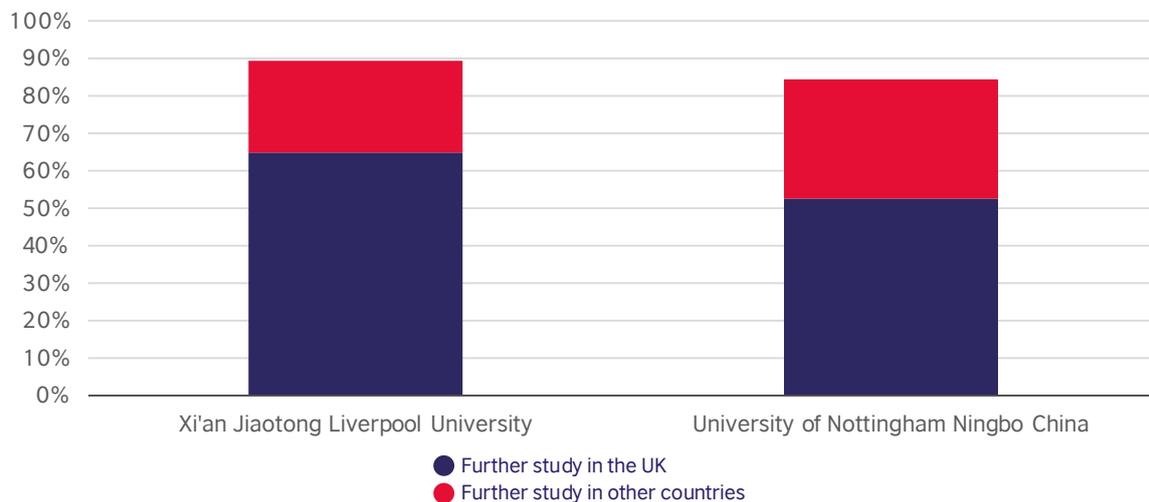
In the case of Scotland, it should be noted that some Scottish universities recruit students holding Advanced Highers, A-levels or equivalent qualifications to Year 2 of their 4-year degree courses. These students may show up as Year 2+ entrants in the chart above. Overall, entrants reported as holding Level 3 qualifications make up around 25 per cent of students who are classed as transnational entrants to Scottish institutions based on our methodology, compared to around 12 per cent in the rest of the UK. In addition, interviewees at a Scottish institution commented that this type of student would not be recorded as joining their course in Year 2+, although this does not necessarily represent all universities in Scotland.

3.7 Transnational partnerships' influence on postgraduate study

While hard data is difficult to obtain, transnational education overseas is also a common pathway to postgraduate study in the UK, particularly for students from China. The bulk of students following UK degree programmes in that country study on a “4+0” model, earning an overseas degree after studying for four years domestically with no overseas study component. However, interviews with staff of Sino-foreign joint universities in China show that future overseas study is an important draw for students deciding to study a transnational degree.

Statistics published by Sino-foreign joint universities support these observations. In 2019, 87 per cent of domestic bachelor's degree graduates from Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University and 84 per cent of those from the University of Nottingham Ningbo China went on to further study.⁷ In both cases a large majority of these graduates enrolled in universities in the UK, with most of the rest heading for other universities outside China.

Figure 3.11: Destinations of graduates from China-UK joint universities, 2019



Base: Domestic (mainland Chinese) bachelor's degree graduates from Sino-UK joint universities in China, 2019

Source: XJTLU / UNNC Graduate Destination Reports

Despite the large proportion of students heading to the UK, graduates from transnational education programmes in China do not necessarily go on to study a master's degree at the UK partner involved in delivering their undergraduate education. University interviewees commented that Chinese graduates generally preferred to “trade up” to a higher-ranking university for postgraduate study. In the case of one joint university the UK parent institution was only the 15th most popular destination for bachelor's degree graduates going on to study a postgraduate course in 2019, representing less than one per cent of total graduates. Similarly, an interviewee at a different partner institution in Malaysia indicated limited take up of master's

⁷ <https://www.xjtlu.edu.cn/assets/files/careers/2019年西交利物浦大学毕业生就业质量报告.pdf>;

https://careers.nottingham.edu.cn/attachment/careersatunnc/ueditor/file/20200310/4150_2_0306%202019年年度就业报告%20网页版%20v5.pdf

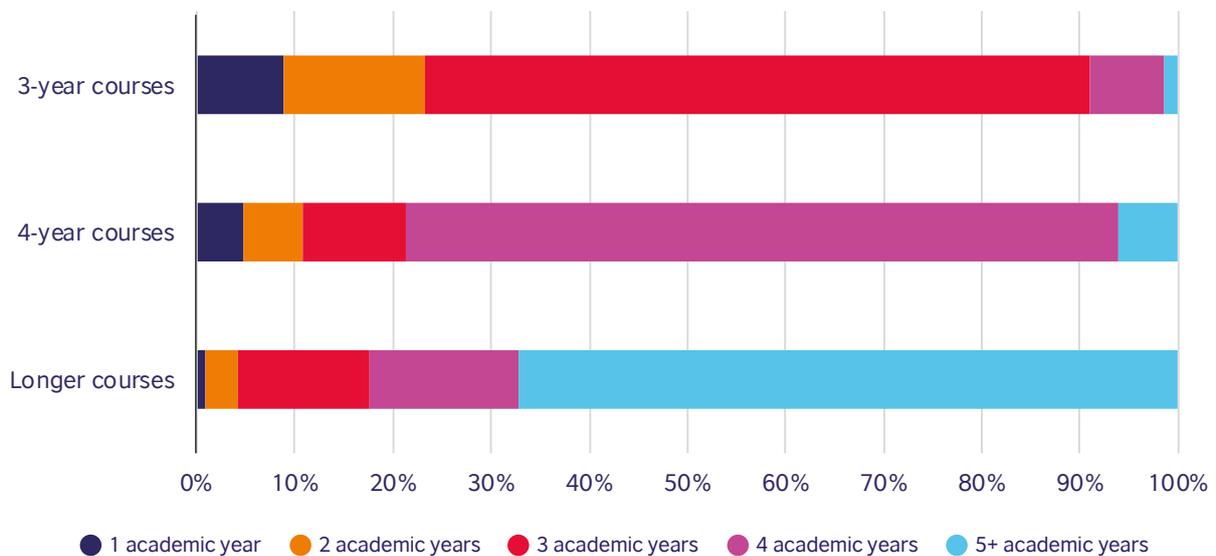
programme progression options among TNE graduates despite offering discounts and bursaries.

In contrast to students from China, graduates earning a UK degree through studying entirely in Malaysia are much less likely to go on to postgraduate study abroad. Interviewees involved in transnational education in Malaysia commented that their graduates generally went straight into employment, and would only study a postgraduate degree after working for several years (if at all).

3.8 Analysis of graduates

Analysis of international first degree graduates in the 2018/19 academic year shows that a significant percentage of non-UK students graduated more quickly than the nominal duration of their course. Looking at first-degree programmes with a nominal duration of 3 academic years⁸, 23 per cent of graduates in 2018/19 had first appeared on the Individual Student Record in 2017/2018 or later. Similarly, 21 per cent of non-UK students whose nominal course duration was registered as 4 academic years graduated with 3 or fewer years of study in the UK.

Figure 3.12: Breakdown of 2018/19 non-UK domiciled UK first degree qualifiers by nominal course duration and time spent in the UK⁹



Base: Non-UK domiciled qualifiers from UK first degree programmes, excluding courses with a nominal duration of 2 years or below and courses with an unknown nominal duration

Although it has not been possible to match this data directly to transnational entrants, the large majority of these students whose UK study period is shorter than the nominal course duration are likely to be transnational entrants who studied part of their programme outside the UK before joining their course in Year 2 or later.

The data above shows that most transnational graduates from three-year degree courses had studied in the UK for two years: this group makes up slightly over 14 per cent of all international

⁸ The data described in this section as 3-year courses includes programmes with duration more than 2 calendar years but less than or equal to 3 calendar years. Similarly, students described as studying in the UK for 3 academic years are those who started their course in the UK between August 2016 and July 2017 and who graduated in the 2018/19 academic year. A more detailed explanation can be found in the Appendix.

⁹ The 4-year courses in Figure 3.13 include both combined undergraduate-plus-masters degree programmes and bachelor's degrees with 4-year durations, while the number of graduates from 5+ year courses is relatively low and probably consists largely of part-time students. Students who spent **more** time studying in the UK than the official course duration include those who repeated years and those who took unscheduled extensions, but not those whose courses were originally designed to include elements such as internships or years abroad as these would be included in the nominal course duration

graduates from three-year first-degree courses, while those who had only studied in the UK for one year made up a little under 9 per cent of the total. Similarly, among students whose nominal course duration was 4 years or longer, significantly more students had studied in the UK for 3 years than for two, which in turn was more common than only studying in the UK for a single year. This supports the conclusions in Section 3.1 about year of entry.

Looking at degree outcomes, the proportion of transnational entrants earning a 2:1 or higher is notably lower than the corresponding proportion of students who study in the UK for the full duration of their course. Overall only 64 per cent of international first degree graduates whose actual study duration in the UK was less than the nominal course length achieved first-class or upper second-class honours, compared to 76 per cent of international graduates whose study duration matched the expected course length.

The majority of interviewed institutions did not hold specific data on student degree outcomes and progression to further study of TNE vs non-TNE students, with some noting that cohorts were too small or difficult to track in isolation. There was a mix of anecdotal evidence on whether transnational entrants were more or less successful in their degree outcomes than their non-transnational international or domestic counterparts. However, some institutions that noted lower degree outcomes for their transnational entrants also noted that they have taken steps in recent years to either close or tighten requirements on underperforming pathways, and have seen improving results since then.

IV. Case Studies

Case studies have been provided by the institutions themselves and do not necessarily reflect the views of the authors of this report.

4.1 The University of Liverpool: Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University

Institutional approach to transnational education & articulation

The University of Liverpool has a number of TNE partnerships, but the largest in terms of student numbers and most wide ranging is the partnership with Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool (XJTLU), a joint-venture University in Suzhou. This opened in 2006, and now has over 17,000 students and 900 academic staff.

The opportunity arose as part of an initiative by the Government of the People's Republic of China. The aim was to increase higher education capacity in China as well to attract a small number of foreign institutions. Liverpool was one of only two UK universities granted permission at this time.

Liverpool decided to build on its well-established academic relationship with Xi'an Jiaotong University to create XJTLU as a joint venture and create an autonomous private institution integral to the Chinese university system, rather than a standalone campus.

Main benefits and barriers

The benefits to the University of Liverpool are increased international profile and reputation, including alumni, strong recruitment to Liverpool on a well-established 2+2 pathway in selected subject areas, and joint research projects, especially through doctoral studentships, with over 100 current joint supervisions. Liverpool-based students can study for one year at XJTLU, either between Levels 5 and 6 or after three years of undergraduate study.

The benefits to XJTLU include international, established expertise and reputation from the start, research partnerships with Liverpool and XJTU, and postgraduate degree programmes through Liverpool. The principal benefit now is the dual award for undergraduate students, even those who do not transfer to the UK, which attracts highly qualified applicants from all over China, and increasingly, internationally.

Barriers to further progress include the demand-led development of areas where Liverpool does not have reciprocal expertise, and some divergence of research fields. Dealing with two national regulatory systems, two University systems and two sets of IT systems creates difficulties at times, but both Universities have excellent Quality Assurance teams who are adept at making things work effectively.

Student Voice

Students who articulate to the UK are motivated by the chance of an international experience and what this brings to their job prospects along with the language development that comes from living in the UK as well as studying in English.

Students who take the 2+2 option in STEM subjects achieve higher rates of 2:1 and first-class degrees than those who remain in Suzhou, and over 75% go on to Master's level programmes in world top 100 Universities; this is a major driver for 2+2 students and their families.

Future developments

The future of the partnership depends very much on the how the COVID-19 pandemic is resolved. While the demand for international education is strong, with around half the usual cohort still arriving in 2020 despite the problems, financial and transport problems may restrict this further in the future. If there is a solution to the virus through vaccine or medication, numbers are expected to recover and then grow steadily, especially at postgraduate level.

An increasing number of international students, especially from Southeast Asian countries, studying first at XJTLU and then progressing to Liverpool, is likely if and when mobility recovers.

XJTLU, in partnership with the University of Liverpool and with XJTU and local Government is also developing a new campus (XJTLU Entrepreneur College, Taicang) and hoping to develop postgraduate programme delivery elsewhere in China. New programmes in Pharmacology and Education are being developed, and a joint industry/innovator/research interface platform.

Take-away points

Liverpool's top three recommendations are to establish a broad partnership across a range of disciplines if possible, rather than set up a single subject operation; to maintain the relationship vigorously with exchange visits and regular communications; to establish a high level of student support to cover both academic and 'life' issues, and don't expect all elements of the scheme to generate a financial surplus.

4.2 The University of Greenwich: Partnership with Academy of Finance, Hanoi, Vietnam

Partnership in Institutional Context

The University of Greenwich Business Faculty has a relatively large TNE provision (around 3,000 students). The context for this provision is that it is all franchised provision to a small number of partners mainly concentrated in a single geographical region (Southeast Asia). The implications of this is that partners (and students at partners) can benefit from close engagement with the Faculty as the curriculum is delivered by on-campus academics, the small number of partners allows more time to be spent on working with each partner and the geographical focus allows targeted resources (a resident member of staff and more partners visited on trips from the UK).

The Faculty recruits a large number of students directly to Year 3 of its programme through supported articulation arrangements, primarily in China.

The partnership with Academy of Finance examined in this case study was developed in the context above. Academy of Finance was an existing TNE partner (offering the MSc Finance & Investment under franchise since 2013) and was looking to develop a unique programme in Vietnam which offered students the opportunity to achieve both a Vietnamese and a UK degree award. They also wished the programme to allow students to achieve a high degree of professional accreditation.

Vietnamese degrees are of four years duration. The TNE/Articulation model chosen involves an agreed curriculum for the first three years (studied wholly in Vietnam) which is partly based on the Greenwich programme but which is solely part of the Academy of Finance award which articulates to the final year of BA(Hons) Accounting and Finance. This final year is run at Academy of Finance as a TNE franchise but with students also offered the opportunity to complete the year at the Greenwich campus in the UK.

The award is rooted in the Vietnamese HE system with recruitment capped at 120/year. Just over 100 students were recruited in the first year (2016) and the full 120 students in subsequent years. In 2019, fourteen students progressed to the Greenwich campus and a further 45 completed under franchise. (At the end of the third year, students have the option to remain only on the single Vietnamese award instead of articulating and some elect to do this). On campus numbers (without Covid) are expected to increase to around 25-30 per year. Final results of the initial groups of students were excellent.

Main benefits

- On-campus recruitment of excellent overseas students using a model which combined two elements of international development (i.e. an articulation model and a TNE franchise model).
- Provides a potential in-house feeder programme for the existing franchised MSc Finance & Investment which had not always recruited in sufficient number.

- A flexible model which does not commit all students to complete the UK award which broadens the potential recruitment market.
- Additional benefit of a UK experience for students who take the final year on the University of Greenwich campus.

Main barriers

- A standard three years franchise model would be likely to be too expensive for many students in Vietnam so this model allowed a wider range of students to consider the programme.
- Approval from the local regulator was needed, although the innovative nature of the programme and the high-standing of the Vietnamese partner were both helpful here.
- A need for care in promoting the programme as this is not a typical Dual Award model under UK regulations although the end result (a programme of study agreed by both partners and which leads to both awards) is essentially the same.

Future developments

- This appears to be a model with potential for further development in markets such as Vietnam (and possibly Malaysia) which have strong demand for UK degree programmes both as TNE and as overseas students coming to the UK.
- Professional body links are an important enhancement to further programmes such as these. In this case, the ACCA grants exemptions to several modules of their professional accounting qualification for students who apply having completed the first three years of the Vietnamese programme and the final year of the UK programme (whether studied in Hanoi or London).

Take-away points

- Develop programmes with close local consultation to ensure the fee structure will attract a viable market.
- By combining different aspects of international strategies – in this case TNE and articulation but also alumni (students who studied in the UK can return to speak to current students) – the various partnership models can be stronger than as a stand-alone.
- A small number of overseas partners allows a much closer working relationship and broader partnership activities (e.g. joint research conferences, workshops in the UK, frequent visits from locally-based staff) build a better base for TNE activities.

4.3 The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

Partnership in Institutional Context

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is Scotland's national accreditation and awarding body with over 100 years of experience in developing qualifications and over 20 years' experience of working internationally. SQA supports the Scottish Government's strategy to promote Scotland's education system internationally and currently has a presence in over 20 countries worldwide. Students can study for an SQA Advanced Diploma in their home country before progressing on to a related undergraduate degree, either within their home country or at an international destination.

SQA supports and strengthens progression pathways for international students by developing articulation arrangements with highly respected institutions around the world. SQA operates globally and provides students with opportunities to progress to institutions across key study destinations like the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. SQA strives to meet the needs of all international stakeholders and will explore all opportunities which will assist learners in realising their potential and achieving their ambitions.

Main benefits

- Providing learners with cost-effective options to progress into higher education overseas.
- Providing learners with an opportunity to gain international experience while they are 'topping up' to a Degree.
- Providing learners with a selection of pathways and destination to choose from.

Main barriers

- Approval in the host country to deliver SQA qualifications.
- Raising awareness of the SQA brand and associated qualifications.

Student voice

UK higher education institutions typically recognise the SQA Advanced Diploma as equivalent to two years of undergraduate study. It will provide the students with advanced entry into a related degree programme. Many of SQA's international students choose the UK as their destination to top up and achieve a Degree due to the excellent reputation that the UK education system carries and the excellent reputation of UK higher education institutions.

Future developments

SQA will continue to grow and strengthen their brand in all international markets. SQA will continue to grow the number of quality international centres delivering Advanced Qualifications, and equally, the number of SQA Progression Partners who can provide the students with a progression pathway onto higher education and complete a related degree programme.

The newly branded SQA Advanced Diploma is proving attractive to students which in turn is strengthening SQA's position in international markets. While destination data on students graduating from SQA programmes are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that students in some regions are choosing to continue their studies to degree level with a UK institution which is operating with a branch campus in the same region or a neighbouring region.

Take-away points

- Higher Education Institutions will have a direct relationship with SQA, an international leader in education and qualifications development
- SQA will promote partner Higher Education Institutions to international students and centres as part of the Diploma to Degree pathway
- Multiple delivery models may be available – provision of cost-effective options for students in their home country who want to gain international experience through an overseas degree.

V. Conclusion

The present report shows that transnational routes remain an important contributor to the total number of international students that progress to study in the UK. This is particularly significant in two countries: China and Malaysia, which are also the countries with the largest UK transnational student cohorts worldwide (and, in the case of China, with the largest international student population in the UK).

Nevertheless, the proportion of students entering UK degree programmes through transnational routes has fallen over the last five years. The relative stagnation in the numbers of students progressing through those routes may to an extent mirror changes in the educational landscape in the main source countries. While students pursuing transnational education courses in China increasingly favour remaining in country for the full duration of their first degree and Chinese education authorities encourage partnerships based on this model, the increase in popularity and standing of local private institutions seems to have put a dent in articulation and progression numbers of Malaysian students.

There may also be other causes, such as universities favouring foundation courses in the UK or overseas, that lead to entry into first year. It seems likely that the significant drop in transnational entrant student numbers in 2013-14 was related to the suspension of the UK's post-study work visa policy in 2012, which signals the importance of UK immigration policy for the success of this type of route.

The report also shows that transferring to on-shore UK study is not as popular among students studying transnational education programmes in other major host countries in Southeast Asia and in Africa. This may be due to the segmentation of student populations, roughly divided along lines of international study affordability. It is possible that, as markets mature, some students will consider transnational pathways under the right conditions.

The report covers data up to the 2018/19 academic year, so the impact of more recent developments – particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the formal departure of the UK from the EU, have not been subject to analysis. Anecdotal evidence suggests a sharp drop in mobility in the short term but the longer-term trends are unclear. Economic difficulties may mean that students are more likely to choose to complete their courses in their home country rather than transferring to the UK, but there are also reports of students choosing transnational education after being unable to go abroad in 2020 who may be more likely than average to come to the UK part-way through their course after the pandemic clears up.

While the subjects and course types studied by transnational entrants largely reflect the preferences of students in source countries, there are some significant outliers. Regulatory reasons may also play a role. Some countries such as China tightly control the subjects in which TNE programmes can be delivered, while requirements placed by professional, statutory and

regulatory bodies in certain disciplines may make transnational pathway implementation difficult (e.g. in medicine and allied health professions).

The report shows that transnational entrants used a variety of qualifications to progress to study in the UK, from sub-degree HE awards to undergraduate credits. The analysis made evident the diversity of transnational education, progression, and articulation arrangements that UK universities have implemented with their overseas partners.

This diversity enriches UK universities by broadening the potential recruitment market and opening up new sources of overseas students - many of whom will go on to study a postgraduate course after completing their bachelor's degree. From the student perspective, transnational pathways in their different formats offer benefits including greater flexibility, the ability to earn both UK and local qualifications, and the chance for those who could not afford to study an entire overseas degree to experience university education in the UK and earn a UK degree.

We hope that this report will be useful to inform university leaders in their decision-making processes, and that UK universities will continue to provide choice and opportunity to students through transnational pathways and continue to reap the institutional benefits of international partnership.

Appendix: Methodology & data sources

Unless otherwise noted, **transnational entrants** are defined as students who started to study a higher education programme overseas and then transferred to the UK in Year 2 or later of the course, as measured by the UK university's regular course structure for domestic students. This definition does not include students who studied at a partner and then transferred into Year 1 of the UK degree course.

In practical terms this was defined as students appearing in the 2018/19 HESA Individual Student record and meeting the following criteria:

- The student's Country of Domicile is outside the UK (including both EU and non-EU international students)
- The level of study is first degree, a category which covers bachelor's degrees as well as integrated undergraduate-plus-masters programmes such as Master of Engineering (MEng) degrees¹⁰
- The student is not classed as a visiting or exchange student
- The Year of Student indicator is 1, i.e. this is the student's first year studying on their current course in the UK
- The Year of Course is 2 or greater, i.e. the student is studying on the second (or later) year of the programme or later according to the structure of their current course

The overwhelming majority of these students study on a full-time basis: only 1.5 per cent of international non-exchange students entering a first degree course in year 2+ in 2018/19 were part-time students.

The HESA Student Record does not specifically identify the type of programme that a transferring student was previously studying, so it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the percentage of students previously registered on a UK degree course overseas vs those that progressed through credit recognition arrangements.

In addition, although in most cases these statistics closely match the true number of transnational entrants, they can also include some students that did not enter through

¹⁰ Note that the first degree category refers to a level of study, contrasting for example with "other undergraduate" programmes (sub-degree qualifications like certificate or diploma programmes), and does not necessarily mean that this is the first degree that the student has studied.

transnational pathways, or conversely could fail to include some students that did enter through transnational pathways:

- The data could incorrectly include students who completed the first part of their course in the UK with an institution that does not submit information to the HESA Individual Student Record and then transferred from that institution to an HE provider. For example, a student could earn an HND at a UK FE college, or could enrol on an “international year one” course at a pathway provider that allows entry to Year 2 or later of a UK degree course. It could also incorrectly include students holding Advanced Highers, A-levels or equivalent qualifications who enter Scottish universities in Year 2 of a Scottish 4-year degree course.
- The data could incorrectly exclude students at one interviewed UK provider which has created new academic programme codes for their major transfer partnerships. An interviewee at this university commented that they classed transferring students as studying a separate one-year degree programme, rather than entering into the third year of an existing three-year course, which allows the university to separately analyse data on course completion and outcomes for these students. (According to the understanding of the compilers of this report, this institution appears to be the only UK university currently taking this approach).

However, interviews with UK HEIs conducted for this research show that in most cases the report’s methodology closely matches the true number of students transferring to the UK from overseas in Year 2 or later, with the number of non-transnational students that this methodology would class as transnational (or vice versa) being small by comparison.

The historical charts showing trends over time use a slightly different definition of transnational entrants. As the historical data available to the compilers of this report does not distinguish between entrants with and without prior UK study, these charts include all non-UK domiciled students entering UK first degree programmes in Year 2 or above (excluding visiting & exchange students). As only a small proportion of Year 2+ entrants have previously studied in the UK (2 per cent of total First Degree entrants in 2018/19, or 12 per cent of those joining in Year 2+) this is unlikely to have a significant effect on overall trends.

Data on **graduates** is also based on the HESA Individual Student Record. Non-UK students graduating from UK first degree courses with a bachelor’s degree in the 2018/19 academic year were divided by course duration and actual duration of study in the UK:

- Data on nominal course duration is based on the “expected period of study” indicator. For the purposes of Section 3.8, partial years have been rounded up – so, for example, programmes with a duration of longer than 2 years and up to 3 years would be classed as three-year courses. In principle this would also include programmes lasting for (for example) two-and-a-half years, but in practice the large majority of courses last for a whole number of academic years.
- Data on actual period of study in the UK is based on the course start date, which refers to the point at which the student entered the HESA Individual Student Record i.e. the start of their studies in the UK. As with the nominal course duration, partial years are rounded up –

so a student who started to study in the UK after August 2018 is classed as having studied for one academic year; a student who entered between August 2017 and July 2018 would be classed as studying for two years and so on. Again, in practice the large majority of students in each year join their courses at the beginning of the academic year.

There are some differences between the proportion of international graduates completing their course faster than the nominal duration and the proportion of students classed as joining their programme in Year 2 or later. These two statistics do not refer to the same cohort of students – the large majority of students graduating in 2018/19 started their programmes several years earlier. In addition, unlike the data on entrants, it was not possible to exclude students with prior UK HE study from the graduate data. Finally, graduate data does not include students who failed to graduate from their course or who left their programme with a lower qualification than a full bachelor's degree.